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New Beginnings

Written by Fern Britton

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FERN BRITTON

New Beginnings

HARPER

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To you, the reader – thank you! Xx

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THEN . . .

'I want Marmite on my toast. Not Dairylea,' Libby yelled downstairs at the top of her voice.

The day Christie's life changed for ever, began just like any other. Her nine-year-old daughter was sulking on her bed.

Nick called up to her: 'Darling, we don't have Marmite. Mummy's told you she'll get some later. How about honey? Now, come and give your old dad a kiss goodbye, gorgeous girl.'

'No.' Libby already had a very definite mind of her own.

'Well, you'll have to go hungry, get weak and feeble, and you won't be able to go out on your bike with me at the weekend.'

'Don't care.'

Christie came out of the kitchen, drying her hands on a tea-towel. 'Libby! Come down here right now and eat your breakfast or you'll be late for school.'

'I hate you.'

'Don't speak to Mummy like that, madam.'

'And I hate you too.'

'She's definitely from your mother's side.' Nick slid an arm around Christie's waist. 'See you later, my beautiful, clever wife. Love you. 'Bye, Freddie.' He kissed them both, and Christie

watched the back of his familiar head as he walked away down the mews.

Her morning happened as every morning happened. Wrestling with Libby's stubbornness, coaxing both kids into the car and getting them off to their schools. By nine forty-five she was back indoors and ready to clear the breakfast debris. It was then that the phone rang.

The rest of the day was filled with such pain that much of it she couldn't recall. She had been told that Nick had died, suddenly, on the pavement two hundred yards from his office and that bystanders had attempted to revive him while calling for an ambulance. She remembered the hospital doctor: young, inexperienced at breaking this kind of bad news to a wife who needed to know exactly what had happened to her husband. 'It was a pulmonary embolism,' he explained. 'It could have happened to anyone.'

How? Why? Why? Why?

At last she was taken to the mortuary, where Nick lay in a silent, nondescript room that she supposed had housed many corpses and heard many tears and farewells.

He was cold and gone from her, with a bruise on his cheek where he'd apparently hit the pavement. Had he been dead before he hit the ground? Had he had any warning?

She climbed up next to him and put her arms round him. He was cold. If only she could have closed her eyes and let go of her own life, right there and then, she would have. She stayed there, feeling utterly empty, hopeless. Her sane self stayed outside her body, looking down at the sad sight she made, lying next to him. Someone opened the door, asked if she was all right. Of course,

she wasn't bloody all right. She kissed Nick goodbye for the last time, then sat outside waiting to be told what to do next as she let the silent tears spill onto her coat.

Later, Fred stared at her, silent, his eyes big with incomprehension. Libby wailed, clinging to her as if she was the only life-raft in a stormy sea. 'Mummy! I didn't kiss him – I didn't kiss him. I told him I hated him. It's my fault. I love Daddy. I want him to come home.'

Libby's grief was so huge and suffocating that Christie wanted to slap her, to shout at her. In more pain than she had ever experienced, what she wanted to say was right on the tip of her tongue: 'Don't you think I want him home too? He's my husband. The love of my life. I'm his wife. I need you to comfort me.'

But what she actually did was cuddle and kiss and console.

NOW . . .

1

'Why do we have to stay with her?' Libby slammed the door of the battered Peugeot estate. 'I don't want to.'

Christie, lugging overnight bags into the car boot, bit back her reprimand about the door, not wanting to provoke her daughter's temper any further. Instead she forced herself into her best unruffled-mother mode. 'You know that I'm staying the night with Auntie Mel so she can help me sort out what I'm going to wear tomorrow. You're going to stay with Granny, who can't come here because she's got an early-morning Pilates class tomorrow.' She tried to keep the amusement out of her voice. The idea of her mother and her friends as Pilates devotees always made her smile.

In the rear-view mirror she could see Libby looking thunderous, her straight hair cut into a neat bob with a fringe that almost hid her frown. Across the bridge of her nose was a smattering of freckles that ran into her flushed cheeks while her rosebud mouth was drawn into a tight line.

'Can't we come too?' nine-year-old Fred begged, as they began to reverse down the drive towards the lane.

'Freddie, I've already explained.' Christie spelled out what was happening for the umpteenth time. 'You've got to go to school tomorrow and I've got a TV show to do. It's really important that I look good, so I need to see Auntie Mel. If it goes well, there might be more work for me. Then there'll be more money. And we can do all sorts of things.'

'Can I have an iPod Touch, then? Ouch!' he yelped. 'What did you pinch me for?'

'Because you're stupid. You're far too young for one.' Libby mustered all the scorn of a twelve-going-on-twenty-five-year-old. 'Don't!' she yelled, as Fred lashed out. She dodged the blow, jabbing him in the leg at the same time so that he squealed.

'For God's sake! Can't the two of you behave like human beings just for once? Is it too much to ask?' Christie yelled at the top of her voice, shocking the children into quiet.

The two of them kept a sullen silence, punctuated by the odd 'Stop it,' or 'Owww,' as one poked at the other.

Christie tried to ignore them. What was it with kids? You love them, care for them, anticipate their every whim – but did they consider her? Never. Was it all right occasionally to feel such ambivalence to the two people she loved more than anyone else in the entire world? Yes, she decided, if they were so selfish as not to understand how important the next two days could be for her. For them. The last two and a bit years since Nick had died had been a dark chaos. She had managed to exist and bring up the children as best she could. They

were at least fed, clothed and relatively balanced. But she was still a jelly, slopped out of its mould and left spreading on a slippery, edgeless plate.

However, she had made some big decisions. She had given up her appearances on *MarketForce*, the afternoon TV consumer programme where she was beginning to make something of a name for herself as a good, solid watchdog journalist. After Nick's sudden death, she couldn't concentrate on anything other than the children's day-to-day needs. She had sold up the little mews house full of so many memories and moved back to her mother's village in Buckinghamshire, where she had found an old, dilapidated money-pit of a Georgian farmhouse. Her mother had told her she'd be mad to buy it so, to prove her right, Christie had blown Nick's life insurance on it.

'It'll be lovely when it's done,' said those friends who had left London to brave the countryside.

Only it hadn't been done. The chimney was cracked, the conservatory was leaking, and the wind whistled through every rattling sash window and door. She was skint. Even though she had Nick's modest pension and a little from the weekly column she now wrote for the *Daily News*, plus occasional features for the paper and the odd women's mag, that didn't do much more than keep the family in new school shoes and petrol.

Now, though, something exciting and scary had happened. *Tart Talk*, the irreverent daytime TV7 show, had asked her to be a guest. Her stomach flipped with fresh nervousness. She wasn't any longer just a widow, with all its connotations of death and

sadness, but a woman who had a life of her own to lead. Nick would have wanted that. Wouldn't he?

'Come on, Christie. You can do it,' she heard his voice tell her.

At last, she turned down the road that led to her mother's neat little brick bungalow. She pulled up outside the low wall that fronted an immaculate garden with a manicured moss-free lawn and regimented borders. Christie turned to the children. Libby was busy texting but Fred was fast asleep.

'Come on, guys. Time to get out.' As Libby looked up at her with her big dark eyes, so reminiscent of Nick's, Christie's heart melted. 'Oh, darling, please don't make me feel bad. This could be really good for us all.'

'Yeah, I know. I hope Granny's made one of her sponge cakes.' Her mood had changed with the fickleness of youth as she hopped out of the car and gave her mother a kiss. 'Come on, Fred. We're here.' She pulled out the bag he was leaning on, waking him with a jolt.

Fred clambered out behind her, bleary with sleep. Christie gathered him up in a bear-hug. 'Be good, darling. I'll see you tomorrow after school.'

She had noticed one of the lace curtains in the bay windows move, and knew her mother would open the door at any moment. Not wanting to miss the train by getting caught up in conversation or complaint, she waited till her mother appeared on the doorstep then, as the children waved at her, she locked the car and shouted, 'Can't stop, Mum. I'm going to be late. Wish me luck. I'll see you tomorrow and thanks a million.'

Then, with a wave, she started walking briskly towards the station. As her steps took her further away from her mother's, she couldn't help thinking back to a time when she thought she'd never be able to move on.

The hours and days after Nick's death were wiped from her mind. Christie was visited by waking dreams of him. When the phone rang, it must be him. When the doorbell rang, it must be him. But, of course, it never was, and the blow to her solar plexus felled her more painfully each time. The agony of telling people that she was no longer part of 'NickandChristie' was something she began to avoid. The look in their eyes, the sound of their voices on the phone made anger roar into her brain and scorch the backs of her eyeballs. Instead, she asked Mel to tell everyone they knew.

One morning a postman delivered two letters for Nick. She heard them drop through the letterbox and just managed to open the door and give the innocent man an earful of grief-sodden abuse before he disappeared through the gate. She sagged onto the doorstep. As she wept, she seemed to float outside her body and, looking down on herself, she was filled with compassion and disgust by what she saw.

'Get up, you stupid excuse for a woman. Get up! Comb your hair, get dressed, brush your teeth. Be a credit to Nick. Nick, you bastard!'

She only emerged from this altered state when a small hand

smoothed her hair and a little boy's voice said, 'Mummy, I'm hungry.'

The words lasered through her. Yes. She was literally the bread-winner now, the one to put food in the children's mouths, to clothe them and guide them through life. She had to be both mother and father to them from now on.

The protective shell that had enveloped her that day kept her strong as she organised the funeral. Her mother tried to help with the catering. 'You must have everybody back to the house and feed them, Christine. That's what I did for your father and it's what people expect. I suggest sandwiches, nothing too fancy. A big bowl of cocktail sausages always goes down well. What man doesn't like a sausage? That's what your father always said. And what about drink? Just a little sherry and lots of tea, I think. You don't want anybody getting drunk. And make sure they know when it finishes. If people hang about they'll expect more food. Christine? Christine? Christine?'

But Christie had gone. She couldn't take her mother's wittering any longer so she had opened the front door and just walked out. For a brief moment in her life she wanted to be free of responsibility. No more widow, no more mum. Just Christie.

Her escape didn't last long – half an hour at most – and when she got home, the children were in the middle of supper, eating chicken nuggets at the kitchen table. Maureen was at the sink, making a jug of Ribena. Christie went to her and hugged her. 'Thanks, Mum.'

'That's all right, darling.'

And nothing more was said.

Somehow the funeral drew a line through the chaos of the days preceding it, and gradually Christie's life began to take on a rhythm of sorts. Not the same as before, but almost bearable. Now that she was solely responsible for the children and could think of nothing else, she gave in her notice at MarketForce *and devoted herself to them, so money was tight. When Libby and Fred were settled, she would start working as a journalist again. The one thing hanging over her head was the bank loan Nick had taken out to help his father, not long before he died. The debt was part of his legacy to her. She had promised him that she would never tell Maureen about its existence, and there was no way she would tell her now.*

2

Deep breathing was not producing the desired effect. Christie's heart was still racing as fast as if she'd been rigged up to an intravenous caffeine drip. Her palms were clammy and she knew that if she unclenched her fists her hands would be shaking. She inhaled again slowly, trying to focus her thoughts. Catching sight of herself, she immediately wished she'd stuck with the simple black round-necked dress, her original choice, instead of giving in to her fashionista sister. After last night's couple of glasses of wine, Mel had insisted she went for something more 'out there'.

'Chris! I'm not going to allow you to disappear into the scenery . . . as normal. This is your big chance, the one time when you want people to notice you, and you're dressing in your usual widow's weeds. Try this.'

She held out a funky, figure-hugging aquamarine and yellow silk sheath dress, which they both knew Christie would never wear in a million years. The neck, hemline and lack of sleeves meant there was way too much on show. Only two years younger, Mel had always been the risk-taker, edgier, unafraid of others' opinions, and her dress sense reflected that. She had been the

highest-marked student of the year when she graduated from the London College of Fashion and was now making a name for herself as a freelance stylist for the glossy mags. Although the sisters were the same size, there was little in their separate wardrobes that would happily cross over. In any case, Christie wasn't sure she wanted people to notice her because of what she wore.

In the end, they had settled on a compromise, dug from the back of the wardrobe: a maroon wrap dress that reached to just above her knees and whispered, 'Look at me. I'm sexy *and* smart.' Even Mel didn't know how this piece of good taste had got into her wardrobe, but they'd agreed that, zhooshed up with very sheer tights, a simple but gorgeous necklace and some killer heels, this was the look that was just right for Christie and for the show.

However, now, standing at the side of the studio, surrounded by the controlled chaos of cameramen, runners, researchers, editor, producer and the other presenters, Christie suddenly felt less confident. Instead of distracting attention from her modest bosom, the large milky amber pendant they'd chosen seemed to accentuate it. To fill out what now seemed an inappropriately skimpy neckline, she needed the breasts of Sharon Barber, the bosomy ex-soap star and *Tart Talk* regular who was standing a few feet away, chatting to the floor manager. Christie pulled at the jersey fabric, trying to close the V, then reminded herself of how the girls in Makeup had complimented her. Under those super-bright lights, her reflection was of someone she hardly recognised. Instead of the usual dressed-down mother of two,

she saw someone elegant but not intimidating, well-groomed but not over the top. They'd given her a bit more eye-shadow and lip-gloss than she was used to and her hair was bigger and more flicked out, but she had to admit that, against her expectations, she quite liked the new her. She took another deep breath.

She felt a hand on her arm and turned to see Marina French smiling at her. An experienced news reporter, now deemed too old for the mainstream news, Marina was respected for her popularity and her ballsy attitude to life, which made male presenters quail. She was still the anchor of *Tart Talk* because of the much-needed gravitas she lent to the otherwise unpredictable fast-talking show. 'Christie, don't worry. You'll be fine,' she murmured, as she nodded towards the audience. 'They've come to have a good time. They want to like you.'

Christie nodded and swallowed. 'Hmm. If you say so . . .'

'Every guest presenter feels nervous their first time on live TV. I'd be worried if you weren't. But once you're out there, the time'll whizz by. Try to enjoy it. You'll soon be an old hand.'

'I hope so.' And she truly did. However nerve-racking the experience so far, she was feeling an excitement that she hadn't known in years. Last week's phone call from the show's producer had come at exactly the right moment. She had read and loved the one-off piece Christie had written about Nick's death, her enforced single motherhood and subsequent move to the country.

After two years, Christie had at last found she was able to look back and understand that she should celebrate the time

she had been given with Nick. As the children grew older, she was even beginning to enjoy being single again as she gained a new perspective on her life. When she had said as much to her editor at a drinks party, he had immediately reacted: 'I've never heard you talk like that. You must write about it for me.' So she had. She had poured her emotions into the piece, excited to be exploring something so close to her heart, such a welcome change from the usual consumer-based features that had become her stock-in-trade. When her editor had criticised it as 'too cerebral for our market', and asked, 'Where's the sex?' she had almost despaired.

To be asked to come on *Tart Talk* to talk intelligently about women surviving the loss of the love of their lives was a huge compliment. But today she was feeling rather differently. She had been up since five thirty, unable to sleep, not even in the back of the sleek Mercedes sent to take her to the TV7 building, home of *Tart Talk*, as it crawled through traffic held up by roadworks on the Euston Road. Sitting on the uncomfortable leather sofa in her dressing room, leafing through the pile of the day's papers as she waited to be called to Makeup, there had been plenty more time for the nerves to kick in. She had been thankful when a runner finally took her along to the green room to meet the three regular presenters.

She had immediately sensed the great rapport that existed between Marina, Sharon and Grace: Grace Benjamin – the thin, gap-toothed black comedian with a big laugh, whose bisexuality was often the butt of her own jokes. Their camaraderie meant they had welcomed her without reserve, offering her coffee

before they went through with the producer the subjects they might be going to cover on today's show. How much would Christie be able to contribute to a discussion about middle-age binge drinking and subsequent one-night stands? Staying up late to watch *Newsnight* just in case had been a complete waste of time. She'd have to wing it and focus her efforts on the reason she was there.

Just before they were due to go on, a fourth woman had sashayed in, finishing a conversation on her BlackBerry. Tall and well-padded but dressed in a stylish tailored cream suit, not a hair out of its coiffured place, she sat down beside Marina. 'Hello, darling,' she breathed. 'I was in the studios so thought I'd pop down and see how you were.' Her energy and presence immediately refocused the room so all eyes were on her. Christie was wondering where she'd seen her before when Marina introduced her.

'Julia, you must meet Christie Lynch. Remember she used to be on *MarketForce*? She's going to be talking about bereavement on the show today. Christie, this is my very special agent, Julia Keen.'

Christie immediately knew who she was. Julia Keen was one of *the* talent agents in London, a name known to most magazine readers, loved and feared in equal measure by those in the business. She had made her reputation by poaching high-earning clients from other agents, often appearing with them at all the most prestigious showbiz events. Christie had read one or two profiles about her in the press. About a year ago Julia had been the subject of much media interest when one

of her clients, the TV presenter Ben Chapman, had drowned in her indoor swimming-pool: coroner's verdict, misadventure. But the press had been free and frequent with speculation about their relationship and the real reason for Ben having been there without his girlfriend, as well as about what had really happened. He had been the co-host of *Good Evening Britain*, a news/magazine show that had actors, writers and MPs queuing up to appear. *Newsnight* meets *The One Show*, it had the six to seven p.m. slot on TV7 five nights a week. When Ben died, his on-air partner, Gilly Lancaster, had made a tribute to him so moving that it was printed on every red-top front page the following day. His long-term partner, Laura, was devastated at losing him, while Julia had absented herself from the red carpets and all that went with them. Success breeds success but scandal can be a dangerous enemy.

Christie remembered the photos splashed in the press of Ben, Laura and Julia, as well as of an indoor pool that had come straight from a scene out of *Footballers' Wives*: colonnaded french windows leading back into the house, white loungers, tropical ferns in large ceramic pots. Julia clearly knew how to enjoy the fruits of her success. Smiling, Christie offered her hand – to find it gripped firmly, as Julia's clear blue eyes assessed her in an unnerving and not altogether pleasant way.

'A pleasure to meet you,' Julia said. 'I've read your *Daily News* column. Good luck today.' She gave her another look of appraisal.

'Thanks.' Christie, feeling a little uncomfortable, was relieved when, at that moment, the green room door opened and they were called to the studio.

As she stood in the dark, behind the set, she could hear the large audience of students and pensioners filing in. Who else had time to go to a daytime show? Bussed in for the occasion, they found their seats and the buzz subsided as the warm-up man welcomed them. Christie strained to hear what he was saying.

Then someone else caught her attention.

'Christie, my darling. Hi. I'm Tim, the floor manager.' A young casually dressed man wearing headphones was at her side. 'Welcome. Nice to have you. In two minutes, watch Marina and just follow her onto the set and take the second stool on the left, behind the desk. OK, love? Good luck.' He patted her shoulder in encouragement.

Oh, God, Marina was walking onto the set. They want to like me, Christie repeated to herself, and followed, as confidently as she could, to the sound of applause. Why did I say yes to this? She could feel the heat of the lights on her face and a prickle of perspiration on her back as she went out into the bright lights. She hitched herself onto the stool, which was high enough to make the women sit up straight or fall off, and wondered what to do with her heels: let them hang or tuck them in? She tucked them in and pulled down the sides of her skirt.

'Look as if you're enjoying yourself,' whispered Grace. 'They won't eat you.'

Switching on a smile as the warm-up guy introduced the team, Christie looked up and out towards the audience where her eyes fell on Mel in the second row, resplendent in a

to-be-noticed-by-my-sister neon pink scarf, grinning like a maniac and giving her the thumbs-up. If only Nick could have been there with her. He would have been so proud. She twisted her wedding ring round her finger, then swiftly reminded herself that she had to stop thinking like that. This was her life now.

'OK. Fifteen seconds, studio. Quiet, please,' shouted Tim. He continued the countdown to zero, then the show's title music struck up.

As the cameras began to roll, they were all laughing. It was up to the four of them now. Christie heard a disembodied voice introducing Marina, Grace, Sharon, and then: '. . . and please welcome Christie Lynch, the merry widow, to ask her: is there dating after death?'

Oh, God! No! Why had no one briefed her that they weren't going to be taking the sensitive, dignified approach she had imagined? Because they realised she'd have shied away? Of course. She should have known better than to trust them not to trivialise the subject, but it was too late now. In front of the audience and her co-presenters, she had no choice but to keep smiling and try to think of something to say. Come on, Nick. Give me strength.