

Stephanie closed her eyes and held out her hands, her son's almost uncontrollable excitement rubbing off on her and making her feel like a child again herself. It was hard to believe it had been nine years. Nine years ago today she had been shivering because of the cold, and crying because it was raining and her hair was going to get ruined, and James had burst into the hotel room where she had been getting ready, ignoring all the voices telling him it was bad luck for him to see his bride before the ceremony, because he had known she would be nervous and that she would care about seeing him more than she would worry about breaking with tradition.

'You're going to have to wear a mac,' he'd said, 'and galoshes. Oh, and maybe a rain bonnet. That'll look nice,' and despite her nerves Stephanie had laughed.

'I mean, I can't marry you if you look like a drowned rat – it'd be bad for my reputation.'

Stephanie's mother, who had been helping her squeeze into her untraditional grey satin dress and who had never quite got James's sense of humour, had tutted and tried to usher him out of the room, but James had flung himself into an armchair in the corner and refused to budge. By the time they had had to leave for the register office Stephanie had felt relaxed and in control, secure that this

was going to be the happiest day of her life, just as it was meant to be.

In the end her hair had lain plastered to her head like wet string, and James had told her that she'd never looked so beautiful and he'd said it with such conviction that she'd actually believed him.

Every year since he had made a big fuss on their anniversary, surprising her with cleverly chosen gifts: a pair of heavily decorated designer wellingtons the first year, a reference to the weather on their wedding day but also, as it turned out, something she now treasured for a different reason – a reminder of their last weekend spent stomping around in the mud at Glastonbury before she'd found out she was pregnant with Finn; a night away at a B-and-B, complete with his parents' offer of babysitting when Finn was two, and Stephanie was at the furthest edge of her rationality; last year a flowery tin watering-can he had known she had her eye on.

Fired up by his enthusiasm, she had planned surprises for him too, something her family had never really gone in for, Christmas being more a time for 'What do you want? A new blender? Fine, that's what I'll get you.' Over the years she had bought him books and gadgets and once, when she was feeling particularly sentimental, a photograph of the three of them in a silver frame. The rule was that the gifts had to remain secret until the big day, something which Finn, confidant of both parents in the planning stages, always struggled with.

This year Stephanie had bought James a fish-shaped corkscrew, which Finn had insisted his father had been admiring in a shop window, although she'd had her

doubts. He had opened it eagerly, tearing off the paper, and had certainly seemed delighted, although Stephanie knew he would never have given away that he wasn't. Now it was her turn and the suspense was killing her.

'Come on.' She laughed. She could hear Finn giggling with excitement.

'Don't open your eyes,' James said, and she felt a small light square box drop into her outstretched hands. She had suspected that he was going to buy her the new Jamie Oliver – in fact, she had been hinting heavily to Finn that that was what she wanted. This didn't feel like the new Jamie Oliver. 'OK, you can open them now.'

She did as she was told. In her hand was a small but distinctive red box. This wasn't right. They weren't meant to spend a lot: the presents were a token, a bit of fun. It was most definitely the thought that counted. OK, she thought, I'll open it and inside there'll be a plastic necklace from Camden Market. That'll be the joke.

Finn was jumping up and down. 'Open it.'

She arranged her face into what she thought was a look of genuine expectation – James had done this before: once he had wrapped a huge box in beautiful flock paper, and when she had unwrapped it there was another and then another until finally all that was left was an empty matchbox. Then he had produced her real gift from behind the sofa. Finn had thought it was the funniest thing he had ever witnessed.

She opened the box. Inside was something that seemed to be doing a very passable imitation of a silver bracelet inlaid with pink stones. Stephanie looked at James

quizzically. He raised his eyebrows as if to say, 'Well, what did you expect?' She picked the bracelet out of its white satin bed. It was most definitely not plastic. 'James?'

'Don't you like it?' Finn was saying.

'Of course I do, I love it, but it's too much. Since when did we do this? Spend fortunes on each other, I mean. This *must* have cost a fortune.'

'I wanted to get you something nice, something proper for a change. To show you how much I appreciate you. Well, how much I love you, really.'

'Yuk,' Finn said, and made a face as if he was going to be sick.

'It's beautiful. I don't know what to say.' She looked at him, her head on one side.

'Well, "Thank you, James, for your amazing kindness and generosity," would be a start,' he said, trying to look serious.

She smiled. 'Thank you, James, for your amazing . . . What was it?'

'Kindness and generosity.'

'Yes, that, exactly, whatever you just said.'

'And for being such a wonderful, not to mention handsome and intelligent, some would say genius, husband.'

Stephanie laughed. 'Oh, no, you'll have to buy me more than a Cartier bracelet to get me to say all that.'

'Just remember this next year,' James said, laughing too, 'when you're out shopping.'

Stephanie slipped the bracelet on to her wrist. It was perfect, exactly the one she would have chosen for herself, except that she probably would have decided it was too

expensive and ended up settling for something far less special. James, when he wanted to, could still surprise her. She slipped her arms round his neck and hugged him. 'Thank you.'



## I

### *Five days later*

It wasn't the words that upset her particularly: it was the kisses that followed them. That and the fact that the message was signed with an initial, not even a name. As if there was no question in the writer's mind that he would know who it was from. As if he received texts like this every day. Perhaps he did, Stephanie thought sadly.

Stephanie had been married to James for nine years, most of them blissfully happy, at least as far as she knew, although suddenly nothing felt that certain. They had one child, seven-year-old Finn, who was bright and funny and, above all, healthy, a black and white cat called Sebastian, who seemed to share all those qualities, and a goldfish named Goldie, who was, well, a fish. They had forty-two and a half thousand pounds left to pay on their mortgage, eleven thousand three hundred in their joint savings account, two thousand two hundred and thirty-eight pounds and seventy-two pence worth of credit-card debt, and a joint inheritance of about thirty-five thousand on its way once both sets of elderly parents died – although it wasn't looking like that would be any time soon: longevity ran in both their families.

In the years that they had been together James had lost his appendix while Stephanie had gained and, thankfully,

lost a handful of kidney stones. James had put on about two stone in weight, mostly around the middle, while Stephanie's valiant efforts in the gym meant that she was only a few pounds heavier than when they had met. She had, of course, acquired a few stretchmarks, but along with them had come Finn, so on balance she thought they were a price worth paying. They were both, still, without a doubt, on the plus side of attractive for their combined age of seventy-seven.

**I'm really missing you. K xxx**

She thought back over the previous night. James had arrived home at about six thirty as usual. He had seemed completely himself, tired but happy to be back. He had gone through his usual after-work routine; getting changed, spending half an hour or so playing with Finn in the garden, reading the paper, dinner, TV then bed. It hadn't exactly been a scintillating evening, the conversation had hardly rivalled the round table at the Algonquin, but it had been . . . normal. An evening exactly like a thousand other evenings they had spent together.

James had told her and Finn a story at dinner, she remembered. A funny story about how he had managed to successfully remove a splinter from the paw of an Afghan hound despite the fact that the family's python was working its way up the inside of his trouser leg. He had acted out the whole scene, putting on a gruff voice to portray the bemused thoughts of the dog, which had had Finn creasing up. He had a tendency to make himself



the hero of his stories – there was usually an underlying message of ‘Look how great I am’ – however entertaining and hilarious he made them. But that was just James. He had grown a little pompous over the years, a little too pleased with himself, but she had always put that down to insecurity, had even found it quite endearing. He was so transparent, she’d thought fondly. Apparently that was not the case.

The way it usually went was like this: James would say something self-aggrandizing, Stephanie would make fun of him, he would laugh and admit to exaggerating his part in whatever story he was telling. It was like role-play: they each knew what was expected of them and what their boundaries were. They enjoyed it, or so she had thought. They would argue about anything, however trivial or taboo – politics, religion, who had had the better voice, Nathan from *Brother Beyond* or Limahl from *Kaja-googoo*. It was what they did. Last night had been no exception. James had been trying to insist that *ER* gave a more realistic portrayal of life in an American hospital than *Grey’s Anatomy*.

‘You might be right,’ Stephanie had said. ‘I’m just saying you don’t know.’

James had puffed up in that half-serious, half-ironic way he had. ‘I do work in the medical profession.’

Stephanie had snorted indignantly. ‘James, you’re a vet. You know nothing about hospitals, apart from the eighteen hours you spent sitting in the waiting room being sick into a bag when I was in labour. I can’t even get you to go to the doctor when you’re ill.’

‘Did you know,’ James had said, ignoring her last

comment, 'that in some countries it's legal for a vet to practise on a human but not the other way round?'

'Your point being?'

'I'm just saying that what I do and what a doctor does are very closely related.'

'And that makes you an expert on life in an inner-city American hospital?'

'Well, more so than you, anyway. You know that I'd defer to you if we were having an argument about . . . ooh, I don't know . . . *What Not to Wear* or *The Clothes Show*.' He'd smiled at her smugly as if to say, 'Got you.'

Stephanie had picked up a cushion, aiming it at his head. 'Patronizing git,' she'd said, laughing, and his self-important front had dissolved.

'Hit a nerve, did I?' he'd said, laughing along with her. 'Upset because you know I'm right?'

Stephanie stared at the four words – actually, four words and a letter – and the three kisses. She hadn't meant to look. She wasn't the sort of woman who trawled through the messages on her husband's mobile phone while he was in the bath but today, when she had realized that he'd left his phone at home and had been scrolling through trying to find a number for the surgery's receptionist, Jackie, she'd found herself idly flicking through his texts looking for, well, nothing really, just looking. She had felt all the blood rush from her head as she'd looked to see who the message was from. 'K', it said. Just 'K'. No Karen or Kirsty or Kylie to give her a clue. No Kimberley, Katrina or Kristen. Just 'I'm really missing you. K xxx', like there was only one person in the world whose name began with a K and James would know

exactly who that was. She was fumbling about for the phone's address book, trying to see if the person listed as 'K' had a number she recognized, when she heard the bang of the front door closing. Stephanie dropped the phone hurriedly, jumping away from it as if she'd been stung. She plunged her hands into the too-hot washing-up water in the sink and tried to look casual as James strode into the room.

'Have you seen my phone?' he asked, not even stopping to say hello.

'No,' Stephanie said and then she'd wondered why she hadn't just said, 'Yes, it's over there.' Because he might have noticed she'd been looking through his address book, that was why.

He cast a cursory glance round the room, rushed out again, and then she heard him running up the stairs. She grabbed the phone from under the chair where she'd dropped it, stabbed at the buttons till the main screen returned, then ran out into the hall.

'James, I've found it. It's here,' she shouted.

'Thanks.' He pecked her on the cheek as he took it from her. 'I'd got as far as Primrose Hill,' he said, rolling his eyes and heading out of the front door again.

'Bye,' she said sadly to his back. She closed the door behind him and sat down heavily on the stairs.

OK, she thought, I have to think about this rationally. I mustn't jump to conclusions. But it was the language, the over-familiarity, the three kisses rather than the routine one that everybody seemed to deem suitable on even the most official piece of office communication, these days. And why would he have a number in his phone

identifiable only as 'K'? Because he didn't want her to know who it was, she thought.

She was tempted to look on James's computer, to go through his emails to see if she could find any clues, any hints of who K might be, but she knew she mustn't turn into one of those people. You'd start by glancing through his emails, next thing you knew you'd be steaming open his post or sniffing his shirt collars every time he came home, like a lovestruck dog. She had to give James the benefit of the doubt. The truth was that even though her marriage wasn't perfect, even though they didn't see enough of each other these days and when they did the routine of running a family seemed to get in the way of everything else, she would still never have thought he would turn to another woman. Not in a thousand years.

She just couldn't imagine he would have it in him, that, even if he was bored with her and tired of their marriage – and she had no real reason to believe that either of these things was true – he would do this to their child. Neither, if she was honest, could she imagine that another woman would throw herself at him, with his self-importance and his habit of poking about in his ears with a cotton bud while he was watching the TV. But maybe she'd got things completely wrong. She had to get out of the house before the lure of his computer became too much for her to resist. She had to get to the office and speak to Natasha. Natasha would know what she should do.

'Don't do anything,' Natasha said, when Stephanie had told her the whole story. 'It'll turn out to be nothing and

then he'll just resent you for going through his texts. Why were you going through his texts anyway?'

'I wasn't . . . I have no idea.'

'Maybe it's from a bloke. Kevin or Kelvin or Keith?'

'With three kisses?'

'A metrosexual,' Natasha persisted. 'They're very free with their emotions. Or a gay admirer? Kieron? Kiefer?'

'I don't think it's from a bloke.'

'Or an aunt?'

'No.'

'Someone from work?'

'Three kisses.'

'I agree it doesn't look good. Just don't do anything in a hurry, OK? Sleep on it.'

'OK,' Stephanie said reluctantly. She always took Natasha's advice.

'Shit,' she said, five minutes later. 'I've just realized. That bracelet he gave me for our anniversary – he's feeling guilty. That's why he spent so much. It wasn't an expression of love, it was an apology.'