

Prologue

Lancashire, England

It was their eighth wedding anniversary. Kirsty was wearing a new dress, bright red, very flattering. They'd booked a table at their favourite restaurant and were going there by taxi, because they wanted to share a bottle of champagne.

She reached out for Mike's hand, smiling at him. He gave it three squeezes, their secret signal for "I love you" and she responded in kind.

Sirens suddenly wailed and a blue light flashed ahead of them. The driver cursed and yelled, "Hold tight!" He braked hard, trying to avoid a speeding car that was coming round the corner on the wrong side of the road.

As tyres screeched, Kirsty was flung against the seat belt and the car side-swiped the taxi. The world seemed to explode around her as they rolled over. It happened so fast that it was over before she do more than scream.

It took her a few seconds to work out that she was upside down and something was trickling along her face. She tried to move and moaned as pain sliced through her arm, so fierce, so all-consuming she felt sick. After that one attempt to free herself, she kept perfectly still.

"Mike? Are you all right?"

There was no answer, but his warm body was pressed against hers. He must be unconscious.

She found it hard to concentrate. Lights flickered and blurred around her, voices told her to lie still and she did. She wished Mike would regain consciousness though.

After what seemed a very long time, someone got the car door open and put a collar round her neck.

“Don’t touch my left arm!” she gasped.

The man muttered something to the person behind him, then said gently, “We’ll have to strap it, love. Can’t give you anything for the pain yet. I’m sorry. What’s your name.”

She told him, then gasped. It hurt. It hurt so much she couldn’t hold back her moans.

“Nearly there now,” that soothing voice said. “We’ll cut you free, then ease you out.”

“See to my husband first,” she said urgently. “He’s unconscious.”

“We’ll look after him, love, don’t worry. We need to get you out of the way so that we can reach him.”

That made sense, if anything did tonight. She tried not to whimper as they laid her on a stretcher trolley and wheeled her through a barrage of blinding lights into an ambulance.

When they shut the rear door, someone started up the engine and she pleaded with them to wait for Mike.

“There’s another ambulance for him, love,” a female paramedic told her.

At the hospital they wheeled her straight through the emergency department to a cubicle at the rear.

“You’ve broken your arm, Mrs Miller,” someone said. “We’ll have to operate. When did you last eat?”

She had trouble working it out. “It was—I can’t—oh, yes, at lunchtime. We were on our way to the restaurant when the crash happened.” Tears filled her eyes. “It’s our wedding anniversary.”

“Tough luck, eh? Now, let’s get you prepped. You’ll feel a lot more comfortable when

they've sorted out that arm of yours and given you some proper painkillers."

"What about my husband? How is he? Surely they've brought him in by now?"

"Not arrived yet."

"Can't I wait, see him first?"

"He wouldn't want you to lie there in pain, now would he?"

When Kirsty woke it was still dark and she couldn't think where she was. Her eyelids felt so heavy she let them close again and didn't wake again until it was daylight.

Her sister was sitting by her bed. She'd been crying.

"Sue?"

"Kirsty. You're awake."

"More or less. I feel dopey. And thirsty."

"I'll fetch a nurse."

They gave her something to drink and checked her arm, which was now in plaster, then the nurse looked at Sue, who nodded.

Kirsty watched the nurse leave then looked at her sister. "How's Mike?"

Sue took her hand. "He didn't make it, darling."

Kirsty couldn't think what she meant for a minute, didn't want to understand those words, then stared at her sister in horror as the meaning sank in. "No."

"I'm so sorry."

"No." Someone began to scream and only when the nurse came rushing in to help hold her still did Kirsty realise it was herself screaming. Only she couldn't stop. They gave her an injection and she drifted away.

Her last thought was that this was a nightmare and she'd wake up soon. It was the worst nightmare she'd ever had.

She was alone when she woke up. She looked round. It wasn't a nightmare, then.

A shadow fell across the bed and she looked up to see her brother standing there, solemn-faced. She couldn't think what to say to him and to her relief, he simply sat down beside her without speaking.

"What about the taxi driver?" she asked.

"He died too. That side of the car got the worst of it."

"Poor man." She swallowed hard, trying not to burst into tears. "I can't believe Mike's dead."

"No. Sorry. It's—bad."

A nurse looked in and immediately came to stand by the bed and take her pulse. "Do you want another sedative, Mrs Miller?"

Kirsty shook her head. "No."

"Call me if you need anything."

When the nurse had gone, silence fell. Kirsty had never been so thankful that Rod was a man of few words. It was comforting to have him there, but she didn't want to talk. What was there to say?

Two days later they said she could go home if she had someone to help her.

"I don't want to go home," she told her brother, who was spending another mainly silent hour by her bedside. "I can't bear the thought of that flat without Mike. I just—can't."

"You can come to my place if you like. I've got a spare bedroom."

"Thanks. That'd be—better." A few tears escaped but she was getting used to ignoring them, hadn't given in again to the urge to howl aloud in sheer misery. It'd not do any good. Mike was dead and nothing would bring him back.

A month later she was still at Rod's house. He'd fetched her clothes and books, but she hadn't gone back to the flat.

"Why don't you live here permanently?" he suggested one evening after tea. "We can share expenses."

She stared at him for a moment. "I thought you liked living alone."

He shook his head. "I don't. But no one else wants to live with me."

She could understand that. Her brother had a communications disorder, which affected his interpersonal skills. He was brilliant with numbers, so had found a job without too much trouble, but had no idea how to deal with people. He understood this, but could do little about it. He's learned to be quiet sometimes, but mostly he said the first thing that came into his head. She got on all right with him, though.

"OK." She'd be glad to economise. Mike had let his life insurance slip and the funeral expenses had been hefty. They'd been saving to buy a house, but hadn't got very far. People who worked in libraries weren't well paid and Mike had always said life was too short to live meanly. She was glad now about that.

She realised Rod was beaming at her but couldn't manage a smile in return, didn't feel as if she'd ever smile again.

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October, four years later

Kirsty escorted this month's speaker to the side area of the library, casting a quick glance over the audience. Enough people to make a respectable showing, thank goodness. She introduced the elegant older woman and sat down at the front, not at all interested in the topic, which was *Getting the Best out of Life*. But it was her turn to babysit the speaker today.

It was quite a coup to have Catherine Kintley. They'd booked her to speak six months ago, but since then her second book had hit the bestseller charts and she'd appeared on television, been featured in articles in women's magazine, had become a celebrity, as people called it these days.

In spite of her reservations about motivational speakers, Kirsty was quickly caught up in what the woman was saying. Catherine had lost her husband when she was thirty-two, just as Kirsty had, and at forty had been diagnosed with ovarian cancer. At sixty, Catherine was vibrant with life and enthusiasm, and communicated it so well the audience sat up straighter, smiled, laughed, nodded—were putty in her hands.

Afterwards they queued up to buy Catherine's book. She took the time to speak to everyone and make them feel special.

When it was all over, Kirsty picked up a copy of the book and surprised herself. "I'd like to buy one as well."

While the bookseller took her money, Catherine signed the book, then smiled at her. "I hope it helps you. You look rather quiet and sad."

"Do I?"

"Yes. Just when you relax your guard. I saw it happen a couple of times during my talk. You're too young to have such a guarded expression."

"I lost my husband too," Kirsty admitted.

"Recently?"

"No, four years ago."

Lara held Kirsty's hand in both hers. "You've not really moved on, dear. I can see it in the way you hold yourself, quiet, tight, shut away. Sorry. I shouldn't be so personal, but I hate to see lives wasted, when there's a big world out there full of exciting things to do. I hope my book helps you."

The warmth of Catherine's smile lingered long after Kirsty had waved goodbye to her at the library door.

She looked at the book and wondered what had got into her. She never read this sort of thing, preferring gentle romances or family stories. Nothing violent, nothing miserable or extreme.

And she had moved on, of course she had. She'd made a whole new life for herself with Rod and it was very—pleasant. She had friends, family she loved, didn't need or expect any more than that.

But Catherine's words lingered in her mind all day.

When she got home, Kirsty found Rod in a much more cheerful mood than usual. "There's a new job advertised at work," he announced before she'd even got her coat off. "It'd be a promotion for me and I could do the work standing on my head."

She made all the appropriate noises, but he went on and on, so in the end she escaped to her computer. But she spent more time staring blindly at the screen than she did answering emails or getting on with her genealogical research into their family history.

At sixty, Catherine Kintley had been glowing with life. Kirsty's eyes went inevitably to the photo she kept on her desk: her and Mike. In it, they were both radiating happiness. She stared across her bedroom at the mirror. From a distance she might have been a well-preserved fifty, not thirty-six. The woman in the mirror was . . . she sought for a word and came back reluctantly with *colourless*. Why had she never noticed before?

Oh, she was being silly! And she might have been stupid enough to buy the book, but she wasn't going to read it.

She did, though, couldn't put it down. Every word seemed meant for her.

But how did you do it? How did you break out of your comfort zone? Catherine said it would be a different way for each person and you had to find your own route—and that was the challenge.

Kirsty truly enjoyed her job, loved helping people, hearing how much they'd enjoyed a book she'd recommended. She certainly didn't intend to change that.

And she didn't fancy going out on the hunt for a new guy, either, whatever her friend Neris said.

So what could she do to change things? She racked her brain, but came up with nothing.

Two weeks later Kirsty parked her car and began walking towards the library. Her shift didn't start for half hour but she always liked to arrive early. As she turned the corner, she saw an old man stagger and sag against the wall for a moment or two. He looked so like her beloved grandfather, it stopped her in her tracks. She still missed Pops dreadfully, ten years after his death.

She hurried across to help the stranger to a nearby bench.

He gave her a faint smile as he eased himself down. "Sorry to trouble you. Came over dizzy for a minute or two. It must be the new medication."

"If you like, I'll stay with you till you feel better, in case you need help."

"That's very kind of you. Are you sure I'm not keeping you?"

"I'm on my way to work at the library but I'm early." She sat down beside him. "Is there anything I can get you?"

"No, thanks. I just need a minute or two to pull myself together then I'll call a taxi. I've got one of those mobile phones, but it's fiddly to use and the keys are too small for these." He held out a hand whose fingers were gnarled with arthritis.

The way he spoke was strange, basically northern like hers, but with a hint of something else as well. "I was just trying to place your accent."

"I was born round here, all my family were, but I've been living in Australia for the past sixty years."

"Oh, so you're visiting."

"No, I'm here to stay this time. Recently I've had an urge to hear the sounds of my childhood, see the places where I was young. It was a sentimental journey, I suppose, but I've only myself to please now because my wife's dead." He shook his head as if baffled.

"Can't believe I'm nearly ninety. I still feel like a lad inside my head sometimes."

His colour was improving but he still looked frail, and that resemblance to Pop kept her by his side. "Do you want me to call you a taxi?"

"Yes, please." He fumbled in his pocket and held the little phone out to her. "Show me how you do it again. To tell you the truth, I've not quite got the hang of it. I didn't need one at home in Australia, you see."

So she showed him, but turned off the phone as soon as it rang. Then she made him turn

it on himself and dial for a taxi, to reinforce the lesson. "There. You did it."

"You explain it better than that uppity young fellow in the shop."

She smiled. She was used to explaining things to elderly people at the library, enjoyed their company.

The taxi arrived five minutes later and she helped him into it. He held the door open and looked up at her. "My name's Ed James, what's yours?"

"Kirsty Miller."

He offered his hand, looked down at hers, then glanced at her left hand. "Thanks for your help, lass. Your husband's a lucky man."

She didn't spoil the moment by telling him she was a widow. She didn't know why she continued to wear the wedding ring. Habit, probably. After watching the taxi drive away she thrust her hands into her pockets and walked briskly across the car park to work. The weather was getting chilly now, soon be winter. She was going to miss the warmer weather.

It turned out to be the sort of day that brought one minor crisis and irritation after another.

And when she got home, there was a crisis of another sort, her brother Rod. One look at his face and she knew he'd not got the promotion.

"What do they want from me?" he demanded, thumping the table. "I couldn't have worked harder. *What do they want?* This is the third time I've been passed over for promotion."

Kirsty tried to listen patiently because she knew how bitterly disappointed he was. She could have told him exactly why he hadn't got the job in management—because he wasn't good with people and was so pernickety about details he drove you mad. He irritated her too sometimes. She'd have found a flat of her own by now, only she knew how much that'd upset him. He had no friends, no one to socialise with except her.

Most of the time they rubbed along together quite well, but lately she'd been feeling restless. It was partly the fault of that book.

She sighed. There must be more to life than this placid existence, only what? How to find it?

Two days later, the old man she'd helped walked slowly into the library. He looked a lot better today, but was leaning heavily on the stick. He saw her and smiled, such a warm smile ahe murmured to her friend Neris, "Can I deal with this customer? I know him slightly."

"Sure."

He took a chair at the queries desk. "Hello again, Kirsty Miller. I'd like to join your library, please."

"And we'd love to have you, Mr James."

"Ed. We don't go mistering people in Australia."

By the time she'd helped him fill in the forms and choose some books, it was her lunch break. The sun was shining, so she ate her sandwiches quickly and went for a walk in the park. Ed was sitting there in a sheltered spot, face turned up to the weak wintry sunlight, both hands resting on his walking stick. His expression was so sad, she couldn't help stopping.

"Hello again. Want some company?"

"I'd love some, but what's a pretty girl like you doing with an old fogey like me? Why aren't you meeting that husband of yours?"

"Mike was killed four years ago."

"Ah. That explains the sadness in your eyes. I lost my wife ten years ago. You never stop missing them, do you?"

Why did people keep telling her she looked sad? She wasn't.

They sat for a minute or two in a companionable silence, then he harrumphed and pulled his scarf more tightly round his neck. "There's a nice little café on the corner. It's warmer there. Have you time for a cup of tea?"

"Yes." She'd make time.

When they were sitting with steaming cups in front of them, she said, "Will you tell me about Australia? I've always wanted to go there." She'd read several travel books about it.

She was late getting back to work, but no one worried because it was give and take, and she often worked more than her set hours if they had a rush on. She'd thoroughly enjoyed her chat. Ed's body might be frail, but there was nothing wrong with his mind and he had a way of describing things that brought them to vivid life. He seemed a lot like her Pop in nature as well as appearance.

After that he came into the library regularly, borrowing only novels, especially romances, which he said reminded him of his wife. If Kirsty wasn't free, he'd wait to be attended to by her and have a quick chat. Once or twice they went out for a coffee in her lunch break and one Sunday she drove him out to a little village where he'd lived as a lad and he bought her lunch at a pub. She was worried he couldn't afford this and tried to pay her share.

He placed his hand over hers, stopping her opening her purse. "I can well afford it, Kirsty. I'm not on the old age pension."

"Oh. Well, all right, then."

Another day, the wind was raw and he looked chilled to the bone. She looked at him in concern. "Surely you'd have been better staying in the Aussie sun until our summer started, Ed? The weather's awful at this time of year."

He hesitated, then gave a little shrug. "I shan't be here then. Got cancer. They can't help

me any more.”

She didn't know what to say, feeling tears well in her eyes. It seemed as if she no sooner grew fond of someone than she lost them.

He patted her hand. “Don't grieve for me, Kirsty. I've had a good life, longer than most, and I don't want to linger on till someone has to change my nappies.”

“How can you face it so cheerfully?”

“Sometimes you get no choice about what you face, only about how you face it.”

That was so true, she thought.

Of course, her brother didn't approve of her new friendship and complained bitterly that she was always out these days. Rod had become very short-tempered since failing to get that promotion.

Kirsty sometimes popped in at Ed's flat after work for a coffee and chat. It was small but comfortable, with a pleasant view over a public garden, and he had all sorts of services to make his life easier.

But she couldn't help noticing that he was looking even frailer, with that translucent, other-worldly look to his eyes that people sometimes got towards the end of their lives.

So she made the most of their time together and ignored Rod's complaints that she was never home.

Ed answered the door and sighed when he saw his great-nephew Noel standing there. His sister's grandson—and as unlike Ed's sister as any direct descendant ever could be.

“Aren't you going to invite me in, Uncle Edward?”

With a sigh, Ed held the door open. “How did you find me?”

“It isn't hard to track someone down. I knew you'd be somewhere round here because it's where you and Gran came from. I was worried about you.”

"I don't know why you should be."

"You're ninety and living on your own. How could I not worry? You should have come to stay with us, as I suggested. My wife and I could have looked after you properly."

Ed went across to his chair and sat down, shaking off the too-firm grasp on his arm. "I don't need looking after and I value my privacy."

"I'm concerned that you're still holding what my dad did against me."

Ed was fed up of being polite to his great-nephew. "What you're really worried about is that I won't leave you anything."

"I *am* the last surviving member of your family, so it'd be a fair thing to expect, surely? And I'm prepared to help you as much as I can while you're—ill."

"Dying, you mean." Ed smiled. "You're in the will, Noel, but only if the main beneficiary rejects my terms."

"What the hell do you mean by that? Who else is there to leave your money to?"

"Friends." Suddenly he was a little afraid of the ugly look on Noel's face. The fellow's father had been a bad 'un and the son was just like him, only not as clever.

"Look, uncle—"

There was a knock on the door and Ed yelled, "Come in!"

His cleaner used her key to enter. "Oh? Are you busy, Mr James? Shall I come back later?"

Noel glared at her. "Yes. We're having a private discussion."

Ed looked at her pleadingly. "No. Please don't leave, Dorothy. Just show my great-nephew out and then get on with your work as usual."

Noel breathed in deeply then stepped back. "We'll talk another day, uncle."

When he'd gone, Ed said, "Would you lock the door? I don't want him coming back in."

Dorothy came to stand beside him. "You look upset. Are you all right?"

“If you’d just get me one of the pills in the blue bottle, I’ll be all right in a minute or two. I’m going to change my will. That fellow isn’t going to have a chance to inherit a thing.” He waved a hand in dismissal. “I’ll just have a little rest, then I’ll ring my lawyer.”

Dorothy came back in a few minutes later and found him slumped in his chair. She bent to feel for a pulse but found only a faint, irregular fluttering. With tears in her eyes, she picked up the phone and called an ambulance, then got the piece of paper out of the kitchen drawer and called the lawyer. Ed had made certain things clear when she came to work here.