

LBRIS

We know
books

Also by Rowan Coleman

Growing Up Twice

After Ever After

River Deep

Woman Walks into a Bar

The Accidental Mother

The Baby Group

The Accidental Family

The
Accidental
Wife

Rowan
Coleman



arrow books

IBRIS | We know books
to point out that neither one of them is anything like their namesakes!

Thank you to my mum who, I think above everything else, has taught me how to be a good friend.

And finally, thank you to the token man in these acknowledgements, my husband Erol who is always there for me, always supporting me and whose love keeps me going. And of course all my love to my daughter Lily who is my sunshine and who makes me feel like spring is here, even on the darkest, wettest day.

Chapter One

Alison James found that her feet could not move.

‘Goodbye fireplace; goodbye window; goodbye spider’s web; goodbye door knob . . .’

As Alison listened to five-year-old Amy’s litany of farewells she thought of her husband in the car, his forefinger drumming against the steering wheel impatiently as he waited for her and Amy to come out and join the rest of the family to go to their new home, their new life. The removal lorry had left almost half an hour ago and Alison knew that Marc was horrified at the thought of his widescreen TV languishing on the damp front lawn while the movers waited for someone to let them in. What he didn’t know was that for two of the family, at least, and despite all that had happened here, it was hard to say goodbye.

The car horn sounded, three long bursts that made Amy jump.

‘Come on then, sweetheart,’ Alison said, taking her daughter’s hand. ‘It’s time to go to our new home. It will be very exciting, won’t it? A proper adventure.’

Amy looked up at her mummy. ‘But I haven’t said goodbye stairs; goodbye loo; goodbye airing cupboard; goodbye . . .’

‘How about you just say one big goodbye to the whole house?’ Alison prompted her, even though she would be

perfectly happy to wait while Amy bade farewell to every brick and board. She knew exactly how her daughter felt about leaving their London home because she was just as reluctant, particularly considering where they were moving to. Everyone else thought they were starting afresh, beginning a new life and turning a clean page. Only Alison understood that they were travelling back into the past, more specifically, her past.

But the decision had been made and now it was impossible to turn back.

'Is Farmington nice, Mama?' Amy asked, closing her fingers tightly around Alison's.

Alison felt an echoing clench of anxiety in her gut. 'Yes, darling, it's lovely. It's the place where Mummy grew up, remember? There's lots of room to play and not so much pollution. And the school will be great. You'll love it. Just think of all the new friends you'll make.'

Alison looked down at Amy's small, quiet face; she could only guess at how terrifying this move must seem to the five-year-old.

What her husband didn't seem to be able to understand was that going home was nearly as terrifying for her.

'Goodbye house,' Amy said on a heavy sigh. 'Be happy with your new family.'

Then finally Alison forced her leaden feet to move and, leading Amy by the hand, she shut the front door on her old life for ever.

'Get a move on, love.' Marc leaned out of the car window. 'I'd like to get us all in before dark!'

Once in the car Alison looked in the rear-view mirror. Fifteen-year-old Dominic was slumped at the very back, his arms crossed, his woollen hat pulled down over his brows so his black hair fanned into his eyes, his beloved electric guitar in its case on the seat next to him. He was plugged into his

iPod with his eyes closed, shutting the world out, displaying his disapproval at what was happening with a silent if not peaceful protest. Her middle child, eight-year-old Gemma, was staring happily out of the window, her legs drumming in anticipation of a new adventure, a new world to conquer and hundreds of new friends to make, possibly the only one in the whole family who was truly looking towards the future.

Only Amy, who had her palms pressed against the car window, kept looking back. Only Amy was still saying her goodbyes even as they turned the corner and their old street was out of sight for good. Only Amy, who brushed away a tear with the heel of a hand and then plugged her mouth with her thumb and clung on to her toy for dear life, seemed aware of exactly what they had left behind.

Only Amy and Alison, that is.

'Come on Alison, it's perfect, admit it?' Marc had pressed her only six weeks earlier, when he'd told her he thought they should put the house on the market and that he'd found them the perfect place to move to.

Alison had half looked at the details of the new house he had thrust under her nose the minute he'd walked in the door. That was Marc: he was an all-or-nothing kind of man. Things had to be done right away or not at all. He had made a mistake and now he was taking decisive action to fix it – decisive and drastic. The house in the photo was certainly much bigger than their current house, set in some grounds at the end of what looked like a long driveway.

'There's no way we can afford a house like this near enough to London for you to be able to commute, and if you think that I'm going to be stuck out in the country while you're in town all week then –'

'That's not it at all, Al,' he said. 'I've been thinking, and,

well, the dealership in Notting Hill runs itself more or less. It's established. There's no challenge for me there any more and I think we all need a change, a proper fresh start.' Alison waited for the hard sell. Marc took her hand as he sat down next to her. 'You need a change of scenery after everything that happened at Christmas, not to mention what's been going on with Dom. That's twice now he's been brought home by a policeman, Alison. He's already been cautioned for riding in a stolen car. What will happen next? Will we find a knife in his school bag or have the next policeman that turns up on our doorstep telling us our son's been shot for looking at someone the wrong way? You don't want that life for him, do you, Al? This is the prefect solution, and see where the house is.'

Alison had stopped looking at her husband the moment he mentioned Christmas. Only Marc could refer in passing to something so painful and humiliating, as if what had happened was merely an inconvenience that a good holiday would sort out. But when she saw the address of the house, all thoughts of Christmas disappeared.

'This house is in Farmington,' she said slowly, feeling suddenly chilled to the core. 'We're not moving to Farmington.'

'Why not Farmington?' Marc asked her. 'We'll be much closer to your parents once they get back from their grand tour. They only live a few miles from Farmington. Besides, you grew up there. It's the perfect place to bring the kids up. It's surrounded by countryside, it's got good schools and low crime rates . . . and look at what we'd get for our money over there compared to this place. So, why not Farmington?'

'You know why not Farmington,' Alison said, redirecting her gaze at him. 'Marc, you're incredible, you really are.'

Mark stared at her wide-eyed for a moment or two as she waited for him to catch up.

'What? You mean because of . . .? Oh, Al, don't be silly.

That's all in the past now, long gone and forgotten. Nobody cares about that any more, not even your parents!'

'I care!' Alison told him, fighting to temper her tone because the girls were in the next room and Dominic would be home soon. It wasn't so much upsetting him that she worried about, it was more how he would judge her if he found out what his father had planned for them. 'Would you move back to Birmingham, to the place where your foster mother told you she didn't want you living with her any more and that she was putting you back in care?'

Marc removed his hand from hers and she felt the chill of its departure.

'I wouldn't move back to Birmingham because it's a shit-hole,' he said, reacting with anger, as he always did if Alison mentioned his childhood. 'It's not the same, and you know it. I got dragged up through foster care and children's homes, kicked about from pillar to post. You had everything you ever wanted: a nice safe life, in a nice safe town, with nice safe parents. Is it so wrong that I want to give that life to my children, and especially to Dom, before he messes up for good?'

'You don't give him enough credit,' Alison protested. 'If you could have seen him in the school show, you would have realised how talented he is. Maybe if you talked to him every now and again -'

'I have talked to him,' Marc interrupted her impatiently. 'I talked to him for hours after the car incident. I don't know . . . I look at him and I see myself, Al. The boy needs straightening out. I think living in Farmington could be the answer.'

'Look, if you want to move from here then fine, I'm not thrilled to live here any more either. But we don't have to go to Farmington. That is the last place we should have to go,' Alison told him bleakly. 'The night I left there with you I knew I was never going back, I never *could* go back.'

LBBS | We know back then? It's an age ago, Alison, it doesn't mean anything now.'

'Not to you?'

'Of course not to me!' Marc exclaimed. 'Al, the last couple of months have been hard on you, you're not thinking straight. If you were you'd see how perfect this is.'

'Even so,' Alison had looked up wearily at Marc, 'it doesn't have to be Farmington. There are a hundred towns like Farmington, two hundred – a thousand, even. Any one of those would give the children the kind of life you want them to have, but not this one, Marc. It doesn't have to be Farmington. Mum and Dad don't even live there any more!'

Marc bowed his head, his hands folded in his lap as they sat side by side on the sofa. 'When I came to Farmington I was a railway labourer,' he began the story she already knew so well. 'Working nights on the lines, sleeping all day in the park, drinking warm beer in the sun, waiting for some girls to walk by, hoping they'd give me a second glance. I was twenty years old and I was already dead, my life was going nowhere. I looked around that town, at those people and those girls, and I knew that it was a world I couldn't ever belong to. I knew I'd go on drifting from one place to the next until the day I died. I didn't have anything, Alison, until I met you. I didn't even have myself.'

'That's not true,' Alison tried to interrupt him.

'You turned my life around. And now I have you. God knows, I don't deserve you but I still have you and I want to keep you. I want to keep the family I love, with one successful business under my belt and another in the pipeline. I want to go back to Farmington, Ali. I want to go back to the place that rejected me back then and I want to *own* it. Most of all I want to deserve *you*.'

'Tell me,' Alison asked him, feeling suddenly inexplicably

sad, 'is that any better a reason to go back than mine is to stay away?'

'We're going back for you,' he whispered, moving his lips over hers. 'Because that's the place where you and I started. It's the place where we belong and all of the things you're worried about are long dead and buried. I promise you when we're there you and I will be happy again. You'll be happy and I'll be different. I'll have more time to spend with you and the kids. Everything will be different, it will be better.'

He'd kissed her then, his hand sliding from her knee to her thigh, and because Alison wanted so much for this to be the fresh start that Marc talked about she let the discussion slide with it. It was one they would never have again, she knew that. Once Marc had made up his mind about something he stuck to it like glue, which was something she supposed she ought to be grateful for. After all, he'd made up his mind to choose her sixteen years ago.

She just had to hope that he was right, that all her fears and misgivings about going back to Farmington were foolish and irrational. That once she'd got settled back there she would feel as if she had never been away.

The only problem was that it was that eventuality that terrified her the most.

It was dusk as their car finally rolled into the driveway of their new home. Amy and Gemma were both asleep on the back seat, and Dominic was still nodding his head to some barely heard beat.

'Leave them for a second,' Marc whispered. 'I've got something I want you to see.'

Glancing back at her children, Alison got out of the car and waited as Marc asked the removal men to give him another few minutes, slipping them each a twenty-pound note.

'Come on,' he said. 'Hopefully, if all of my plans have worked, then ...'

Alison walked into the cavernous hallway just as Marc switched on the lights and she saw that it was filled with bouquets of red roses. Twelve of them, Alison counted, arranged on the marble-tiled floor in the shape of a love heart, their sweet scent struggling against that of the new paint but their colour vibrant and bloody against the magnolia walls. It was a dramatic gesture and typical of Marc.

'Happy Valentine's Day, darling,' Marc said, wrapping his arms around her from behind. 'And welcome home.'

Chapter Two

How Catherine Ashley came to be spending Valentine's Day with her almost ex-husband was a story that pretty much summed up her life.

'You don't mind booking Jimmy, do you?' Lois, the PTA chairperson, had asked her at the last meeting, with her own special brand of tact. 'It's not awkward at all booking your ex to play at the Valentine's dance, is it? It's just that I know how you two get on still, and he'll give you a reduced rate. Every penny counts if we're going to raise enough money to pay for the interactive whiteboards.'

Catherine, PTA secretary, had said she didn't mind, and mostly she didn't. It was a fact of life that Jimmy and his band were present at every wedding, christening and even the odd funeral that she had attended, both before and since they had split up as a couple, playing covers for the masses to pay the bills while they waited for the stardom that had so far eluded them. Besides, for the last few months peace had broken out between them, and Jimmy had become almost as much a part of her daily life as he had been when they were living together. Maybe even more so, because the stress and tension that their being together had caused had dissolved at last now that she had stopped waiting for him to leave her and had kicked him out.

Her friend Kirsty said they were the happiest married couple she knew, and she put it all down to the fact that they'd been separated and living apart for two years. Kirsty hadn't been there for the first year, those long and difficult months when they had tried to find a way to be parents without ripping themselves or their children to shreds. But the last year had been OK – good, even. Friendship had finally emerged from the ashes of what they'd once had, and Kirsty was right: for the most part they got on well. One day Catherine knew they'd get divorced properly, but until something happened to push either one of them in that direction she was still officially Mrs Jimmy Ashley, so considering she managed to live quite happily with that on a daily basis, booking her husband's band to play the Valentine's dance was the least of her worries.

The gas bill, the hours her boss wanted her to work, whether or not she'd have the money to get Eloise what she really wanted for her birthday – those were the worries that kept Catherine awake at night. But those were practical problems that Catherine could tackle and fight. It had been the utter paralysing fear of loving Jimmy the way he wanted her to, the way *she* often tried to, that would expose her long-guarded vulnerability. That threat of powerlessness had stalked her throughout her marriage until one day Jimmy proved all her misgivings right and betrayed her, making her thank God that she had never fully committed her heart to him because the shock of what he had done to her and their family was hard enough to bear as it was. If she had allowed herself to love him it would have been intolerable.

It had taken her a long time to readjust her feelings towards him, but she had done it for her girls, for Eloise and Leila, whom she lived for, content to let her life orbit them with the same ordered regularity as the Earth turns around the sun,

letting their happiness and beauty warm her, because their love was all that she needed.

And manning the bar at the Valentine's dance with her friend and neighbour, while her ex-husband brandished his guitar like a mammoth outsized phallus on the stage was just one of those things. It was a Jimmy thing. Like talking endlessly about more or less nothing apart from sex was a Kirsty thing.

'On reflection I think I *am* in love with my personal trainer,' Kirsty said thoughtfully for the fourth or fifth time since she had started this one-sided debate. She was holding a plastic cup full of wine and gazing contemplatively at one of the many red cardboard hearts that had been hung from the ceiling and that stirred gently, wafted by warm air created by the dancing crowd below.

Catherine looked at her, crossing her arms. 'No, you are not in love with your personal trainer,' she replied, also for about the fourth or fifth time. 'How can you be in love with him? You hardly know him. You've seen him three or four times for an hour twice a week at most.'

Catherine was grateful that Kirsty had offered to come with her to the dance, as the only other single woman in town without a date, because Catherine wouldn't have come herself if it wasn't for the fact that she was on the committee. But she had been volunteered to run the bar, so having Kirsty by her side did take the edge off the whole Valentine theme and helped to make the evening almost bearable.

Still, if Catherine had known that she was going to be treated to two hours solid of how wonderful Kirsty's personal trainer was, and the varying degree of likelihood that she was in love with him, then on balance she probably would have found standing on her own behind the table like a pariah marginally preferable. She might have looked a bit sad, quietly

UPPIS | We know
Lobo

sipping glass after glass of cheap wine while the town's couples danced happily to '(Everything I Do) I Do It For You', and yes, it would have been more difficult to ignore the four twenty-year-old girl groupies who always seemed to follow her husband and his band around, despite the fact they were all past thirty and would have been has-beens if they had ever been anybody, staring at Jimmy like he was some rock god, but at least she wouldn't be having the same meaningless conversation on a loop *again*.

'So?' Kirsty was questioning her. 'What do you think I should do? It's hard to pull your personal trainer, you know, because, after all, whenever you see him you are fat and red and sweaty. How can you make a man want you when you are fat and red and sweaty? Particularly when, based on the research I've done, I know the kind of women he likes are thin, blonde and have massive tits. Any ideas?'

At six foot exactly, Catherine looked down at her friend, whom she towered above by several inches.

'You are not in love with your trainer,' she repeated firmly, as if she were telling her five-year-old, Leila, that no way was she staying up for the end of *Strictly Come Dancing*, 'so you don't have to try and pull him. You probably don't even fancy him, not really.'

'I think you'll find I do,' Kirsty avowed. 'Have you seen his arms, his chest, his legs, his bum, his . . . oh God, I'm having a hot flush, and not on my neck.'

'That's lust, Kirsty!' Catherine exclaimed, feeling her cheeks colour. A year of knowing Kirsty still had not made her immune to the other woman's insistence on conducting full and frank discussions of a sexual nature in public places. 'Lust is not love, and love isn't even love – it's hormones.'

'It's not lust.' Kirsty was adamant. 'It's so much more than that. We talk and laugh and he *listens* to me. Plus he is the only

man in the whole wide world who knows how much I weigh *exactly*. If that's not grounds for marriage then I don't know what is.'

'It's transference,' Catherine went on. 'Like when people fall for their psychiatrists. You are transferring your sexual urges on to the poor man. Remember, you pay him fifty-nine nighty-five an hour to train you. He doesn't turn up out of the goodness of his heart or just so he can get a look at you sweating. And anyway, like you said, he fancies blonde eighteen-year-olds with breast implants.'

'No, no, he *thinks* he fancies blonde eighteen-year-olds with breast implants but that's only because he hasn't met me yet. I mean, he's met me, but he hasn't met *me*. Once he truly knows me, he'll see what love really is. Else there's always plastic surgery.'

'Just listen.' Catherine took a much-needed sip of wine. 'You are not in love with your trainer and he is not in love with you. He is probably in love with himself. Now get over it. Do me a favour and go and ask someone's husband to dance with you. I could do with a laugh.'

Kirsty sighed but allowed the change of subject nevertheless.

'You don't just rush up to a couple and tap the woman on the shoulder and say, "Please can I dance with your husband?"' she told Catherine. 'There's no fun to be had there, and besides, it never works; the married woman is a particularly fierce and protective creature. You have to bide your time, hunt the lone husband. Imagine that you are like a cheetah stalking a gazelle and then, at just the right moment, you pounce when no one's looking and drag your prey off into the bush and devour them whole.'

'On second thoughts maybe you'd better settle for just a dance. Some of those out there are quite scary when they are