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Erica
JAMES

An **IDEAL**
HUSBAND



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES

Chapter One

It was a perfect March day and spring had arrived in all its glorious splendour. Leaf buds were fattening on the hawthorn and cherry trees and in the glittery bright sunshine patches of buttery-yellow cowslips were shyly showing themselves in the grass verges. Daffodils were gaily bobbing their heads as though in time to some secret rhythm playing on the breeze.

Everywhere Louisa Langford looked as she drove home from the farm shop there was a sense of better things to come. Only a few months ago and she would have cheerfully declared it one of those days in which to rejoice and count one's many blessings. Now it took a little more effort on her part to do that, but she did it all the same because the alternative was she might end up howling at the moon like a vengeful madwoman.

So far, and in possession of an iron-willed self-control, she had managed to avoid shaming herself by behaving like a lunatic. Friends and neighbours had offered shoulders to cry on and lavished swathes of sympathy on her, which was kind of them, but it wasn't what she needed. It was divorce she was going through, she wanted to tell them, not a terminal illness.

This was, she knew all too well, a typical character trait of hers, the desire to remain stoic in the face of excruciating bewilderment that this could have happened to her. Divorce was what happened to other people, not her. Not when she had truly believed that she

and Kip had defied the odds, that they had done everything right to ensure that while the marriages of their friends and acquaintances sadly came unravelled, they were the lucky ones. How stupid she now felt for holding such a disgustingly smug and complacent view.

Every couple had their storms to weather and Louisa had taken pride in the fact that whatever had been flung at her and Kip, they had coped. When they'd had money problems, they'd tightened their belts and lived accordingly. When the children had been young and pushed them to the outer limits of their patience, they had gritted their teeth and dug deeper for further patience. Health problems and the death of their parents had all been an intrinsic part of family life and, as worrying and as upsetting as those events had been, they had pulled together as a couple and survived them. You could only do that if the foundations of your marriage were rock solid with love.

So what had gone wrong? That was what Louisa couldn't understand. Why, when they were on the verge of enjoying what other friends referred to as the 'golden years' of retirement, had Kip thrown it all away? And for what: a stupid, self-indulgent late mid-life crisis?

Nearly home now, she slowed her speed to round the bend of the tree-lined lane and was met with a sight that had her letting out a cry of shocked disbelief. There in the front garden of Charity Cottage, her home for over thirty years, was a for sale board. She had been gone for less than an hour, but in that short space of time somebody had come here and pounded a wooden post into the flowerbed. It might just as well have been hammered into her heart.

She drove through the gateposts and came to a stop on the gravelled driveway. Switching off the engine and willing herself to stay calm, she stepped out of the car, retrieved the shopping from

the boot, and let herself in at the front door. Slamming the door shut with her foot, she carried the bags through to the kitchen. There she dumped them on the floor, not caring about smashing the eggs or bruising the fruit and vegetables she'd just bought. Sinking into the nearest chair, she took a long shuddering breath and let out a wail of despair. Her head in her hands, she wept at the injustice of it all. She wept too for the loss of the man she had loved – the man she still loved – but who she feared was in the process of making her hate him.

How could he do this to her?

How could he be so cruel?

Wasn't it bad enough that he'd left her for a girl younger than their own daughter?

Wasn't it bad enough that the girl had been their youngest son's ex-girlfriend?

But now this, forcing her from her beloved home. Had he become so ruthlessly fixed on carving out a new life for himself that he had lost every trace of compassion for how this would affect her?

Or was it a mistake? Had the for sale board been put up in the wrong place? Was that it? Was she working herself into state and thinking the worst for no real reason? Ever since the pandemic, for sale boards had sprung up like weeds in the area. Properties in Suffolk villages, particularly those with good rail links to London, had been selling at astronomical prices in the last few years. Her eldest son, Ashley, was an estate agent and he had benefited enormously from city folk rushing to live in the country. He had even sold a beautiful barn conversion in a nearby village to his sister and her husband after they'd decided country living would suit them and their young daughter better than London.

Wanting desperately to believe that the man to whom she had been married for nearly forty years would never behave so heartlessly towards her, Louisa clung to the hope that a quick

telephone call would have this all sorted and the estate agent who had arranged to have the board put in her garden would apologise and send somebody to remove it. But by the sickening dread that was lodged in the pit of her stomach, she knew she was deceiving herself. Hadn't Kip said that there was a strong possibility they would have to sell the house so they could both move on, that financially they would both benefit from the sale? Her divorce lawyer had said as much too.

But naïvely Louisa had imagined that he would realise how much this would hurt her, and Kip would do the decent thing by letting her keep the house into which she had poured so much of herself. Everyone knew that it was a woman who made a house a home, that it was where a mother could nurture the family. It was women who made an emotional connection to a home; for men it was often little more than bricks and mortar, an investment to be cashed in at the appropriate time. Which was what Kip was now doing. He would doubtless claim that he needed to take this step so he could build himself a secure future with the new love of his life. Never mind what he was doing to his old family.

It was the thought of how Kip must have gone behind her back to put the house on the market that brought an abrupt end to her sobbing. Couldn't he at least have kept it in the family and asked Ashley to sell it? But of course not, that would have meant Ashley would have told her straight away what Kip was up to. Instead he must have secretly met with an estate agent here to have the house assessed and photographed at a time when he knew she wouldn't be around. Like last week when she was up in Harrogate. And what story had he given the agent, who would have been rubbing their hands at the prospect of selling one of the most attractive houses in the village of Ashbury St Clare?

'Oh, my wife is fully on board with selling up, we're divorcing but it's all very amicable,' he'd probably said, adding with a shrug,

'it's a shame, but just one of those things.' Louisa knew just how charmingly engaging and persuasive Kip could be. It was why everybody loved him.

So appalled was she at the idea that he could behave so duplicitously, Louisa sat in stunned shock at the table. She should have changed the locks, just as her sister had advised. But she had said no. She hadn't wanted to appear confrontational; Charity Cottage was still Kip's as much as it was hers. Damn fool her for being so trusting and gullible!

And damn fool her for thinking that Kip would never want to part with Charity Cottage, that if nothing else, it might be the one thing that would tempt him back. Hadn't he always joked that the only way he would ever leave was when he was carried out feet first inside a coffin? She could almost wish that he'd left her by dying rather than leaving her for another woman half her age.

Twenty minutes later and having pulled herself together, Louisa had organised for a locksmith to come later that afternoon to change the locks. She would have three extra sets of keys made up to give to the children, but no more would Kip be able to let himself in whenever he chose. She pictured him putting his key in the lock and the expression on his face when he realised what she had done. The thought should have brought her malicious pleasure, but it didn't. It made her feel hollowed out that it had come to this.

With the shopping put away she rang the young woman with the irritatingly upbeat voice who was acting on her behalf to ensure that a fair divorce settlement would be agreed. It still staggered her that Kip had initiated divorce proceedings with such indecent haste. But that was him all over; once he made a decision that was it, there was no going back.

The receptionist at the law firm who answered the phone to Louisa informed her that Ms Bailey was out of the office

until Monday, but she could leave a message if she wanted. Louisa declined. What she wanted was for this nightmare not to be happening.

She then telephoned the estate agent whose for sale board had made such an unwelcome appearance in the front garden. Keeping her voice as level and as composed as she could, she made it clear that she'd had no prior knowledge of her husband's definite intent to put the house on the market, it had previously only been a possibility, and she was far from happy the way things had been done. She saw no point in demanding that the sign be removed; the house was a jointly owned asset, and although it would break her heart to leave it, she suspected it was a battle she would lose if she tried to fight the sale of it.

After ending the call, she then contemplated ringing one of her children but decided against it. Ashley and Angus would both be working, and Arabella would be busy with little Heidi.

In the weeks immediately after their father had made his shocking announcement on – of all days – Boxing Day that he wanted a divorce and was moving out to be with his absurdly young girlfriend, not only did the children call her at least twice a day, they visited her as often as they could.

Understandably, they were as shocked as she was by what their father had done and each in their different ways was still coming to terms with the situation. Anger seemed to be their number one emotion, especially for her youngest son, Angus. But then he had a lot to come to terms with: his father embarking on an affair with his ex-girlfriend.

Of the three children, Angus was the more self-contained and reserved one. His position within the family had not always been easy, as from a young age he'd had to accept that he would never be able to penetrate the close bond Arabella and Ashley shared as twins. Consequently, he tended to keep his emotions to himself.

To Louisa's knowledge he hadn't yet been able to bring himself

to speak to his father since Boxing Day. She couldn't blame him for that.

To keep her mind from picking away at the raw hurt of Kip's latest act of betrayal, Louisa set to with peeling potatoes to make a fish pie with the cod and smoked haddock she'd bought at the farm shop. It was a favourite dish of the family, one that she had made for many years and which they would have for lunch tomorrow.

The children – she still thought of them that way, even though they were all in their thirties – were coming to spend the day with her. She wasn't planning on going to a lot of trouble; her days of spending hours cooking complicated meals were behind her, she really couldn't be bothered. But she would dress everything up by using the best crockery, which before had only been used for special occasions. Now she used it nearly all the time.

'Mum, you can't put those in the dishwasher,' her daughter had recently chided her, 'the gold will come off!'

'I don't care,' Louisa had said, ramming the plates into the dishwasher with a wilful excess of force. 'What does it matter? It's only a bit of china.' In the past Louisa had washed the dinner service – a wedding gift – by hand, treating it as though it were as delicate as a newborn baby.

When the fish pie was made and put in the fridge, and with an hour to go until the locksmith would arrive, Louisa made herself a mug of coffee and took it through to the timber-framed orangery which they'd had added on to the sitting room ten years ago. It was a beautifully bright and airy space and had instantly become Louisa's favourite room in the house. It was now where she spent most of her time. Before Kip had left her, her workshop had been confined to the box room at the top of the house, but since January she had brought everything downstairs and turned the orangery into her workshop.

It was here that she could lose herself in creating the miniatures

which she sold under the name of *It's the Little Things* either through her Etsy shop or at the various doll's house fairs around the country. That was why she'd been in Harrogate last week; she had been at the Miniaturist Fair selling her miniature watercolours as well as a selection of hand-painted 12th scale furniture. She bought the furniture in kit form and put it together before decorating each item in tiny detail. She also bought pre-loved items on eBay to repaint. The work was intricate and immensely absorbing and by abandoning reality in favour of a perfectly controlled world, albeit a 12th scale world, it had enabled her to hang on to what was left of her sanity after Kip had left her.

But was that the source of the problem: had she spent too long focusing her attention on the minutiae of life – just as she had to concentrate on the tiny details of what she created – and lost sight of the bigger picture? Was that why she hadn't noticed her husband falling out of love with her and falling in love with somebody else?

Chapter Two

'Mum, I've just been told by a work colleague that there's a for sale board at the house. What the hell's going on?'

The vehemence of his words bounced back at Ashley in the confines of his car and he immediately regretted how he'd spoken. He'd sounded like he was blaming his mother and she was the last person who should be blamed. The person he should have rung was his father, because doubtless he was the one who had instructed Barston and Bright to put Charity Cottage on the market.

'I can assure you I had nothing to do with it,' his mother said.

He heard the hurt defensiveness in her voice and wished he'd spoken with more care. 'Of course, I didn't think you had,' he said more gently. 'When did the board appear?'

'It was there when I came back from the farm shop at about midday today. Can you imagine the shock I had when I drove home and saw it?'

Ashley could. 'And Dad hadn't mentioned anything to you before?' he asked. 'He hadn't warned you?'

'No. Other than some vague stuff a while ago that the house might have to be sold. But I never thought he'd go through with it. I thought he would at least leave me with my home. And the worst of it is that he did all this behind my back. He must have met with the estate agent here while I was away last week. I don't understand him, I really don't. Do you, Ashley?'

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The anguish and confused disbelief in his mother's voice filled him with an impotent rage. 'No,' he said grimly, wanting very much to punch something very hard. 'I don't understand him any more. Shall I come over and see you? I'm on my way home, but I can easily call Caro and explain.'

'That's kind of you, darling, but you'll be here tomorrow, and we can discuss it then. Go home and enjoy your evening and give little Peggy a kiss from her Grammy.'

Knowing that Caro wanted him home early so she could go to her book group this evening, Ashley took his mother at her word and said goodbye. With a small stab of guilt, he was relieved not to have to spoil his wife's plans for the evening, but equally he felt guilty that his mother was facing this latest act of family sabotage alone.

That's how it felt to Ashley, as if his father was deliberately lobbing live hand grenades at them as a family and with each one that landed and exploded, another level of trust and love was lost. Putting the house on the market the way he had was the last straw. Although who knew, maybe there was worse to come.

Before Boxing Day, and when he last saw his father, Ashley had thought him one of the finest men he knew. Fair-minded, generous, always encouraging and supportive, open-minded and never judgemental, and always fun to be around; that was the man Ashley had known and admired. Yes, Dad had displayed occasional flashes of temper and irrational obstinacy, who didn't, but that aside Ashley would have described him as the perfect father, and the perfect husband too. He was what Ashley had aspired to be in his own marriage, but now he felt that he had been duped. Everything about his father had been a sham. He simply wasn't the man Ashley had believed him to be.

His father's choice of Barston and Bright, a rival estate agent, to sell Charity Cottage was a real kick in the guts for Ashley. If his old childhood home was ever going to be sold, then it should be

Taylor Marks who took on the job, and with Ashley as an associate partner at the helm. Not that he'd thought Mum would be forced to sell. He'd trusted his dad to have his finances sufficiently in order to live comfortably enough without breaking Mum's heart any more than it already was.

Or was it Zoe who had pushed him to take this step? Was she the one pulling the strings in their relationship?

When Angus had first brought Zoe home to meet the family last spring, Mum had gone out of her way to make his girlfriend feel welcome. Mum always wanted people to feel at ease and part of the family. She hated for anyone to feel uncomfortable or unwelcome.

At the time, and this wasn't with the benefit of hindsight, Ashley and his sister, Arabella, had discussed in private that they thought Zoe wasn't warming to the fuss that Mum made of her. But then Angus shared with them that Zoe wasn't used to a close-knit family like theirs. Her father had died when she was a child and then her mother had died a few years ago. Naturally, when Mum knew this, it made her want to lavish yet more affection on Zoe.

Five months after that first visit of Zoe's to Charity Cottage, Angus pitched up on his own for a family barbecue. He made out it was no big deal that Zoe had just dumped him, easy come, easy go, he'd said, but he'd got badly drunk that night and Mum had found him lying on the grass in the garden staring up at the sky as the rain came down. Mum never went into details about the conversation that had passed between them, but it was clear that Angus must have cared for Zoe a lot more than she did for him.

Fast forward to Boxing Day and Dad's shocking announcement, and when he'd sworn blind that he and Zoe hadn't started their affair while she was still seeing Angus. He'd said it as though that made everything okay, that that was a line they wouldn't have dreamt of crossing. Everything else was just fine.

Ashley didn't think he would ever forgive his father, who in

one fell swoop had fractured them as a family. He'd broken Mum's heart, tainted the love both Ashley and Arabella felt for him and crushed Angus. His selfishness ensured that they would never be the same again. Every family occasion would now be different. Every family memory distorted.

Yet somehow Dad expected them to accept the new situation and move on. The child in Ashley – the boy who had idolised his father – wanted to do that, but his anger and disappointment, and his loyalty to Mum, wouldn't allow it. His wife, Caro, took the view that sooner or later they would have to accept the situation because otherwise it would only become a lot more difficult for them.

Caro spoke from experience. Her own parents had divorced when she was a child and after they realised the harm they were causing their two daughters with their arguing and petty disputes over whose turn it was to have the children, they sought counselling. From then on, they managed to put their own feelings aside so they could concentrate on their children's happiness. With that achieved they were both happier themselves and eventually found love with new partners. All four of them had come to Ashley and Caro's wedding and had seemed perfectly at ease with each other.

Ashley couldn't imagine anything remotely like that happening with his parents. How could Mum ever feel comfortable in Zoe's presence? For that matter, why the hell should she? And why should the family go along with it as though Dad had done nothing more than trade in his old car for a new one?

Grinding his teeth – something Caro said he'd started doing in his sleep these last few months – Ashley stopped at the temporary traffic lights on Chelstead High Street. The road was being dug up yet again, the second time in twelve months, and waiting impatiently for the lights to change, he drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. He supposed he should ring his brother and sister to discuss this latest news, but he decided it could wait.

With the lights now green, he drove on and made another decision. But as so often happened when he called his father, he was diverted to voicemail.

'Full disclosure, Dad,' he began, 'I didn't believe I could think any less of you, but then you go and do this, go behind Mum's back to sell the house from under her feet. And of all the agents you could have chosen, you appoint Barston and Bright who are not known as Bastard and Shite for nothing!'

He rang off and clamping his mouth shut, he ground his teeth. He didn't stop grinding them until he arrived home. Switching the engine off, he stared up at the detached house which he and Caro had moved into four years ago. He could remember their excitement that first night in their new home, surrounded by packing boxes and eating fish and chips and drinking Moët. Despite being exhausted, they'd made love and slept the sleep of the dead until woken in the morning by bright sunshine streaming in through the bedroom window that had no curtains.

They'd loved their new home, and with its weatherboarding and mellow brickwork, and what any estate agent worth their salt would describe as being a highly desirable individual property in a sought-after village, they had poured every spare moment they had into renovating and decorating it, making it theirs. But whatever pride and delight they'd derived from the months they'd spent knocking walls down, rebuilding and painting and tiling, putting in new flooring, and installing bi-fold doors to the kitchen, it all paled into insignificance when their daughter was born. In a heartbeat, the world changed for Ashley. Nothing mattered more to him than Caro and Peggy: they were his all.

They were also his Achilles heel. Life without them would be unbearable. That was why he could relate to the pain his mother was going through. All too easily he could imagine himself in his mother's place, losing the most important person in his life, and it terrified the hell out of him. Which made him hate his father all