

Three of a Kind

This was the only answer. Once he let go it would be over. All the doubt and confusion. There was no other solution. He wouldn't fight it. Just let the cold, darkness engulf him until the maelstrom in his head stopped. Leaning out over the water below, arms outstretched behind him, the young man tightened his grip on the balustrade, fingers white on the groove at the top as he held on. His feet shifted as he tried to fit them onto the narrow ledge of the bridge. He felt mad, free, liberated. All he had to do was release his grip and it would all end. A slight breeze ruffled his hair causing his pale fringe to flop over his eye. Rashly he let go with one hand to scoop it back into place but wobbled, becoming unbalanced. He frantically searched for the side again gripping it with both hands. The river swirled below as the tide was turning pulling it towards the mouth and the sea beyond. It was too early for much traffic. A few cars and the odd white van passed by on the road behind him. All oblivious to his dilemma.

He looked down. If only he could have told someone. Not his father. Bastard. He never wanted to see him again as long as he lived. He laughed at the absurdity of the phrase. The way he was going that wouldn't be for more than a few seconds. Mum? She cared, but wouldn't understand. She'd tell him not to worry, that it would go away. But it hadn't gone away. Not since the incident in the fourth year at school. He'd had to live with the knowledge that he was different. Years of lying and deceiving everyone. Deceiving himself. Now his time was up. Everything was coming to an end. He had to choose a path. But he couldn't do that without facing his father. And he couldn't do that again. Not after the last time. But he was a grown man. Supposed to make his own decisions. Well, *this* was his decision. He had been coming to this point for years. What a relief it would be, at last, to end it all.

But what about Chris...? Chris was the only one who would care. Chris was the only one who had got him through these last four years. Helped him see reason, try and stand up to his parents. Make him realise that it was his life to lead not theirs. Maybe if Chris came with him this time he could face it all. The young man hesitated. Chris would know what to do. Perhaps he shouldn't do it just yet. Perhaps he should give it time; talk it through once more.

Relaxing his shoulders, he loosened his hands and slowly shuffled his feet sideways towards the bank. He hesitated. His left foot caught on a rivet as he moved it gingerly over the obstacle. Slowly he moved each foot along. His hands never relinquishing their grip until he had a secure foothold. Slowly he inched his way until the scrub along side the river bank came into view beneath him. He stopped. But even Chris couldn't stop the doubts. The feeling of failure. The knowledge that he wasn't normal. That he was a disappointment. A wind whipped up suddenly and blew dust into his eyes from the tow path below him.

The jogger never knew what made him look up at that precise moment, just as he slowed his pace to adjust the volume on his iPhone. The young man on the bridge high in front of him leaned forward and let go with one hand, as if in slow motion; his silhouette blackened against the sunrise behind him. As he started to fall, the man turned and frantically tried to grip the balustrade behind him. Mark could see the panic in his face as he desperately tried to get a hold of the wood. Mark stopped jogging and stood still as he ripped the wires from around his ears. 'Oh, my God... No!' came in disbelief from his lips. It was too late. The figure above him, unable to grasp any kind of hold, plunged, his body twisted and flailing, to the ground.

Chapter 1

By the time Kate finished in the lounge she felt exhausted and badly needed a cup of strong coffee. It had been non stop since Mike left for the office at the crack of dawn that morning. He was so bloody particular about the house. She usually managed to let it go over her head, just keeping things ticking over, but on special occasions like this dinner tonight, he expected her to pull out all the stops.

‘It looks lovely,’ Emma said pushing the vacuum cleaner in front of her as she came into the room and bent down to coil up the wire that was trailing behind her like a tail.

Kate brushed a strand of hair from her eyes with the back of her hand and sighed, a slight sheen of perspiration gleamed on her brow. Straightening up she looked at the coffee table and frowned as she saw a smudge of polish that she had missed, striped across the middle. Kneeling down so that she could catch it in the sunlight streaming through the window, she took the cloth and carefully wiped away any remaining marks. If there had been a Brownie badge for perseverance she would have got it that morning.

‘There, now tell me it’s not perfect,’ she challenged, standing back to admire her handiwork. Although it wasn’t a large room, it had good proportions and the pale yellow decor made it appear bigger. With the fireplace centrally placed along one wall, and the sofa and chairs sat squarely around the coffee table, it felt cosy. Kate plumped, for the umpteenth time, the brightly coloured cushions that matched the curtains. Picking up the pile of magazines from the floor, she laid them carefully in a fan pattern on the small side table, each one carefully spaced a small distance apart.

‘Crikey, surely they’re not going to get a ruler out to check the dimensions?’ Emma added sarcastically straightening up, her hand on her hip as she watched her friend.

‘Hummm,’ Kate said distractedly, giving them a last inspection. Quickly pushing one of the magazines that had slipped out of place she picked up the basket of cleaning materials and walked hurriedly towards the kitchen.

‘Thanks, Em, it was good of you to come and help out,’ she said just catching the polish before it hit the ground as it slipped from her grasp. ‘Mike’s even more twitchy than usual. You’d think the Queen was coming tonight, the state he’s got himself into.’

‘It wouldn’t matter who was coming,’ Emma said following her, pulling the cleaner. She propped it in the corner next to the wine rack and went over to fill the kettle. ‘He’s so anal about the house. What does a few cobwebs matter here and there? I don’t know how you manage to stay so calm, I couldn’t. There must be a name for what he’s got. You know, some kind of...obia or syndrome?’ Emma crossed the room and opened the fridge door taking out the red topped carton of milk to fill the coffee cups. ‘You’re not still on this watered down stuff are you?’ she shouted loudly as she turned and realised that Kate had left the room. Disapprovingly, holding the milk up as though it were poisonous, she poured it into the cups after the granules and waited for her friend to reappear before continuing. ‘When are you going to realise that life is too short to be on a permanent diet. This is our big year, girl. Isn’t it about time we let up a bit? If you can’t do it at fifty, when can you?’ she grinned as she returned the carton to its place in the fridge door. ‘Semi skimmed wouldn’t hurt and it would taste so much better,’ she grimaced as she poured the boiled water.

Kate leant against the counter and rolled her eyes at her friend's dramatics. 'I'm damned if I'm going to let it all go to pot just because I've *nearly* hit half way. It's alright for you,' she said glad to change the subject from her husband's failings. 'I can't let myself go. I only have to look at food and it's leapt onto my thighs. It's only by being careful...' she argued indicating the cups, '... that I've been able to keep control all these years. You're lucky you've got room for manoeuvre. Anyway, what about you?' she directed back at her friend at the same time as flicking away a stray crumb from the worktop. 'When do you get the boys back?'

'Oh, next week sometime,' came the reply. 'Guy's taken them to visit his mother in France. It was a spur of the moment thing apparently. Didn't let her know that he had them for the holidays and when she found out she went ballistic and insisted he took them over straight away. You know how he crumbles when she calls.'

'What about the bunny boiler? Has she gone as well?'

'Of course. He doesn't go anywhere without her. Elliot texted me to say she's upsetting Gran by insisting on coming down to breakfast later than everyone else and then saying she can't eat anything.'

'Makes you look like a saint then,' Kate said stretching up to place a kiss on her friend's cheek then picking up her cup from the counter next to her. 'I bet you miss them though.'

'Who, my ex and his mother?' Emma smiled as she took another sip of her coffee, wincing as it was too hot.

'No... you idiot, Elliot and Tom. It must be hard for you in the holidays. You have them all term, and then they're suddenly whisked away for weeks at a time. It must be difficult to adjust,' Kate said studying her friend's face to see if she had hit home.

‘Oh, I’ve got used to it,’ Emma said quietly, quickly turning her back as she reached in the cupboard for the biscuit tin.

‘Liar,’ Kate accused leaning back against the counter and looking at her. Emma always did try and hide things but she’d been able to read her for years. On the surface it looked as though Emma had everything. Tall and slim with long, blond hair tumbling just past her shoulders, Kate had envied her when they had been at school. Emma had bumbled along in life, seemingly with no direction in her nonchalant manner, travelling around the world, flitting from boyfriend to boyfriend. It wasn’t until she met Guy soon after she was thirty that she settled down. When Elliot eventually arrived Emma at last seemed to start to grow up and think about someone. Kate couldn’t imagine life being so random, buffeted from whim to whim without control. She liked to know what direction she was going in and how she was going to get there.

‘You must hate it,’ Kate persisted. ‘Don’t think you can fool me. I know you too well. You must be lonely sometimes.’ She put her hand out and squeezed the shoulder of the woman in front of her. ‘Distraction. That’s what you need,’ she concluded as her friend turned round and gave her a watery grin. ‘We must find you something to take your mind off things.’ She put down her cup. ‘I saw an article that could be useful, it’s here somewhere...’

Kate reached over to a pile of newspapers lying on the chair. She’d been reading the papers more avidly recently looking for properties to invest in. Flicking through she gave a short grunt of approval when she found the right edition, folded the broadsheet and handed the page to Emma. ‘Why don’t you give this a go?’

Emma glanced at the title and grinned. Rolling it up into a baton she hit Kate on the arm with it as she walked past and pulled out a heavy wooden chair to sit at the large, oak dining table that stood in front of the patio windows.

‘Oww,’ Kate protested, mockingly rubbing her arm.

‘Lonely hearts I’ll give you lonely, bloody hearts,’ Emma laughed. ‘I’ve got rid of one husband. Why would you think I’d want another?’

‘Correction. He got rid of you,’ Kate reminded pointedly, holding up her hands in surrender when Emma raised the newspaper baton again as she sat down opposite.

‘Same thing really,’ Emma said, shrugging her shoulders. ‘Oh, I admit, it’s not nice to be passed over for a younger model. It nearly bloody killed me in the beginning. But as time’s gone on I think it was probably for the best.’

‘How do you mean?’ Kate asked cocking her head to one side.

‘Oh,’ Emma revealed slowly. ‘I realise now we’d been winging it for years. We had nothing left to talk about except the children. He’d got so wrapped up in his work it was as though I didn’t exist. I tried to get on with my life but I got fed up playing second fiddle, just as much as he probably got fed up with me.’

‘Don’t be silly why would he get fed up with you? You have your own business... own life. You’re not like me, at home all day,’ she continued ignoring Emma’s raised eyebrows. ‘The salon keeps you busy doesn’t it?’ she probed feeling the flood about to unleash.

‘Oh, don’t get me wrong, it does. I love it. Going in everyday is what got me through. But I can’t live my life with my staff in a hairdressing salon. I want a companion, Kate, someone to share things with. I’d finish at five, pick the boys up and come home to an empty house. All evening, every day. I’d get the boys to bed and then sit there. That’s when you want to talk to someone. Sometimes Guy wouldn’t bother to come home at all, just ring to tell me the meeting was going to be late or he was so busy it made sense to stay in town. We just seemed to drift apart. Eventually I gave up trying to make any effort. That’s when the bunny boiler stepped in. Clearly Guy was more

bothered about sex than he let on. I suppose she made a refreshing change to me, the old moaner at home,' she paused, letting out a deep sigh and leaning back in her chair. 'To be honest I wasn't totally surprised when he told me he was leaving. Even the boys didn't seem to notice he was gone.' Emma took a sip of her coffee. 'I'd be alright about it, if it wasn't for them. I feel guilty as hell about what I've done. Maybe if I'd made more of an effort he wouldn't have strayed.'

'Don't be silly,' Kate sympathised. Relishing her position of counsellor, Kate folded her arms and straightened up in her seat. 'It takes two to make a marriage work and you've just said how unhappy you were. Guy's the loser. He's lost out on a beautiful home, two gorgeous boys and you, why look at you,' she pleaded thrusting her arm out towards her. 'You're in the best nick of the three of us. He's a fool. Bunny boiler will soon start demanding, if she isn't already. What is she anyway? Twenty five... thirty?'

'Twenty eight.'

'Perfect. The hormones will be kicking in soon and she'll want babies. Then he'll realise what an idiot he's been. Can you imagine any man of fifty...'

'Forty eight,' Emma cut in sharply.

'Ok, forty eight then... Miss Picky... what man of forty eight wants to go through the hassles of raising another brood. He's working his way towards late lie-ins and afternoon snoozes on the sofa. You wait. It'll fall apart and he'll be left on his own in his old age. Serve him right. And by then you'll be ensconced with some hunk of a man yourself. Preferably one with big muscles and a huge...' Kate hesitated and grinned.

'Huge what?' Emma laughed naughtily. 'Don't be so rude.'

‘All in your mind, missy. I was going to say, huge bank balance,’ she finished, leaning back in her chair and folding her arms smugly. Maybe a complete change was what Emma needed. New man, new start. Again she seemed to be without direction, letting others make the decisions for her, just waiting for Guy to make up his mind about what to do with the marriage. How long ago was it that he had left now? Surely Emma wasn’t going to just let him call all the shots. The reality of the break up must have registered by now and if they weren’t going to be together, which they obviously weren’t considering Guy’s current behaviour, then Emma ought to give it to him straight and demand a divorce. Cut the ties and let herself move on.

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ Emma reflected scooping back her long hair into a loose, scrunched knot as she leant back against the chair, her hands holding it in place on top of her head. ‘Mr Big Muscles has got to have more to him than money. Guy’s talking about selling the house so I won’t need that. I don’t mind really. It’s too big for the three of us now anyway.’

There she goes again, Kate thought. Letting someone else make the decisions about *her* life. It was about time she woke up and took charge of the situation. If not for her, for the boys. ‘It’s a bloody mansion,’ Kate exclaimed. ‘It must a nightmare to look after. How do find the time to clean all those bloody toilets?’

‘I don’t. The en- suites are out of bounds,’ Emma replied with a grin. ‘Oh, I won’t miss it. It was a status thing with Guy. I just don’t want *her* getting her hands on any of it. I’d much rather be in a cosy cottage somewhere. It’s all this too- ing and fro- ing with the boys. I can’t stand it. She’s welcome to Guy’s dirty washing and his moods. And by the sounds of it, she’s not such a laugh either. I think they’re pretty well suited actually.’ Why isn’t she getting angry? Kate reflected looking at Emma rocking backwards and forwards on the two rear chair legs as though she was sitting in a boring

lesson at school. The way Guy treated her was shameful. What was it going to take to make her fight back?

‘Anyway, I’m in no hurry to land myself with another burden,’ Emma continued. ‘Although...’

‘Although what...?’

‘I do miss the sex. Even once in a blue moon was better than nothing.’

‘Oh, *please*,’ Kate groaned, trust Emma to come up with that as a priority.

‘Don’t remind me. That’s one of the things that really get on my nerves with Mike. Why does it always have to be such a big issue? If he goes too long without it he gets all grumpy and starts slamming cupboards. It’s like a warning sign, so I know I’ve got to deliver the goods before too long, just to keep the peace. I’d quite happily be a nun.’

Emma let out a hoot of laughter and rocked backwards on her chair. ‘I’d like to see you as a nun. You wait until you haven’t got it on tap anymore, girl. I can assure you, you’ll miss it then. Although, maybe it’s not the actual sex,’ Emma reflected.

‘Maybe it’s the intimacy that I miss. Even though he wasn’t there very often, I’ve got no one now I can just go up to and cuddle anymore. You know, smooch over to on the sofa and nestle into.’

‘No I don’t actually,’ Kate said sipping her coffee and straightening herself up. ‘Come on, you know I’m married to a board. When did you last see him hold my hand in public? Or kiss me for that matter. Mike doesn’t know the meaning of smooching. No... intimacy to him is sex or nothing at all.’ She leaned across the table and took Emma’s hand. Her face mock serious, a mischievous twinkle in her eye. ‘Come here though, I’ll give you a cuddle if you want.’

‘Thanks, but no thanks,’ Emma said laughing, getting up and taking their cups over to the sink. ‘Your chest isn’t nearly hairy enough for me. How have you managed then if he won’t even cuddle you?’

‘Oooh, I don’t know. It’s never been a priority for me,’ Kate said swivelling round in her chair, her arm draped casually over the back while she watched Emma. It really hadn’t. She had never been interested in sex, even when they were all younger she had been happy to go without. It was only because everyone else at University seemed to be at it that she felt she had to compete to be included. ‘Maybe I’ve just got a very low libido. And as far as cuddles go, I get them from Luke when he’s home, that’s enough.’

‘Oh, how is he? He finishes soon doesn’t he?’

‘Yes, exams next month. Came home last week. Seemed a bit quiet but I put that down to exam stress.’ She hoped it was just exams that were worrying him. She had always been close to her son when he was younger but somehow, going through his teenage years, he had withdrawn from her. Oh, they still talked. It was just more about general things than how he felt. When he was younger she had always heard how the other boys were teasing him at school or when he was upset with one of his friends. Now when she rang him in his halls of residence, the conversation ended up making her feel like his secretary knowing his schedule for the week. ‘It must be hard for them all,’ she concluded. ‘Pressure, pressure, pressure to do well *and* they’ve got that huge debt at the end.’

‘Any girlfriends yet?’

‘Not that I know of. He’s kept all that side of things very low key. Says he’s concentrating on getting his degree out of the way. Mike wants him to do something in the City.’

‘What does Luke want?’

‘I’m not sure. It’s a subject we try and avoid after he and Mike had a huge row about it in his first year. Luke said he’d finish this course but then wanted to study History of Art. Well, Mike nearly hit the roof. Luke didn’t come home for Christmas that year. Said he had studying to do and was staying with a friend.’

‘I remember now,’ Emma said opening the dishwasher which was neatly hidden behind the white wooden door. ‘Isn’t that the year you had your mother-in-law to stay and she never went home.’

‘Yeah, you’ve got it. I nearly lost the will to live,’ Kate said slowly. And her marriage she reflected. ‘She got flu and stayed for a month. As far as Luke’s career’s concerned we’ve avoided the subject ever since. Now... more important things. What are you going to do about getting a man?’

‘Give it a rest, Kate,’ Emma said pointedly tipping the remains of the drinks into the sink and stacking the cups on the top shelf. ‘I’m better off on my own. I really can’t be bothered with all that getting to know you business. Once they know I own a hair salon they start brushing their hair and asking me for discount. So, not only have I got to work out whether they are a mad axe murderer or not, but whether they are so shallow they only want me for my scissors. Anyway, it’s not just me anymore,’ she added seeing her friend’s questioning look as she ran her hands under the tap and reached for the dark blue towel hanging on the front of the Aga. ‘I’ve got the boys to watch out for. I can’t bring just anyone home. He might be a bad influence on them; they’re at a vulnerable stage. And anyway, at our age there isn’t much out there that isn’t someone else’s reject or comes without baggage.’

‘But Em, you can’t go through your life with that attitude. The boys are getting older; they’ll be gone one day soon. You don’t want to be a lonely old maid, do you?’

‘Course not, but I’d rather be lonely than stuck with someone I can’t stand.’

‘Well, I think you ought to widen your horizons and go join some evening class or something,’ Kate chided. ‘I can’t be looking after you, as well as Cass.’

‘Oh, don’t worry about me, I’ll be fine, as for Cass, can you honestly see Seth letting anything happen to her? She’s the lucky one; he adores her, always has and always will.’ Kate had always envied Cassie’s relationship with her husband. Ever since they met Cassie had been his whole world. There wasn’t anything that she could do wrong in his eyes. As far as Kate saw it they had the perfect marriage. When their daughters completed their family Seth always reminded Kate of a puppy with two tails. Surrounded by the women he adored, and who adored him, what man could want for more? ‘I know, you’re right, but somehow I always saw the three of us together in our old age, living on a hill and drinking cocktails at sunset, she continued. ‘We’d have got rid of all the men and just enjoy ourselves, booking them in for the odd occasion we might need their services. If you know what I mean.’

‘Oooh, maybe we could have a few on hand. You wouldn’t need them that often by the sounds of things, I could use your share,’ Emma eyes sparkled.

‘Returning to the real world,’ Kate smiled at how Emma always managed to turn the conversation. ‘Don’t you think Cassie is the lucky one; it must be nice to be so in love after twenty five years of marriage.’

‘Don’t go all sentimental on me,’ Emma scoffed. ‘Yes, great to have that kind of friendship but look at the downside.’

‘What downside?’ Kate retorted getting up from her seat and walking through the doorway into the lounge. ‘Seth dotes on her. They do everything together, have two beautiful daughters, a loving relationship and, if we believe what she says, great sex.’

‘Yes, but think about it,’ Emma continued mischievously following her and manoeuvring herself towards the sofa.

‘Don’t sit there. My cushions!’ Kate exclaimed moving quickly to block her as she poised to sit down. ‘Here sit on the floor next to me.’ She sat down with her back resting against the chair and stretched out her legs. With a scowl Emma followed her lead and continued.

‘She’s only ever had great sex with Seth. How does she know it’s great if she’s had nothing to compare it to? They were childhood sweethearts who have stayed together through thick and thin. She once told me she’s never slept with anyone else.’

‘Oh my God,’ Kate said aghast, absentmindedly twiddling a strand of hair round her finger. That explained it. Why Cassie was always so cagey whenever the conversation got on the subject of sex. She didn’t have anything to talk about without being disloyal to Seth. ‘But I thought she’d played the field a bit. What about that guy when she was nursing? She told us about him. He kept hovering around. Didn’t that go anywhere?’

Emma shook her head slowly mouthing a silent no.

‘Blimey, I can’t imagine what that is like. Seth must be a bloody God in the sack to keep her satisfied all these years. Or maybe she’s like me and doesn’t need much. I’ve never really had this kind of conversation with her.’

‘And why do you think that might be?’ Emma teased.

‘I don’t know. Do you think she’s envious of us? We can get a bit out of hand reminiscing when we’ve had a few too many.’

‘Basically, the way I see it, she loves Seth but there’s always the nagging doubt that there might have been something else out there and now it’s too late to find out.’

‘It’s never too late. Look at you. You’re about to embark on a new relationship.’

‘Give it a rest,’ Emma said tersely. ‘I’m nowhere near ready to meet someone else, even if I wanted to. I couldn’t imagine taking my clothes off in front of a stranger; he’d run a mile when he saw me. The lights would definitely have to be off for anything to happen.’

‘Sounds like my house then,’ Kate offered. ‘Lights off is essential.’

‘What! But it doesn’t matter anymore. Mike’s seen you giving birth for God’s sake. He shouldn’t care about the odd extra bit of wobbly flesh.’

‘Thanks very much. I may not be as trim as you but I’m not *that* bad. Anyway it’s not *my* flesh I’m worried about. Picture Mike, red and sweaty, as he puffs away? It’s not a pleasant sight I can assure you,’ Kate responded.

‘Kate! I’ve always thought Mike was pretty fit. I’ll never be able to look him in the eye again.’

‘Emma,’ Kate said seriously extracting her fingers from the knot of brunette hair. ‘When you said that bit about Guy wanting to sell the house, you didn’t mean just yet, did you? We can still hold our party there, can’t we?’

‘I hope so,’ Emma replied suddenly becoming engrossed in picking some crumbs from the carpet. ‘He’s talking about getting it valued and putting it on the market, but I honestly can’t see anything happening before the summer. You know how disorganised he is. We’ll be fine for September. Crikey, it took us long enough to agree on the date between the three of us. I can’t go through all that again. If we get a buyer before then I’ll just have to delay things somehow. Now what else needs doing before I go?’ she asked. ‘I can’t be all day. I’ve got to go into the salon on the way home to meet a Rep.’

Kate got up and walked over to the oak dresser behind them to retrieve some plates. The ornate glass doors revealing numerous glassware of all shapes and sizes. She

bent down to open one of the six doors underneath and started to select a pile of white, side plates. 'If you could give me a hand with the canapés that would be great. I only have to prepare them and then put them together just before the guests arrive.'

The phone rang. Kate absentmindedly reached up to retrieve it from the ledge, sandwiching it between her shoulder and her ear as she struggled to take out the crockery. The voice on the other end was low and serious. Kate manoeuvred the phone to listen with one hand whilst trying to keep hold of the china with the other.

Suddenly there was a loud crash as everything tumbled to the ground. Emma jumped up and swung round to see her friend standing stock still amid the debris of broken plates. Her face was ashen and the hand that was now holding the phone was shaking as she paid rapt attention to the person on the other end.

'My God, Kate, what is it?' Emma questioned earnestly going over to her and placing a hand on her shoulder, as Kate slowly put down the receiver without turning it off. 'What's happened?'

'Em... Em....' Kate replied her voice barely above a whisper as she leaned on the wooden ledge of the dresser to steady herself. 'Emma ...it's...it's Luke. He's just jumped off Hammersmith Bridge.'