

PART ONE

I

The second my plane hit the runway I was already beginning to wonder if I'd done the right thing. Didn't surprise visits always end in disaster? But, up until the moment the flight took off, a big part of me had been worried that I would have to cancel at the last minute, that work would call and say they'd rejiggered things again and they needed me after all, so it had seemed safer not to tell anyone. No expectations, no disappointment: that was my rationale. And, besides, I thought it would be fun.

Not to mention the fact that I needed a bit of home comfort. I was still reeling from my big news. It felt, to be honest, a bit like the world was about to end, but I knew deep down that I was overreacting. I had always known it was a possibility. I had watched as many others had suffered the same fate. I just hadn't been expecting it to be so sudden.

I'd been living in New York for seven and a half months. In two weeks, I'd be home for good.

And I thought that breaking the news to Jack face to face would help. Because sad though he'd be for me that I was losing my job, I was pretty sure his main reaction would be happiness: that I was coming home,

that we could get on with setting a date for the wedding we'd announced before I'd left, that we'd be back to being a normal couple who lived together rather than more than three thousand miles apart. And I knew that would rub off on me. I needed a bit of perspective.

My heart was kicking up a storm as I approached our road, sweaty and overtired with the jet lag that was kicking in already. I have never done anything like this – flown halfway round the world on a whim. Over and over again, I'd been imagining Jack's face when he found me at home – shock, but I had no doubt it would be quickly followed by sheer delight. I knew, of course, that he would already have left for work by the time I arrived, but there was always a chance he'd have taken the day off sick or as a random holiday. Not that I have ever known him to do either of those things. He loves his job. Or, at least, he loves his work – which is in advertising. He's finding his actual job a bit frustrating. He's impatient to move on and up.

I had spent the whole flight trying to decide what I would do – should I hide and jump out on him? (Might give him a heart attack.) Stand proudly beside a lovingly cooked meal with a serving spoon in my hand? (Too *Stepford Wives*.) Or be lounging on the sofa wearing nothing but a basque? (He'd probably laugh. Also, the slight hitch that I don't own a basque, wouldn't know where to buy one if you paid me. I barely know what one is.) In the end, I decided that booze was the way to

go. Wine bottle in one hand, glasses in the other. Don't tell me I don't know the way to a man's heart. Or a woman's, for that matter. I was already planning a trip to the offy around the corner.

I lugged my – way too big for a weekend – suitcase up the stairs. I was transporting as much of my crap home as I could manage before the big move: another reason why this trip made sense. I smiled when I saw that Jack must have been watering the rubber plant on the landing that is my pride and joy, because it looked so healthy and shiny. He might even have polished the leaves, too. That would be a first. This, I realize in retrospect, is when I should have known. Thirty-eight-year-old men do not suddenly start buffing up the leaves of houseplants for no reason. I let myself in, calling out his name, crossing my fingers that today might be the day he had decided to go in late. It was still only a quarter past nine but deep down I knew he'd already be at his desk. He wouldn't be home till half six, quarter to seven at the earliest. And I hadn't even dared think about the fact that he might go out straight from the office. When I spoke to him last night – just before I boarded the plane, although he didn't know that – he didn't mention any plans, but these things change.

The moment I opened the door I knew something wasn't right. The flat looked tidy, for a start. And there was a smell I didn't recognize. Just a hint of it, mixed in with Jack's earthy blend of coconut shower gel, take-away curries and laundry with a hint of unwashed gym

kit. I sniffed loudly, trying to work out what I was finding so unsettling. Could it be me, a faint trace left in my possessions, even though I hadn't been back since Christmas, over three months ago?

I ditched my case and my computer bag and snuffled my way around the flat like a bloodhound. There was more evidence of extreme tidiness – the dishwasher was empty and everything put away, papers were stacked neatly on the coffee table; even the remotes were in a straight line. Maybe he'd invited his mum up, it occurred to me. I should have checked with her, let her in on my secret. He probably wants to show her how well he's coping without me. I know how concerned she was when she heard work was taking me to New York. Maybe she was here already and she'd just gone out for the day, leaving a lingering, unidentifiable but most definitely female scent behind her.

I jumped as Oscar, our portly black cat, appeared out of nowhere and ran towards me. Grateful that he remembered me, I picked him up and made a fuss of him, but I was distracted. I looked in the fridge for his food.

Hummus? Jack thinks the only thing hummus is good for is grouting the bathroom. He thinks it tastes like old sofa cushions, although when he's ever tasted those I have no idea. I shut the fridge door, plonked a handful of Dreamies down for Oscar, who looked at me, disappointed.

I checked in the spare bedroom for signs of life. The bed was stripped and piled up with junk, like it always

is. Most of it has been there since the day I moved in four and a half years ago. Pictures we'd never got around to hanging, two tennis racquets we'd used once on holiday, a lamp neither of us liked. No visiting mother, then. I went back out and along the windowless hall. In the bathroom, I stopped short. There was a little cluster of girly toiletries on the windowsill. None of it belonged to me. Shampoo for fine hair. Toner for combination skin. I suddenly felt light-headed. Put out a hand to steady myself on the sink.

In the bedroom, the bed was made. I don't think I've ever known Jack to make the bed in the five years we've been together. Not because he's lazy, he just doesn't see the point. He's only going to get back in and mess it up again. There was an unfamiliar suitcase on my side. I flung it open, riffled through the clothes inside. She was a size eight, whoever she was. In the wardrobe, a row of dresses, blouses and skirts edged my own stuff to the far corner. Some of them looked familiar, but I couldn't work out why. The labels revealed they were from Zara, Top Shop, Maje. Half my friends probably have the same things.

I resisted the urge to phone Jack to demand answers. He didn't even know I was in the country. I retrieved my bags and made sure I'd left no trace behind. Then I exited the flat and headed down to the street. I went straight to the park across the road and sat on a bench. I needed time to think.