

## Prologue

There should be some kind of warning given the day your life changes for ever. A tingle in the air, a whisper on the breeze, a gentle celestial nudge urging you to treasure what you've got before it's too late. But for Gemma, the morning began with deceptive familiarity: the sound of Spencer crashing around in the bathroom next door, the shower being turned up to its most torrential setting, then his voice belting out an enthusiastic if tuneless rendition of 'My Girl'.

Gemma pulled the pillow over her head to block out the noise. Five more minutes, she promised herself. Five more minutes, snuggled beneath the warm duvet and then she'd force herself up and into action.

Sleep stole over her like a soft blanket, though, and she drifted back into a dream, not noticing when her husband placed a steaming cup of tea on the bedside table nearby, nor when he yelled a cheerful goodbye ten minutes later.

If she'd known then what would unfold in the space of a single morning, she'd have run after him, thrown her arms tight around his body and refused to let him leave the house.

*Not today*, she'd have said. *You're going nowhere, Spencer Bailey.*

But she didn't know. She had no idea. And so the day began.

## Chapter One

### *Three weeks earlier*

It was New Year's Eve: night of a thousand parties, of champagne corks bouncing off ceilings, bright fireworks cracking open the sky, and the finest frocks ever to grace a dance-floor. Across the nation, Christmas had been discarded like old tinsel and reindeer antlers in readiness for one last alcohol-fuelled, throw-caution-to-the-wind knees-up before the austerity of do-gooding January dawned, cold and forbidding. In bars and clubs and village halls throughout the land, they were ready: umpteen bottles of fizz corked and chilling, clingfilmed buffets laid out on linen-clothed trestle tables, cutlery and glasses polished to a soft gleam. In the bathrooms and bedrooms of all the towns and cities, they were ready: glittery make-up applied, hair primped and sprayed, the hiss of the iron as it smoothed down fabric creases, and the worst of the Christmas excesses glossed over by control pants and many a muttered New Year dieting resolution.

Down in the small Suffolk village of Larkmead, however, Gem-

ma Bailey was one burned canapé away from a total meltdown. How was it, she wondered crossly, that their original plans for ‘just a small gathering’ with a few friends, some experimental cocktails and a bowl of posh crisps had metamorphosed into an everyone-welcome house party, which would totally turn the new neighbours against them? Daft question. It was down to Spencer, of course, her gregarious husband, who’d seen fit to invite all his football mates and their other halves to the party, as well as some of the lads from work. He’d even asked some woman last seen when they were teenagers, who was back in Larkmead after the death of her mum, for heaven’s sake. (‘I felt sorry for her!’ he’d protested when Gemma gave him a long-suffering look. ‘What was I supposed to do?’ ‘Oh, I don’t know, pat her arm and say “Sorry for your loss”, like a normal person?’ she’d replied, rolling her eyes.)

As if that wasn’t enough of a random guest-list, a fortnight ago, at the primary-school Christmas quiz, he’d proceeded to get completely smashed, commandeered the microphone from the quiz-master – the deputy head teacher, no less! – and invited basically the entire hall of parents along, too. Gemma had opened her mouth to protest, but only the faintest whimper came out. It was too late anyway. Everyone was already saying they’d love to come, they were all *dying* to see what she’d done with the new place. The new place, by the way, that still had woodchip wallpaper and manky carpets in every room, strange-smelling drains and the most horribly pink bathroom suite known to mankind. Gemma had not been planning any kind of open house until at least the summer, thank you very much, especially

not to some of the competitive mums in Darcey's class who had houses like museums and could sniff out bad hoovering and dusty surfaces in approximately ten seconds.

(She still felt a flush of shame when she thought about the time her son Will had brought one particular friend home for tea, aged about seven. Jack Barrington – that was it – a tuftyhaired little boy with a piping treble back then, although, these days, he was almost six foot with acne and a newly deep voice. Jack's mum had come to pick him up and, as she thanked Gemma at the front door, Jack said, 'Will's house is *really* messy, Mum!' in a voice hushed with shock. 'And we had *chips* for tea!' It was a bit like that in Larkmead: competitive mothering. Gemma had long since given up trying to win any accolades in the field.)

'You don't mind, do you?' Spencer had asked, as they staggered home in the wintry moonlight after the Christmas quiz ended. 'Might as well make it a proper New Year party, don't you think?'

'I'm not sure the house is ready for a party,' Gemma had replied, her mind flashing from one horror zone to another: the faded, dusty curtains the previous owners had left behind, the mouldy patch of wall in the kitchen, the spidery downstairs loo with the blown light bulb that she still hadn't got round to replacing. They'd only been in their house six weeks, after all, and hadn't even unpacked all of the boxes, let alone performed any DIY miracles.

'Yeah – exactly! So it doesn't matter if it gets trashed, right?' He elbowed her. 'We don't have to worry about people spilling wine on the carpets – we'll be ripping them all out soon anyway. And it's such a great house for a party.'

He had a point. It was a great house, full stop; or rather it would be, once they'd done it up. They'd completely overstretched themselves, buying the gorgeous old stone farmhouse on the expensive side of Larkmead village, but it would be worth it one day. There were four big bedrooms, a lovely long garden and a garage to house the sleek black Mazda that Gemma swore Spencer loved more than her. Bags of potential, the estate agent had said. Bags of charm.

It was also going to take bags of energy and hard labour to turn it into their dream home, especially as they didn't have any funds left to pay painters and decorators. But that was fine, they agreed: this was their forever home, the only one they'd ever need. There was no rush. Well, there hadn't been anyway, until Spencer invited half the village round on the biggest night of the year.

Still, she was getting there. The kitchen and living room were now pretty much spotless, as was the downstairs loo. She'd laid out a buffet table, hiding her rather unappetizing looking home-made canapés at the back, and decanting plastic tubs of Waitrose dips into her nicest blue-glazed bowls. There was also a large quiche from the deli, a ton of cheeses left over from Christmas, and half a brandy-drenched Christmas cake, which had you seeing double after three mouthfuls. That would have to do. (And if the competitive school mums wanted to raise their eyebrows at her half-arsed catering, then let them. She didn't care. Well, only a little bit.)

Spencer, meanwhile, had taken the children over to his parents' house, where they'd be spending the night. They were only

ten minutes down the road, but he was taking a suspiciously long time to return. No doubt his dad, Terry, had uncapped the whisky and they were both setting the world to rights in front of the fire. He could be hours yet.

Sighing a little, she polished all the champagne and wine glasses with a clean tea-towel and lined them up on the worktop, wishing she could fizz into more of a party mood. There was something about New Year's Eve that always brought her up a little short – that taking-stock moment when life seemed to hinge between two planes, past and future, and you were forced to examine exactly where you were. Recently she'd had the uneasy feeling that the years were slipping by, each faster than the last, and she wasn't doing enough with her life. Sure, she was a wife to Spencer and a mum to Will and Darcey, and she was grateful for all of that. But in what other way was she leaving any kind of imprint on the world? Sometimes she felt she could vanish tomorrow and nobody would even notice.

'What does your mum do?' Gemma had heard Nicolette Valentine ask Darcey a few weeks ago as they went upstairs to Darcey's bedroom. Nicolette was new to Larkmead, and had a semi-famous actor mum and a dad who'd recently got a job as a registrar at the local hospital.

'Oh, not much,' Darcey replied. 'She's just a mum.'

*She's just a mum.* Like that was nothing. Darcey had even sounded embarrassed to say the words, as if fully aware of Gemma's failings.

She had tortured herself ever since that she was not a good role-model. All of her other friends with children were back

at work now, with part-time jobs that required smart clothes and make-up, pursed lips as they checked their smartphones in the playground. And what was she? A chubby housewife, who did the laundry and the shopping and made sure everyone got to school and work on time, with the occasional dressmaking job on the side. *She's just a mum. Not much.*

Sometimes in her darkest hour she wondered if Spencer thought that of her, too.

'Come on, Gems,' she muttered aloud, trying to shake off her gloom. Once she had her new dress on, she'd feel better, she reminded herself. She'd made it at the start of the month and had been dying to wear it ever since: a midnight-blue velour off-the-shoulder beauty that cinched her in at the waist and fell into a flattering tulip-shaped skirt. With a few well placed darts, the dress accentuated her hourglass figure, making her bust and bum appear voluptuous and curvy rather than plain old fat. There were even a few black sequins twinkling here and there. Hopefully a bit of sparkle on the outside would make her feel sparkly on the inside, too.

(She had wrestled a few demons in the past over her size, it had to be said. In her early twenties she had become kind of obsessed with calorie-counting, slimming right down to the size of a twig for a while. Had she been happy, though, denying herself carbs and puddings for the sake of squeezing into skimpy dresses? No, she had not. She'd hated the weak, hollow emptiness that gnawed inside her when she had starved herself. Thankfully all that nonsense had been nipped in the bud long ago. No New Year's crash diets in *this* house, thank you very much.)

The doorbell rang just then, making her jump. Ah, that would be Spencer – forgotten his keys, she bet. Her spirits lifted at once: knowing Spence, he'd pour her a cocktail, rig up the glitterball and tease her for worrying about something as ridiculous as canapés, and all of a sudden she'd feel a million times better.

She opened the door, but saw an unfamiliar woman standing there, rather than her husband. A thirty-something woman with coppery hair tied back in a messy ponytail, a pale freckled face and a blue Puffa jacket. She didn't look like an evangelical Jehovah's Witness on a mission to convert the world to Jesus, but you never could tell.

'Hi,' Gemma said. 'Can I help you?'

'Hi, yes, sorry to bother you,' the woman said. 'I'm meant to be staying in the cottage next door, but the guy I'm renting it from – Bernie Sykes? – isn't answering his phone, and I've no way of getting in. I don't suppose you know how I can get hold of him, do you?'

'Ah. Right.' The previous owners of their home had warned her about this. The pretty cream-painted cottage next door was rented out as a holiday let by Bernie, the larger-than-life landlord of the village pub. Unfortunately Bernie was usually too busy holding court in his bar to remember to answer his phone, or even notice it was ringing, let alone pay attention to his bookings diary. 'Don't worry, I've got a spare key. Come in a sec while I find it.'

The woman stepped into the hallway as Gemma returned to the kitchen and fished out the key from its hiding place in the old red teapot on her dresser. 'Here,' she said, holding it out. 'Knowing Bernie, he'll have had a few drinks already and his phone's



probably lost down the back of the sofa. You can always find him in the pub, though – The Partridge, at the end of the road and left. He’s the landlord: loud, whisky, slight resemblance to a walrus. You can’t miss him.’

‘Thanks so much,’ the woman said, and opened the front door again. ‘Cheers.’

‘No problem,’ Gemma said. ‘And happy New Year, by the way. Looks a lovely cottage. Perfect for a romantic getaway.’ The woman’s mouth twisted. ‘It’s just me staying, actually,’ she said. ‘Thanks again. Happy New Year to you, too.’

Oh. That was strange. Gemma watched her go, unable to imagine what it would be like to spend New Year’s Eve alone. *There*, she told herself sternly. It could be worse, see? You could be all on your own next door, rather than here with a house full of guests and gallons of booze. It certainly put a few crap canapés into perspective.

An hour later Gemma was multitasking rather impressively by running a creamy, scented bath while drinking a very welcome glass of cold Pinot Grigio. It was slipping down a treat after all her hard work.

‘Gems? Where are you?’ she heard Spencer shout as the front door banged behind him.

‘Up here, stark naked and awaiting your pleasure, sire,’ she yelled back, even though she was still in her old jeans, hair scraped back in a scrunchie, with an unattractive onion aroma lingering on her fingers. ‘Come and get me!’ She swished her hand through the water, making the bubbles froth. That should get him pelting him up the stairs, she thought. Spencer took the slightest raising

of an eyebrow as an invitation that she was desperate for his bod. She and Spencer had been together for fifteen years now. They had met one sunny Saturday when she'd gone to visit her dad in Stowmarket and accidentally crashed into Spencer's van. Whatever he might say, Gemma was sticking to her guns: the prang was totally his fault. If he hadn't distracted her by walking along the street with no shirt on, his chest tanned and muscular, his sloe-dark eyes so soulful and his black curly hair so gorgeously tousled, there was no way her foot would have slipped on the accelerator. As it was, she'd been halfway through a parallel-parking attempt, and had reversed into the vehicle behind her with a horribly loud bang.

'Oi!' he'd cried, breaking into a jog. 'That's my van, that is. Look what you've done!'

Pink in the cheeks, Gemma clambered out of her car, mortified at what had just happened. She was also kind of breathless at being so close to this handsome stranger, even if he was in a blistering rage. 'I am so sorry,' she gulped. 'Shit, this isn't even my car – it's my flatmate's. She's going to kill me.'

His eyes softened, perhaps because she was wearing a turquoise minidress with a huge zip that went all the way down the front. She had been small and slinky back then, a size eight and two stone lighter than she was now. With her long conker coloured hair, heart-shaped face and large brown eyes, she was the kind of person that you couldn't stay mad with for long. 'Don't worry,' he said gruffly after a moment, inspecting the mercifully intact bumper. 'No harm done. Are you all right?'

Her insides went swimmy as his gaze fastened on her, and her

pulse quickened. *I am now*, she thought.

Gemma was living in London at the time, working as a designer for Pop, a cheap-and-cheerful fashion range, but it took just three months before she and Spencer were happily shackled up in a rented red-brick terraced house in Larkmead, the small Suffolk village where he'd grown up. A year later they were married and then, just as she was starting to tire of the London commute (as much as two hours, door-to-door, on a bad day) she fell pregnant with Will and took an early maternity leave. Sometimes she wondered how her life would have turned out if Spencer hadn't been in Stowmarket that day, or if she'd chosen a different place to park. Funny how everything could change course so dramatically in one fateful moment.

'Hell-o!' he called now, bursting into the bathroom. 'Hey,' he added, seeing her still in her full scruffbag get-up. 'I was promised nudity and sex. Where's my nudity and sex?'

She laughed at the indignant look on his face, then her breath caught in her throat as he pulled his shirt over his head and approached her with a wanton gleam in his eye. She might have let herself go over the years, but he certainly hadn't. He was as beefy and muscular as he'd ever been.

'Now then, Mrs Bailey,' he said, sliding his arms around her and tugging at her top. 'Let me help you take off these clothes . . .'

*Lucy Diamond*