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JULIA LLEWELLYN



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*For Lizzy Kremer.
Thank you for everything*

I

It took an hour and a half to travel from Rosie and Jake's old two-bedroom flat on the grimy fringes of the North Circular to the Village nestling on a bend just south of the Thames. The Village, which had a duck pond, an ancient church with a steeple you could climb on Sunday afternoons, an array of gift shops selling wrapping paper at five pounds a pop and coffee parlours competing to serve the best chocolate brownie. The Village looked its absolute best on this breezy day in early spring, with almond blossom blowing from the trees like candied pink snow.

'That restaurant on the corner just got a Michelin star,' said Jake, nodding at a whitewashed Victorian cottage with wisteria growing round the door and no sign whatsoever it might be open to members of the public. 'We should go.'

'Definitely,' Rosie agreed. 'As soon as I find a babysitter.'

'Or we could take the boys,' Jake said, as Toby hollered from the back seat, 'Get off, George! Stop hitting me.'

'Maybe not,' Rosie smiled.

'Look!' yelled little George. 'A kite!'

Indeed, there were two little boys in cord shorts and chambray shirts holding a kite string, not squabbling over it as Rosie's boys would have, but smiling delightedly as they ran along. A Labrador barked excitedly. A pretty mummy with long dark hair in a floaty summer dress watched, beaming. A daddy, also in shorts and a violet polo top was shouting encouragement. It was like the old Peter and Jane books that Rosie had learned to read from come to life. Did the Village tourist board pay them to stand there?

'Can we fly a kite?' George asked. 'Today?' In Neasden the only place to fly a kite was on the patch of grass next to the four-lane A road decorated with disused needles and dog shit.

'Not today, love, because we'll need to buy one first. But once we have one, yes, every day.' Remembering George was apt to take promises literally, Rosie hastily backtracked. 'I mean, most days. Now we'll be living so close to the Green.' Another thought struck her. 'We might even be able to fly it in the garden; it's big enough.'

'We're going to have a trampoline in the garden,' Toby reminded her. 'You promised.'

'I know. I've ordered one. It'll be delivered next week.' It had been a pinch-yourself moment clicking on CONFIRM. Imagine, a trampoline in the back garden. Rosie knew virtually all kids had them these days, along with tutors and ADHD, but it was still a dream come true for someone who had grown up in a cramped

three-bedroom flat above a bookies with no outdoor space at all – it was still a dream come true.

‘Mummy!’ shrieked George, the suggestion of bouncing having obviously been the last straw. ‘I’m going to be sick.’

‘Oh no! Slow down, Jake.’ Poor George suffered horribly from car-sickness. Rosie had spent a small fortune – probably the cost of two trampolines – on acupuncture wristbands and homeopathic remedies to tackle the problem, but since she always forgot to administer them before they set out on a car trip, she had no idea if they worked or not. Likewise, she never remembered to bring plastic bags as vomit receptacles. Jake, slow down!

‘We’ll be there in just two minutes.’ Jake always said this. It drove Rosie mad.

‘Slow bloody down!’ she hissed, craning round. Her two-year-old son had turned an alarming shade of green.

‘Slowdownforfuck’ssakeJake!’

But it was too late. George had hurled his breakfast Weetabix and raisins all over himself and the back seat of their elderly Passat.

‘Mummeee!’

‘Uurgh, Georgie, you stink!’ Toby bellowed as the car belatedly halted in front of the high iron gates that protected their new home from the outside world.

‘Don’t stink!’

‘Toby, don’t be mean to your brother. Jake, I told you

to stop!’ But Jake wasn’t listening, he was fiddling with his new key ring. He pressed a button and the gates slowly opened.

‘How cool is that? I’m like Blofeld,’ he crowed as they drove through them, crunching to a halt on the gravel. Rosie leaped out of her seat, opened the back door and yanked George out of his car seat. Puke splattered over the drive.

‘Welcome to our new abode,’ laughed Jake.

‘Take off my clothes,’ George sobbed.

‘Oh, sweetheart,’ Rosie said, gingerly pulling his T-shirt over his head, so his reddish curls were streaked fetchingly with complementary orange vomit. ‘Poor you. We’ll change you as soon as the removal van arrives with all your clothes. And while we’re waiting you can have the first bath in our new house.’

‘That’s not *fair*,’ protested Toby, whose life was a series of never-ending injustices.

‘You can share it,’ Rosie amended, holding her son’s reeking clothes by the tips of her fingers. ‘Or have a bath of your very own.’ After all, there were six bathrooms to choose from, as she recalled.

Whooping, the boys ran up the front steps that led to the glossy black front door, which was flanked by two stone sleeping dogs, statues of Lampard and Di Canio, Louis and Samantha’s, the previous owners, beloved Rhodesian ridgebacks.

Rosie and Jake stood gazing up at the house. Three storeys of dark red Georgian brick studded with

white-framed sash windows. Like the heartbreakingly pretty homes inhabited by characters in Jane Austen novels (at least in the telly versions Rosie had watched). The kind of house that today was the domain of rock stars, bankers, famous sportsmen – the rich.

Because, not quite overnight, but within the past year or so, Rosie and Jake had become one of that number.

‘It’s beautiful, isn’t it?’ Jake said.

‘I can’t believe this is really happening.’ Nor could Rosie believe she was standing in front of her dream home holding a selection of puke-splashed garments, but never mind.

‘Mum, Mum. I need a weeee!’ Toby yelled. ‘*Open the door.*’

‘Oh Christ.’ Jake started fumbling with the key ring again. ‘Not vomit *and* wee on the same day, surely?’

‘That’s pretty good going. We need to add some blood and crap into the mix for it really to get exciting.’

‘Which key goes in which lock?’ Jake panicked, examining the brand-new set of keys that Fripley and Farquhar’s couriers had biked round that morning.

‘Hurry, Daddy! I’m bursting.’

‘Nearly there.’ Jake pushed the huge brass door knob and the door swung open revealing the marble hallway. Without Louis and Samantha’s reproduction furniture, it was even bigger than Rosie remembered. The burglar alarm started bleeping.

‘Oh fuck, what do we do?’

'I have the code!' Rosie smiled. She was the calm one in their partnership. 'Nine nine four two.'

'Let me!' yelled George, but Jake had already stabbed in the numbers.

'Daddd-eeeeee.' George started weeping at this betrayal.

'Oh, George, it's OK.'

'Where's the toilet?' Toby wailed, clutching the front of his trousers.

'You'll have to say "loo", now, my son,' Jake teased. 'We're not in Neasden any more.'

'*Mummy* says "toilet".'

'Yes, and Mummy will always say "toilet",' responded Rosie cheerfully. Words like 'toilet', 'lounge' and 'pardon' were her mother-in-law Yolande's pet hates; she and Jake always joked about it.

'C'mon,' Jake said. 'It's over there. I'll race ya.'

They ran into the little hallway that led to the kitchen, yelling with delight. Rosie knelt down and put her arms round George in his skimpy underpants. They looked up at the double-height ceiling: supported by twirly Corinthian pillars.

'What do you think, schnooks?'

'It's big.'

'Shall we go up to the bathroom? To one of the many bathrooms,' Rosie giggled, struck yet again by the amazing change in their fortunes. Would she ever get used to it? 'We'll get you washed. Maybe in the jacuzzi.' There was a jacuzzi in her and Jake's peach-coloured

en suite, not to mention glass his 'n' hers sinks. They planned to fill it with foam up to their necks and then drink a bottle of Moët in it to christen the new house.

'Waaargh!' bellowed Toby, re-emerging from the loo. 'Come on, Georgie. Let's play. Kill, kill, kill!'

'We're going up for a bath and then you can play.'

'The gold taps will have to go,' said Jake, following him. 'And the water in the loo's still blue. Sam must have had her cleaner give the place a final once-over before she left to give Marbella a good spring clean.' He put his arms round Rosie's waist and kissed her gently on the lips, smiling down at her.

'We've done good, Old Bean,' he said. He had called her that since he'd had a tiny part in a fringe Jeeves and Wooster play, just after they met.

'*You've* done good. I just married the right man.' Rosie hugged him close. 'Is it really ours?'

'It's one hundred per cent ours. Cash. No mortgage.'

'No mortgage,' Rosie breathed. She thought back to her childhood, when some months she and Nanna had to literally search for coins down the back of the sofa to pay the rent. 'Our bricks.'

'Our gutters.'

'Our ivy.'

'Our light switches.'

'Hopefully not for much longer,' grimaced Rosie. Samantha and Louis's light switches were gold-plated, very eighties, another detail that strongly evoked her best friend Christy's childhood home. Twenty years ago

Rosie had thought Christy's parents were the ultimate sophisticater, even if her mother was horrible. Now, of course, fashions had changed completely. Rosie was planning to rip out everything, make the house contemporary and stylish.

'We're going to grow old and die here. Though we'll have to install a Stannah. Two Stannahs. Our Stannahs.'

'Four. Two for each staircase. His 'n' hers. Designed like thrones.'

Hand in hand, they walked into the 'reception room' as Samantha called it. Yolande would have corrected her, told her it was the 'living room', Rosie thought, smiling.

The dusky-green carpet was brighter where the kidney-shaped glass coffee table and white leather sofas had sat, and the lavender walls had faded patches where the Warhol-style oil portraits of Louis and Samantha had hung. They'd left the curtains: voluminous maroon swags held back by lap-dancery tassels, and there were huge holes in the walls, relics of the cabling for Louis's vast home-entertainment system.

'Sam did all of this,' Louis had said when showing them round (he'd refused to let the man from Fripley and Farquhar have a look-in) and instead of immediately issuing her husband with a writ for libel Samantha had nodded proudly. She was an ex-model, huge in the seventies apparently, with a cloud of ash-blond hair and a penchant for tight leggings and low-cut tops, revealing an only slightly raddled cleavage. Rosie instantly liked Samantha, passion for antiseptic wipes, air freshener and

all. She and Louis, who had finally retired from running a chain of bookies, had downsized to their second home in Spain, but they'd promised they'd visit whenever they returned to the Village to see their friends.

'You're going to have a great social life here, babe,' Samantha had promised. 'Do you want me to put you in touch with my bridge club? They'd love to have you on board.'

The hideous decor didn't matter. Something in the bones of this house spoke to Rosie from the instant she saw it, making her want it so badly it was like a chasm opening in her chest. She'd imagined herself making scones on the Aga (she hadn't a clue how Agas worked and didn't even much like scones, but never mind). She envisaged the boys playing cricket in the garden (they'd remove Louis's greenhouse), while she – in a liny dress like one she'd admired a few years ago in Jigsaw but couldn't then afford – would wander out with a wicker basket to gather raspberries from the bush in the far corner to make into jam. They'd be happy here, she knew it.

Mind you, she and Jake had been very happy in the cramped flat in Neasden. But they were outgrowing it and then, virtually overnight, they'd had the money to buy – not *any* house they wanted – they still couldn't have afforded a maisonette in somewhere like Knightsbridge – but their dream house, their forever house, in a lovely area, with a huge garden and rooms going spare.

She still couldn't believe how simple the process had been. Rosie had said she wanted the house and Jake agreed (though it helped that his mother had also proclaimed it an excellent investment). They'd offered the asking price and been immediately accepted. All those years of scrimping, trying not to turn on the heating until November, buying nappies from Lidl, no holidays and suddenly this. Overnight, almost. Extraordinary.

'Our Ikea furniture's going to look so ridiculous in this room,' Rosie grinned, looking around the cavernous space.

'Looks better without all the crystal ornaments on the mantelpiece, though.' Jake hugged her. 'But you're right. We'll need to buy some new stuff. Get rid of those horrible curtains, put in shutters.'

Rosie pulled back the curtains and looked down at the garden. A garden with planning permission for a swimming pool. As a child she'd always wanted a pool, considering it the acme of luxury. Though they'd have to wait a few years to install it – good Lord, could you imagine George around it? But when the boys were older, it would be a different matter.

They could have a dog. They *could* have another baby, but Rosie wasn't interested. She was so grateful and thrilled that she'd been able to jack in her job and spend more time with the boys, but at the same time the reality of being at home with small children wasn't quite living up to her fantasy. It was messier than she'd imagined, noisier, more boring and sometimes more

lonely – though of course there were brilliant bits too. Still, the first item on her to-do list was finding a good nursery. Then she'd have mornings off, time to . . . she didn't know. Well, do up the house obviously. She'd drive to antiques markets that started at dawn and scour eBay for finds just like people did in *Living Etc*, people whose children were called things like Indigo, Thorn and Bushfire.

But then? Take up pottery? Start training for entry to *The Great British Bake Off*? Study for a PhD in Spanish literature? Who knew? At least she wouldn't be strap-hanging on the Bakerloo line, beating herself up because Toby had a rash and she'd said nothing about it to the nursery staff or having to deal with dreary Cillian at the next-door desk complaining about his adenoids.

Only eighteen months ago that had been her life. She'd been working in that little office in Paddington for Tapper-Green IT Consultants, earning OK-ish money, but money that all seemed to be going on nursery fees. Jake was a struggling actor, often doing gigs for free, just to get his face seen. Rosie was exhausted from rushing from home to nursery to work to nursery to home again, too grumpy and tired to really enjoy the boys. But just as she was teetering on the verge of a nervous breakdown, about to beg Jake to jack in the acting dream and find a proper job, he got the part in *Archbishop Grace*.

It was an overnight sensation. From being a nobody, people had started pointing and nudging at her

husband as he walked down the street. They asked for autographs when he was standing in the queue at Tesco's. A man had approached him the other day in Oxford Street and picked him up and licked his face. People filmed him peeing in public toilets. Everywhere he went, people yelled out his catchphrase: 'Not under *my* patio.' Everyone thought this was hilarious. Rosie had trained herself to smile when they did it, even though the joke had long lost its lustre.

He was interviewed constantly for every publication imaginable. He had four hundred and fifty-three thousand-odd followers on Twitter and had closed down his Facebook page because so many weirdos were jumping on there. He had been to the pub with Ricky Gervais after filming a comedy quiz show and had Jonathan Ross's email.

He was just about to start rehearsing for a West End version of *Twelfth Night* – not the glitziest choice, and certainly not the best paid, though the fact that Ellie Lewis, star for years of the insanely popular, brainy and glamorous American drama *O'Rourke's*, was going to be Viola, had given the enterprise a load more sex appeal. Not to mention, Christy Papadopolous, Rosie's best and oldest friend – and as it happened, her husband's agent, but that was another story – had assured Jake the play was the best step to take if he wanted to be regarded not just as a sitcom star but as a serious actor. And Christy knew what she was talking about.

Anyway, Rosie thought, as she moved from the

reception room to the ‘snug’, which, despite its name, could contain their old flat, the end result was suddenly money had been pouring into Jake’s bank account. She wouldn’t call herself rich, because she didn’t feel like a rich person. Rich people spoke like the queen and spent their nights out at Boujis or Annabel’s, rather than in front of a Love Film DVD. She didn’t look rich – her shoulder-length hair was always pulled back in a practical ponytail and she hadn’t had time to have her highlights done for six months and she wore no make-up. Again, when would you find the time to apply it when the boys were displaying their kung-fu kicks? Her jeans were from Gap (bought with a thirty-per-cent-off voucher). Her trainers were FitFlops (*not* cool but *so* comfy). Her top was River Island. Then there was her turquoise necklace purchased on that holiday with Christy in Rimini, when they’d danced until dawn every night.

‘Happy?’ said Jake behind her. He slipped his arms over her shoulders and rubbed himself against her bottom. Jake would have to be in a coma not to want to have sex. Rosie slapped his hand gently as it moved towards the zip of her jeans.

‘Stop it, you sick pervert. We have a vomit-encrusted child to bathe.’

‘Later?’ he whispered in her ear. ‘To christen the bedroom?’

‘Of course later,’ Rosie grinned.

‘Mummy!’ shouted Toby. ‘The moving van is here.’

She ran back into the hallway and peered through one of the windowpanes that flanked the front door. Sure enough, the van was drawing up.

‘Better put the kettle on.’

‘Can I help them?’ Toby cried.

‘Well . . . You can perhaps help unpack something.’ She’d originally said they’d do the unpacking themselves, but Jake had overridden her and said they’d pay the premium and have the removal guys do it. Why not? They could afford it. He was always saying that these days.

There was just one thing she needed to do before making cups of tea. She pulled out her old Samsung – as soon as she had a moment she’d get round to finally upgrading to an iPhone – and jabbed out a quick text. Two recipients: Christy and Sandrine.

We’re finally here! So excited. Can’t wait for you to come and see it. xxx

She opened the door and as she stepped outside into the spring sunshine, her phone tringed. Sandrine.

So excited for you, honey-bunny. xx

Rosie smiled. Truly, there was no one lovelier than Sandrine. She imagined her pootling around her kitchen in Hebden Bridge in her huge shabby slippers and one of her baggy sweatshirts, cat rubbing against her ankles, while her partner June potted in their little herb garden. Rosie hoped she’d visit soon. She’d die of laughter

when she saw the gold taps, but it would be kind, supportive laughter.

The inbox showed another text. Christy. Rosie's best friend since she was seven years old.

Can't wait to see the results of all my hard work! Xx PS Bottle of Moët on the way. Let me know if it doesn't turn up.

'Oh, Christy,' Rosie grinned. She showed the text to Jake.

He smiled wryly. 'That woman and Moët. She's getting more *Ab Fab* by the second.'

Rosie smiled up at him. Sometimes she felt like she was standing in a rainstorm, being pelted with the force of her love for Jake. She was so lucky. She had everything – her wonderful husband, her two boys and now all this. And her best friend who'd helped her achieve all this. When they were kids, she'd always made up little stories about living in a huge house with a beautiful garden and now . . .

'All right?' asked Nicky, head of the delivery squad, winking as he climbed down from the driver's cab.

'Never better,' Rosie replied. 'Just need to unpack the soap, some boys' clothes, the kettle and we'll be raring to go.'