

Just a Family Affair

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Extract

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One

Six months earlier

Kay Oakley stretched out on her sun-lounger, wiggled her toes and decided that the deep plum polish the beautician had talked her into really was too dark. The nails looked bruised, as if someone had stepped on her foot. The infuriating thing was she'd known all along she wouldn't like it, but had given in. Now she'd have to go back tomorrow and have them re-varnished her usual pillar-box red.

Then she sighed. Was this what her life had come to? When the colour of her nail polish constituted a crisis? It wasn't as if another trip to the salon was even an inconvenience. She genuinely didn't have anything better to do. And when had she lost the ability to paint her own toenails? When had the prospect of lifting a finger to do anything herself become inconceivable?

From an outsider's point of view, she had little to complain about. The twenty-metre pool rippled in front of her, blue and inviting. The gardens were lush and well kept, the stone of the terrace glowed warm in the afternoon sun. The nearby poolhouse provided a wet room, a huge fridge stocked with beers, wines, and soft drinks, and a stack of fluffy towels that was replenished daily by the maids. A walkway sheltered by a vine-covered trellis meandered back up to the house, with its whitewashed walls and cool tiled floors. Her daughter Flora and her little friend splashed in the children's pool under the watchful eye of the nanny.

She looked down at her body. Kay had never had a problem with weight, even after giving birth, but she had to admit she was in tip-top condition for a mother just on the wrong side of forty. Her stomach was flat, without a stretchmark in sight, and thanks to her healthy Mediterranean diet of meat, fish, vegetables and fruit, she had no cellulite. Her white Gucci bikini showed off her even tan – not too dark, for Kay was vigilant about not overdoing the sun. She knew from their social circle that there was nothing more ageing, except perhaps a forty-a-day habit. She didn't want to look like a tortoise. Furthermore,

there wasn't a superfluous hair or skin cell on her. Every day she looked for some imperfection that could be ironed out, just to give her a challenge. She longed for a hairy mole or an unsightly bulge that she could get her teeth into, but thanks to her daily gym and salon visits there were none.

She reached out a languid hand for the tumbler of mineral water filled with ice and wedges of fresh lemon she'd picked off the tree earlier. Here she was, leading the perfect magazine existence, in a luxury villa on a luxury complex in Portugal, and she was bored out of her mind. She'd thought about getting a job, but there were none. At least nothing that would make it worth her while. She could get a job as a manicurist. Or as a guide, showing potential purchasers around the new developments that her husband Lawrence and his cronies were throwing up overnight. But neither of these opportunities was what she had in mind. She wanted something that would shake her out of her complacency. Something that would make her feel excited. Afraid, even. Something that would enable her to justify her place on this planet. It wasn't as if they needed the money. At the moment, they couldn't get rid of it fast enough. What she needed was some mental stimulation.

A few months ago, in desperation, she'd tried setting up a book club. Kay was no boffin, but she longed for some banter, some witty repartee. For the inaugural read she'd chosen *Chocolat*, because she didn't want to put the other women off with anything too erudite. But out of six, only three managed to finish it, and the ensuing discussion revolved around the calorific content of the subject matter and the casting of Johnny Depp in the movie. Hardly an intellectual debate. Kay, who'd devoured it, adored it, and been enchanted by the concept of magical reality (which she'd read about in the reader's notes on the website) realized she was onto a losing wicket. There were no like-minded women in her social circle. Kay had never been one for close friends, but she found that for the first time in her life she was lonely.

Added to which, she missed England dreadfully. She'd never considered herself particularly at one with nature, but she missed the changing seasons. The relentless Portuguese sunshine was driving her mad. She'd give anything for a sparkling frost, or a brisk autumnal breeze, or even a torrential downpour.

In her mind's eye she longingly imagined Honeycote, the tiny village in the Cotswolds she and Lawrence had lived in before they moved here. It would be hunkering down for winter now, shedding its leaves,

putting on its mantle of mist, the air crisp and sharp. And she was fairly certain its inhabitants could have managed more than five minutes of discussion on Joanne Harris before moving on to the inevitable salacious gossip about who was bonking who in the local hunt.

Kay jumped to her feet and marched over to the children. The nanny eyed her warily, wondering if she had inadvertently put a foot wrong – were the children being too loud? Were they splashing too much? But no – Mrs Oakley was smiling at her.

‘You might as well have the rest of the day off. I’ll look after them.’

The girl blinked in astonishment, then panicked that she was going to be given her notice. The English never came out with what they were really thinking. Was this Mrs Oakley’s way of saying her services were no longer needed? Would she have a curt phone call that evening telling her not to bother coming back?

‘I’ll see you tomorrow.’ Kay was getting impatient. The nanny was dithering – didn’t she know a good thing when she saw it? Eventually she went, and Kay took the two little girls into the kitchen to make them milkshakes. Kay wasn’t a natural hands-on mother, but anything to stop the tedium.

She wasn’t sure how much longer she could endure this way of life. Swimming pool. Shopping. Beauty parlour. Shopping. Cocktail parties and barbecues. Shopping. There was nothing to strive for. Nothing to think about, except what to wear and whether to go one shade lighter or darker with the highlights. And what to throw on the barbecue each evening for the so-called friends they entertained night after night. Even though they could hardly be described as anything more than acquaintances. They were all indistinguishable from each other, the people that she and Lawrence mixed with. They all had the same values. Or lack of.

She took a carton of ice-cream out of the freezer and a box of huge ripe strawberries. If they were in England, she could be leading Flora round the paddock on a fat little pony. There were stables here, of course, but it wasn’t the same. She longed for trees and hedges and hills and valleys and ponds and streams. And air that was fresh, not air that hit the back of your throat.

Kay hulled the strawberries, throwing them carelessly into the blender. She wanted a change. She’d had enough. Nearly four years, they’d been here. Surely that was long enough? Surely they could go back to England now? Any gossip would have died down by now. They could start again afresh. Not that she cared about rumour-mongering,

but she knew Lawrence was sensitive. He was the one who'd wanted to move away to escape the wagging tongues. Brazen Kay would have happily faced the speculation and scandal, but she gave in to his wishes. After all, he had made a pretty big sacrifice, taking her back when she'd given birth to another man's child. So she had capitulated, initially seduced by the picture he painted of life in the sun. What wasn't to like?

A lot, it now turned out. She flicked the switch on the blender and watched the fruit bounce wildly in the glass jar, spurting out red juice, staining the white of the ice-cream, until eventually the two mingled into a satisfying deep pink. She poured the unctuous liquid into two tall glasses and topped it with sprinkles. Sitting on a chrome bar stool, resting her chin in her hand with her elbow on the granite work surface, she watched Flora and her friend giggling and spooning the concoction into their mouths. They were happy enough. But Kay was worried how Flora would turn out, brought up in this sterile environment. She missed the English class system, the little giveaway clues that allowed you to pigeonhole people. Here, you were simply judged on how much money you had, and people speculated on the state of your bank balance interminably. In England, you could be top dog without cash; even the wealthiest person could slide to the bottom of the pecking order if they weren't seen to be spending their money on the right things. Kay loved the nuances; the way you could never be quite sure of your position. The way it was always the people who didn't care who came out on top; the ones who did care often languished at the bottom, desperate to make their way up the greasy pole to recognition and respectability.

Kay took no comfort from the fact that here, she and Lawrence were at the top of their social ladder, simply by dint of their perceived financial success. She really didn't care that she was the queen bee, for she didn't value the opinion of any of their associates. She wouldn't care if she never saw anything of them again. She picked up a perfectly ripe strawberry and bit into it savagely.

She'd talk to Lawrence when he got home this evening. She was starting to suspect that he too had had enough of paradise. He had been restless of late. A bit heavy on the vodka and tonics too, which she didn't like. It was often the way, when you had the Midas touch. Money didn't always make life easier. Maybe they should cut their losses, get out while the going was good, and settle for a quieter existence. She pictured a small house back in Honeycote – well, not *small* small, but certainly not as big as the palatial manor house they had once lived in.

Flora could go to a decent school – she pictured her in the red and grey uniform of the prep school in Eldenbury, the nearby market town. And she could have a proper conversation, with a man who wasn't a sexist git drenched in Hugo Boss, trying to paw you under the dinner table at every opportunity. Not that men in the Cotswolds didn't have wandering hands, but they were more subtle about it. Kay allowed herself a little smile, both at the memory and the prospect, and felt a flicker of adrenalin. Perhaps they could be back in time for Christmas? Images of roaring log fires, flickering candles and intoxicating mulled wine rushed through her head. Surely Flora deserved a proper English Yuletide? Perhaps that was the tack she should take with Lawrence? Flora was his Achilles heel, after all.

Something had to happen to get them out of this anodyne existence.

At half past four the doorbell rang, the chimes echoing through the marble of the hall. Kay automatically checked her appearance in the mirror and swiped a lipstick across her mouth, because you could never be seen to look anything other than your best – that was when the rumours started. She put the lid back on the lipstick and sighed. She'd been brainwashed. Why should she care what people thought?

She walked through the hall, discerning two shadowy shapes through the thickly frosted glass of the front door. Bulky figures. Definitely men. Disconcerted, for a moment she thought about not answering, but something drew her forward.

As she opened the door and saw the solemn expressions, then recognized the uniform of the police, a warning sprang into her mind. What was that irritating strap line that people seemed so fond of these days?

Be careful what you wish for . . .