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Promises, Promises

Written by Erica James

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*Promises,
Promises*

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Chapter One

The Lilacs was as quiet as the grave. Just how Maggie Storm liked it, especially after all the noise and chaos that had gone on at home before she'd set off to come here.

The washing machine had gone on the blink mid-cycle and no matter how politely she coaxed or not-so-politely thumped it, it simply would not work. Then Dave had taken a screwdriver to it and, surprise, surprise, he had flooded the kitchen. She had been telling him for weeks that there was something wrong with it, but he hadn't listened.

Not that he ever did listen. Seventeen years of marriage and he still asked how many sugars she wanted in her tea – that was if he ever got off his backside in the first place to make her a drink. 'I DON'T HAVE SUGAR IN MY TEA,' she would reply through gritted teeth. 'ONLY IN COFFEE.' Increasingly she was finding herself speaking to him in capital letters. Very big capital letters. Underlined, sometimes. If she ever complained he would accuse her of nagging and say that she was lucky to have a husband who made her a drink and that it wasn't his fault that he couldn't keep up with her faddy likes and dislikes. 'But that's women for you,' he'd add with an annoying roll of his eyes and an even more annoying puff of breath that said, *Pah! Women! Always changing their minds.*

Lucky. Yeah, she was lucky all right. Just think of all the worse husbands she could have ended up with – that sick Austrian bloke who kept his poor daughter in the cellar all her life, for one.

But lucky her: at the age of nineteen she had married

Dave Storm, who had all the magnetic charm, sophistication and understanding of Mr Blobby. She was now so used to referring to him as Mr Blobby in her head, she was sure that one day soon the name was going to slip out. Give Mr Blobby a lager in his hand and an audience of his mates from the garage where he worked as a mechanic and he thought he was so funny. Downright hilarious. A real Jack the Lad. There must have been a time when Maggie had thought he was funny, but now he mostly made her grind her teeth. Sometimes she had cartoon-like fantasies of taking a swing at him with a frying pan. Not to kill him, of course, merely to knock some sense into him. *I don't take sugar in my tea ... Bang! I don't like being called Mags ... Bang! I hate the way you sniff for no real reason ...*

Sometimes, when she wasn't imagining herself with a frying pan in her hands, she pictured herself screaming, her mouth wide open, her eyes bulging nearly out of their sockets. The temptation to scream was growing harder to resist. But she mustn't give in to it. Do that and she might lose it and never stop screaming.

Not Losing It was one of her New Year's resolutions. Along with:

Do Something New.
Learn To Stand Up For Myself.
Lose Weight.

Other than Not Losing It, she had done nothing about the resolutions, but it was only the third of January, so early days.

It was her first day back at work after the Christmas holidays and, to be honest, after a week of being cooped up with Mr Blobby, Blobby Junior, and Brenda – the mother-in-law from hell – it was a relief. Paid to clean other people's houses, she made their lives easier. A shame no one did the same for her. If she was paid by the regret instead of by the hour, why, she'd be richer than the Queen!

She finished cleaning the loo and then sprayed the glass bowl hand-basin with Cillit Bang and wondered if the Queen had even heard of Cillit Bang, much less used it. ‘What does one do with this?’ she imagined her, thoroughly baffled, asking one of her flunkies.

Maggie had been working for the family that owned The Lilacs for four years now. Whilst she felt she knew a lot about them – as their cleaner she saw herself as all-seeing and all-knowing – they knew very little about her. For instance, she knew that Mr Edwards (Please-Call-Me-Ethan) was forty-six and ran his own bed linen company. He wore Armani aftershave, Hugo Boss and Paul Smith suits, size eleven shoes and a fifteen-and-a-half-inch shirt collar, and suffered with stomach problems (there was a ton of antacid products in his bathroom cabinet). He preferred boxers to Y-fronts and had a massive CD collection in his office, which he liked to listen to when he was working from home. Sometimes he played his music so loud it made the pictures on his walls slip. She was always having to straighten them. If his wife was around, he listened to his music through headphones.

With six bedrooms and three bathrooms, a dressing room, a lounge (sorry, sitting room), a dining room, a conservatory, a TV room, an office and a kitchen the size of a tennis court and a laundry room with a loo and shower off it, The Lilacs was the biggest house in Lilac Avenue. She couldn’t begin to think how much money Please-Call-Me-Ethan had to earn to run it. Lately he looked tired and fed up, which was a pity because he was a really nice bloke. He had dead gorgeous dark-brown eyes and a really lovely smile. He had a great body, too, a body she certainly wouldn’t turn down if it came at her in the middle of the night the way Mr Blobby’s did. He was always nicely dressed, whether it was jeans and a T-shirt or one of his expensive suits. And he had the most amazing hands – square strong hands with the nails all neatly trimmed and very clean. Unlike Mr Blobby’s. But then Mr Blobby was a car mechanic, so that was hardly

something she could complain about. She suspected that Please-Call-Me-Ethan was not entirely happy or entirely faithful to his bitch of a wife. Maggie didn't blame him.

Mrs Edwards (Please-Call-Me-Mrs-Edwards) was forty-one and had probably never done a day's work in her life. She was a member of an exclusive fitness and spa centre, where she spent most days flexing and toning and having her hair and nails done. No wonder she always claimed to be exhausted. She was a minuscule size eight and wore nothing but designer clothes. Her walk-in wardrobe was bigger than Maggie and Mr Blobby's bedroom and was laid out with shelves, drawers and hanging rails. Nothing was ever out of place; coat hangers all faced the same direction and shoes were carefully stored in their original boxes.

Recently Mrs Edwards had started visiting a clinic for Botox injections on the quiet. Maggie had the feeling that no one, including Ethan, was supposed to know about the clinic, but all-seeing, all-knowing Maggie knew about it. She had seen the bill for the last visit, a bill dated for the morning when Mrs Edwards had said she was going to the dentist. The bill had been in the pocket of the Prada jacket Maggie had been told to take to the dry cleaners. When she had found the bill and handed it over, saying, 'I think this belongs to you, Mrs Edwards,' the woman had turned very red and very pouty. Careful, Maggie had wanted to warn her, we don't want to undo all the expensive work on that face of yours, do we?

The Edwards had only the one child. She had just turned fifteen, and as spoiled brats went, Valentina Edwards was right up there with the very worst. She was a monster. A mouthy madam. It was plain for anyone with a pair of eyes in their head to see that she took after her mother in almost every way. Whatever she asked for, she was given. Her latest demand, which Maggie had overheard two weeks ago, was for a pair of shoes for a party she had been invited to. And not any old shoes; she wanted a pair of Gina shoes as worn by all the WAGS. They cost

the best part of four hundred pounds. Maggie had heard her father, who was working from home that afternoon, say he was sure she already had plenty of perfectly good shoes in her wardrobe. Failing that, and seeing as they now had the same size feet, she had her mother's extensive shoe collection at her disposal, because as they both had to be aware, there was a recession on and he wasn't made of money.

Maggie had often heard Ethan try to be the voice of reason, but in this instance – unable to avoid hearing every word of the argument while she polished the granite work surfaces in the kitchen, but sadly not within viewing distance – he was being out-shouted from all sides. Mother and daughter had ganged up on him and accused him of being mean, of depriving a poor girl of a measly pair of shoes for a party. 'What next, Dad?' Valentina had screeched, probably with a toss of her Goldilocks long blonde hair. 'Will I have to stop having my legs and bikini line waxed because of some stupid recession?'

'Since when did you start having your legs waxed?' he'd asked.

'Oh, for heaven's sake, Ethan, she's been having them done since she was thirteen! If you took a bit more notice of your family, you'd know that.'

'Pardon me, I'm just trying to keep a business going so I can fund your waxing and God knows what else!'

'Now you're being petty.'

'And you're both treating me as a walking ATM.'

'Like, *hello*, can we stick to the point, Dad? Can I have the shoes, or what?'

The bare-arsed cheek of the girl!

As she lugged the vacuum cleaner upstairs, Maggie wondered why someone as nice as Ethan stood for it. Why didn't he just walk out of the door one morning, climb into his car and drive away for ever?

On the landing, she pushed open the door of Valentina's bedroom. It was its usual pigsty mess: clothes, shoes, boots, tights, magazines, handbags, scarves, CDs and

make-up tossed any old how. Thankfully Valentina wasn't around; she was next door with her friend Katie Paxton. For her sins, Maggie also cleaned for the Paxtons. They had moved into the avenue a year and a half ago and since then Mrs Paxton had become Mrs Edwards' best friend. The two women had a lot in common, both having been cut from the same cloth.

So whilst it was safe to say that Maggie knew quite a bit about her employers at The Lilacs, she was sure they knew absolutely nothing about her. They certainly would have no idea that every week, during her secret afternoon off, she would go to Kings Melford library and lose herself in a book. She had never told anyone about her afternoon off; it was her special time, the only time she had to herself. For three hours, when no one expected or demanded anything of her, she would sit in a comfortable chair and lose herself in a romantic novel – one of those bite-sized ones, as she called them. And as if carried away on a magic carpet, she could imagine being in another world and another life – a life of love and romance where candles flickered and hearts were always beating faster.

Of course she knew it wasn't real – she wasn't stupid – but where was the harm in wanting it to be real? Where was the harm in dreaming of a sexy hunk of a man who would hold her in his arms and tell her she was beautiful?

Because one thing was for sure: not in a million years was it going to cross Mr Blobby's gormless mind to do that!

She went over to the window and opened it to shake out the duster. A blast of freezing air hit her, and as she withdrew her hand and started to close the window, she heard a car coming down the avenue. She watched it slowly approach The Lilacs and when it was level the woman driving the car stopped it; she appeared to be checking if she had the right address. The car then turned onto the drive and stopped behind Maggie's Fiat Panda. Not wanting to be caught gawping, Maggie closed the window and

stepped away. Less than a minute later the front doorbell rang, followed by the sound of Mrs Edwards' shoes on the limestone tiled floor of the hallway downstairs.