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A Breath of Fresh Air

Written by Erica James

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*A Breath of
Fresh Air*

ERICA JAMES



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*To Edward and Samuel who handled their
mother's tantrums with such patience.
Thanks to Big G and all my friends who helped
and bullied me through the darkness,
especially Helena, Maureen and Rosemary*

Man cannot discover new
oceans until he has courage
to lose sight of the shore.

Unknown

Chapter One

Charlotte had never seen a man cry before, so she wasn't sure how to react to her husband's unexpected display of emotion. Not once had she ever imagined Peter capable of crying; it went against all she had ever known about him.

At a quarter to eight in the morning and while tapping open her boiled egg in their Brussels apartment, Charlotte Lawrence had finally plucked up the courage to ask her husband for a divorce and to put an end, once and for all, to his assumption that because he was fulfilled, so was she. She had told him that life under the corporate umbrella was not sufficient to satisfy both their needs. And then he had cried.

Charlotte passed him the box of tissues and tried to assimilate her own feelings. To her surprise, she felt indifference towards Peter, tinged with a hint of embarrassment. True, a man of the 1990s was allowed to cry – men were now allowed the full gamut of emotions, it was no holds barred, cards on the kitchen table; like women, men had emotions, too. But when it was in their kitchen and over their table, it felt all wrong.

'I'm sorry,' she said, knowing how hollow and inadequate her words sounded. She watched Peter scour his eyes with a tissue, then blow his nose. She looked away, down on to the street below, and wished, as she did every morning she looked out of the window, that she was back in England.

She knew it was pathetic, but she couldn't help it. She was homesick. Oh yes, she'd been given lots of helpful advice, mostly from Peter's father. 'I was a prisoner of war for two and half years and managed to enjoy myself, don't see why you can't just knuckle down to it, girl.' Then of course there was his old favourite: 'Stop feeling so sorry for yourself.'

And in simple justification of their nomadic lifestyle, that in eight years of marriage had taken them from London to Singapore, back to London and then on to Brussels, Peter would say, 'Other wives are happy here.'

'But I'm not other wives!' she would say in desperate retaliation, knowing that Peter had no comprehension of her basic need for the simple things in life: stability, security and a suburban high street of familiar chain stores, not the sophisticated expatriate regime of uncertainty, cocktail parties, language classes and flower arranging.

In a moment of cynicism and real rock-bottom boredom, she too had joined the ranks of the flower arrangers, and then Peter had tried getting her pregnant, believing this to be the answer. But this was one area in Peter's life where he had to admit failure. A genius in the mergers and acquisitions department he was, but with a low sperm count there was little he could do in the baby-making department.

Looking out of the window, Charlotte watched the softly falling snow. She felt as though they were characters acting out their parts in a well-rehearsed performance; a scene which she had produced and directed in her own mind for nearly a year now – except Peter was ad-libbing; he wasn't supposed to cry.

'Why?' he said, bringing her back to the script.

She turned round. 'Because I don't like what you're doing to me.'

He sniffed loudly and she could see he was willing his body to act according to the rules of his straitjacketed upbringing – boys didn't blub at boarding school. 'This is absurd,' he said, at last, and in a firm loud voice that had the effect of disciplining those dark, unexplored territories of his inner self. He picked up his briefcase, once more in control. 'I'll be back late. I'm in Luxembourg all day.'

'But the snow, it's far too dangerous, you can't possibly go all that way . . . and anyway, we need to talk.'

'There's nothing to discuss. The answer is no.'

Lying back in the bath, Charlotte waited for the warmth of the water to ease away the strain of not just the past hour, but the past eight years. It took only a few moments before she realised that she wasn't in need of a soothing balm. She was all right. After nearly a year of waiting for this point in her life, she was actually all right. The truth of her feelings hit her quite forcibly and she let out a sudden laugh. It echoed horribly in the bathroom with its high tiled ceiling. She chewed her lip guiltily.

But what next?

And now the second act in her well-rehearsed performance ran through her mind. This was when she stopped dancing attendance to someone else's tune, this was when she whistled the melody of her own life.

She would go back to England, to Hulme Welford, and move in with her parents until she got herself sorted; it would be hell living with her mother again, but Dad would be sweet.

And work. What about work?

Before she had been moulded into a corporate wife she had run her own business: an upmarket sweater shop. But then Peter had come home one evening with that silly grin

on his face and told her his boss had asked him 'to consider Singapore'. Within three months the shop had gone, along with her identity, and she had found herself living a twelve-hour flight away from all that was comforting and familiar.

She knew it would be hard starting over again; finding work was never easy. Wherever they had lived she had tried to find her own niche – even if it had always been taken away from her. After seven months of trying to find work in Singapore, she had eventually managed to get a job within the personnel department of an international chemical company; then when Peter's contract had come to an end they had moved back to London. She had just found herself work there, when Peter announced they were going to Brussels. For the first six months she struggled to learn some basic French and was then offered a temporary part-time job working as a volunteer for a helpline service for the English-speaking community. When this had come to an end though, there had been no more work available, not until she had met Christina.

At half past eleven, Charlotte decided to call round to see her neighbour, Christina. She wanted to share this moment with someone – wanted somebody to tell her how brave she was, that leaving her husband was the right thing to do.

Christina Castelli had moved into the apartment next door and had become Charlotte's only real friend.

'A high-class tart!' Peter had announced, calling in for his clean shirts en route for the airport, just as the last of Christina's expensive-looking furniture had been brought up to the sixth floor. 'Perfectly obvious what she is,' he had gone on to say. 'The lift stinks of erotic perfume.'

Charlotte had questioned him on this point; how did he know what erotic perfume smelt like? He had fumbled for

an answer and then reaching for his suit-carrier had simply said, 'Be back day after tomorrow, any duty-free you want?'

'Yes,' she had told him, 'some erotic perfume would be nice.'

He hadn't laughed, but then he'd forgotten how. His life had become too serious; too full of live-or-die mergers and acquisitions. He was constantly living on his ability to judge whether a thing was a profit or a loss; it was either black or it was white to Peter. The only grey area in his life was her.

Within a few days of Christina moving in, Charlotte had been forced to admit that Peter may have been right. The *femme fatale* fragrance in the downstairs hall, lift and sixth floor landing seemed now to be accompanied by a steady stream of German eau-de-Cologne. Charlotte never actually saw her neighbour's callers, apart from one man, who by accident got the wrong apartment, and when Charlotte tried to point him in the right direction he shot back into the lift, his face hidden behind a copy of *Le Soir*.

One morning Christina knocked on Charlotte's door and invited her in for a drink.

'You must call me Christina,' she told Charlotte in perfect English, beckoning her towards a cream leather sofa that had more than a hint of Milan to it. 'We have no need to be formal, for I do not think we shall be conducting any business between ourselves. And I may call you . . . ?'

'Charlotte, very plain I'm afraid,' Charlotte said, feeling incredibly plain as she sat next to this catwalk beauty.

Christina laughed, a light tinkling laugh, that Charlotte knew would have the ability to whip the boxer shorts off

any man in seconds. 'In that case I shall call you Carlotta – that is your name in Rome, where I come from.'

Charlotte never told Peter about her visits next door, not even when Christina came up with a job for her.

'Carlotta, you and I are alike in many ways,' Christina said one day. 'We both need to be kept busy and I know that behind that beautiful smile of yours you are perfectly miserable, so I have found you work, just two mornings a week for a friend of mine.'

Charlotte looked doubtfully at her. 'What kind of work?'

Christina laughed. 'Do not worry, Carlotta, I am not about to turn you into a . . . now what was the expression I heard Mr Carlotta use, the day I moved in . . . ah yes, a high-class tart. No, I would not suggest such a thing.'

Charlotte's cheeks flushed. 'How did you hear that?'

Christina shrugged her silk-clad shoulders. 'It was a warm day, every window in Brussels was open. Mr Carlotta's voice carried well that afternoon.'

In Christina's company, Peter was never referred to as Peter, instead he had simply become the anonymous Mr Carlotta. Christina had told Charlotte on their first meeting that she never wanted to meet or even know the name of Charlotte's husband. 'After all,' she had said, her full lips turned gently upwards in the most seductive of smiles, 'it might be awkward for us both if it turned out that I already knew your husband.'

'No, Carlotta, you are not to work as a high-class tart, but as a receptionist. There now, I think that would suit you so much more, don't you?'

'But I can't speak French very well, never mind Flemish,' Charlotte said hopelessly, and then added, 'I have tried, I just don't seem to be very good at it.'

'Then I will teach you, I am a good teacher.'

Charlotte suddenly smiled.

‘Such a beautiful smile you have, Carlotta, but I am wondering why you are smiling. What is it you think I am good at teaching?’

Looking at the reflection of herself in the hall mirror, Charlotte smiled at the memory of that conversation. She would miss her friendship with Christina when she moved back to England; it would be the only thing from Brussels that she would miss. Just as she was about to pick up her keys and go and see Christina, the door bell rang.

She pulled the door open and saw two Belgian policemen standing in front of her. They started speaking in French and even with her limited knowledge of the language, she was able to understand what they were saying.

Monsieur Peter Lawrence was dead.

Chapter Two

Shrilling with all the urgency of a telephone, a child's voice invaded the quiet, Edwardian sitting-room of The Gables in Hulme Welford.

'MUMMY!'

Charlotte's younger sister Hilary, who was quite used to her daughter's demanding cry, carried on pouring out cups of tea. Similarly, the Reverend Malcolm Jackson, a robust forty-five-year-old Meatloaf fan and father of three, barely flinched, but not so Iris Braithwaite, a woman who claimed to live on nothing but the remains of her shredded nerves; she jolted vigorously, as though in response to a proffered red-hot poker.

A six-year-old girl, dressed in an assortment of jumble sale goods, appeared at the sitting-room door. With cheap yellow beads bouncing on her chest and over-sized red slingbacks slapping at her heels, she trotted towards her mother.

'Becky,' Hilary said, 'I did tell you not to play with the clothes from the boxes in the hall. Go and take them off, especially those ridiculous shoes, you'll have an accident.'

'Do I have to?'

'Yes you do. Now say hello to Mrs Braithwaite and Malcolm.'

Six-year-old shyness appearing from nowhere rendered the little girl speechless. She played with the biggest of the yellow beads, turning one of her feet inwards. She then

remembered what she had wanted her mother for. 'What does bonking mean, Mummy?'

Flanked by an uneasy rattle of china from one side of her and a stifled laugh from the other, Hilary grappled to save the teapot in her hands and to think of a suitable answer. All she could think of was the terrible unfairness of it all.

She had worked so hard today, had tried to make everything just right. It had all fallen apart though, the moment she had opened the fridge door that morning and realised she hadn't got any eggs. The shop in the village had run out of her usual free-range variety and she had been forced to make do with those battery-farmed eggs instead. The sponge, of course, had turned out a disaster and was it any wonder? She had then had to make a back-up batch of scones for her monthly meeting with Malcolm Jackson and Iris Braithwaite – Chairlady of the St John's Replacement Stained Glass Window Committee. Then, just as she'd got the kitchen cleared up, school had telephoned to say there had been a gas leak and all children were being sent home. And on top of all this her sister Charlotte was arriving in a few hours' time, which meant there had been Ivy Cottage to get ready for her, along with the welcome-home dinner to prepare for that evening. No, life just wasn't being fair with her today.

Then with shame she thought of Charlotte. Life hadn't exactly been fair to her recently.

It was now two and a half months since Peter had died; the funny thing was, it felt longer.

It had been a sad little funeral, on a cold wet day in Aldershot, with their own family far out-numbering Peter's. She had been so sure that Peter's funeral would have been a rather grand affair, had even bought a hat, which thankfully, just at the last minute, she had left

behind in the car. In fact there had been few friends present, hardly anyone to mourn comfortingly alongside Charlotte, just a few duty-bound work colleagues; not even Peter's own brother had turned up. She had felt sorry for Peter's parents; sorry, too, that nobody cried, not even Charlotte.

Afterwards they had all tried to talk Charlotte out of returning to Brussels, had tried to get her to leave everything to the company. 'I must go back,' she had said. 'There are things I need to sort out.' She had been adamant. Just as she had been adamant about buying a house in the village. 'I want to be where I grew up,' she had told them on the telephone. 'Hulme Welford is the only place I know as home. It's got to be there.'

Secretly Hilary was looking forward to having her sister to look after, living, as she would be, quite literally on the doorstep. She smiled to herself at the thought of one day taking the credit for getting Charlotte back on her feet. She could almost feel that rosy glow of praise and gratitude, which she knew would be hers within a few months. Yes, she had great plans for her elder sister.

Looking up from the teapot Hilary realised that both Iris Braithwaite and Malcolm Jackson were staring at her, Becky too. Uncharacteristically she chose to ignore her daughter. 'More tea?' she said.

Taking his cue, Malcolm Jackson held out his cup. 'Just a top-up, please.'

Becky was not to be put off. 'But Mummy . . .'

'Have a chocolate biscuit, dear.'

Wide-eyed with delight, Becky took one, thought better, and took another, but then doggedly continued with her line of questioning. 'Philip says he won't give me back my Barbie doll until Ken's finished bonking her. How long do you think that will take, Mummy?'

At the commotion which followed, Becky left her jumble-sale heels behind her and took to her own, whilst Hilary did her best to deal with Iris Braithwaite's tea-soaked tweed skirt and the slice of lemon that had ended up sitting perkily, like a Frenchman's beret, on one of her sensible brown lace-up shoes.

Another cup and saucer was fetched from the kitchen and quickly filled, but conversation, like the tea, was strained, until Iris Braithwaite warmed to her subject: that of the rising sense of apathy in the village. 'It seems to me that people today have lost their sense of generosity,' she said, taking a sip of tea and wincing as she scalded her thin lips. 'Why, I remember a time when we thought nothing of a jumble sale every two months.'

'I think that people are less inclined to throw things away these days,' suggested Malcolm Jackson. 'After all, everyone, in some way, has been affected by . . .'

'It's greed, pure greed,' interrupted Iris. 'People are hoarding things. Greed is such a terrible sin and one to be avoided at all costs.' She punctuated this by reaching for another scone. 'And as the good book says, "Let the wicked fall into their own nets, whilst I pass in safety."'

Malcolm Jackson couldn't resist it and touché'd with 'Ah, but let's not forget "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone."' His tone was cynical rather than pious and he received a withering look for his trouble.

'We really could do with one more pair of hands for the jumble sale next Saturday,' Hilary said in an effort to steer the conversation back to where it had been before Becky had interrupted. 'We had seven last time, and to be honest we were a bit stretched.'

'What about Charlotte, your sister?' Iris Braithwaite said. 'She could help, she won't have any commitments so

soon, will she? Do her good, get her fully integrated into the village again.'

'Oh, I don't think that would be a good idea. Do you?' Hilary asked, turning to the vicar.

'Nonsense,' Iris Braithwaite carried on, ignoring Malcolm's opened mouth. 'She'll need to be busy. When my Sydney died fifteen years ago, the first thing I did was to spring-clean the house and organise the summer fête.' She paused as though reflecting on those halcyon days, then said, 'I don't suppose Charlotte will be bringing any of her deceased husband's clothing back with her, will she? We could make good use of that at the jumble sale.' And casting a meaningful glance over Malcolm Jackson's faded sweatshirt and jeans, she said, 'Perhaps there might even be something suitable for the vicar.'

'I really couldn't say,' Hilary said helplessly, conscious of the sudden sirocco-style exhalation of breath at her side.

It was always the same. Every month, whenever they had to meet to discuss various fund-raising events for St John's, Iris Braithwaite rendered poor Malcolm speechless. Trouble was, Malcolm, being a clergyman, was like the Queen – not allowed to answer back – and she herself, like so many in the village, was just plain terrified of Iris Braithwaite.

'Well,' said Iris, putting her cup down on the tray and then dabbing the corners of her mouth with her napkin, 'I think we've covered everything quite adequately. So, come along, Vicar, it's time we were going. I'm sure Mrs Parker doesn't want us cluttering up her sitting-room a moment longer.'

Dutifully getting his bulky frame to his feet, Malcolm Jackson smiled at Hilary and thanked her for the tea. 'Will you be in church on Sunday?' he added as they moved towards the hall.

‘Yes, it’s my turn on Sunday School rota – which reminds me, we really could do with a new trainer seat for the toilet. Poor Joel had an accident with the last one.’

‘Really, Mrs Parker!’ spluttered Iris Braithwaite. ‘I’m sure the vicar doesn’t want to hear about such trifling matters.’

Oh dear, thought Hilary, another faux pas.

‘I doubt whether it seemed a trifling matter to young Joel at the time,’ Malcolm said, a smile on his lips. ‘No serious damage, I hope?’

‘He hurt his bum!’ came a loud voice. It was Becky bumping her way down the stairs on her bottom. She was now wearing a pink leotard with grass-stained ballet tights and carrying her treasured Barbie doll in her hands. ‘He hurt his willy wobbler as well,’ she added for good measure, when she finally bumped to a stop at the foot of the stairs. ‘He was such a cry-baby, he cried all during the story of David and Goliath.’

‘Thank you, Becky, that’s enough,’ said Hilary in a tired voice. She pulled open the front door, anxious for the afternoon to come to an end. But Iris was not finished.

‘We’re a pair of hands short on the church flower rota. Ask Charlotte, it’ll give her something to do. Lovely tea by the way, shame about that sponge, though.’

‘Have they gone?’ It was Philip, a dark-haired ten-year-old boy, calling from the top of the stairs. Satisfied that the coast was clear, he raced downstairs and shot into the sitting-room to gain possession of the remote control of the television before his sister got it.

‘What about your homework, Philip?’ Hilary asked, fulfilling her son’s expectations of her, as she began clearing the wreckage of tea.

'I've done it,' he replied glibly, thereby fulfilling his mother's expectations of him, at the same time waving the remote control device high in the air, just out of his sister's reach.

Out in the kitchen, Hilary fed the dishwasher, cake crumbs and all, mentally going over that evening's meal, and her plan – supper with a few of the neighbours, just to get her sister acclimatised, and, of course, to introduce her to Alex.

If there was one thing Hilary could never be accused of, it was suffering from an over-indulgence of sentimentality, and whilst it was all very sad and tragic that her sister's husband had died so suddenly, she knew that one simply had to carry on. Charlotte would now have to build up her life again, with a little help. She would need company, and preferably the company of a man, and Hilary had just the man in mind.

Alex Hamilton had been in the village for just two weeks now, renting the granny annexe of Charlotte's new house, Ivy Cottage. He was, in Hilary's opinion, quite the most attractive man to have hit Hulme Welford since a few years ago, when a rather notorious snooker player moved into the village, only to move out again rather rapidly when he lost his potting technique, along with his fortune.

There was no doubt in her mind that Alex Hamilton was the tonic Charlotte needed in order to get herself back on her feet again.

Hilary looked up at the clock above the Aga. Charlotte's plane would be arriving within the hour and Hilary knew the traffic would slow her down.

'I can always get a taxi,' her sister had said.

'Nonsense!' had been Hilary's reply.

Now there was a part of her that was regretting this

rash offer; she had more than enough to do without getting caught up in Friday night's rush-hour traffic.

Living 'conveniently placed for Manchester airport', as her husband David so liked to describe the village in his estate agency brochures, was the only tangible disadvantage to living in Hulme Welford, as far as Hilary could see. They were situated directly beneath the main flight path and David had to work hard at playing down the noise to prospective purchasers who came into his attractive black and white half-timbered estate agency office in the centre of the village.

In recent years house sales in the area had sky-rocketed, as Hulme Welford, with all its chocolate-box charm, had steadily increased in popularity with the more adventurous members of the Manchester commuter-belt set. When the older and quite dilapidated cottages in the village had been snapped up, small exclusive developments, such as Orchard Way and Pippin Rise, had sprung up like weeds on the perimeter of the village. They provided trouble-free houses for the upwardly mobile; fully centrally heated, double garaged and two bathroomed, gold taps and all. The houses had increased the population of the village, and brought to it an excess of BMWs tearing about the lanes, as well as a universally agreed improvement to the shops. The local infant and junior school had responded with equal expansion and now, with its increased numbers and pulsating PTA, could boast not only good academic results, but a swimming pool as well.

Most of these changes Hilary approved of, especially the pulsating PTA, of which she was currently Secretary. Next year she hoped to be Chairwoman. Just recently though, the idea of joining the Board of Governors for the school had taken root, and the more Hilary thought

about it, the more the idea appealed to her. She could even buy one of those smart executive-looking suits to wear for the meetings.

Taking a tray of wine glasses through to the dining-room, Hilary's thoughts about whether to buy a navy-blue or grey suit were interrupted by a pump-action ring at the doorbell. 'Get that, will you, Philip? It'll be Tiffany.'

'Oh Mum, *Grange Hill*'s on.'

'Oh, all right, I'll go.' She put the glasses down on the oak table in the hall. 'And Becky, you come out of there, you're too young for *Grange Hill*.'

A shrill wail started up from Becky, followed by a full scale riot, as Philip began thumping his sister to make her be quiet. Unperturbed, Hilary opened the front door.

'Muffin 'ell, what's going on?'

Hearing their babysitter's familiar voice, Becky leapt off her brother and ran out into the hall. Tiffany fascinated her. When she grew up, she wanted to be just like her – black leggings, huge boots, black-rimmed eyes just like a panda and long, long black hair.

'Can I count your rings, Tiffany?'

'Say please.'

'Please.'

'Course you can. Let's see how good your maths is today.'

With tongue-poking-out-of-the-mouth concentration, Becky started to count. First on Tiffany's left hand then on her right. 'Four and three, that makes . . . seven,' she announced after careful consideration.

'Who's a clever little madam then. And what *was* you doing to your brother when I came in?'

'*Were*,' corrected Becky.

Hilary smiled. Tiffany's subversive teaching methods with Becky never failed. She and David could shout until

they were blue in the face about the correct use of speech and Becky would just throw it back at them.

‘Okay if I dash off straight away, Tiffany?’ Hilary said. ‘I’d like to try and get there early.’

‘Yeah sure, no problem.’

‘I’ll be a couple of hours at most. David might even be back before me, though I doubt it.’ She reached for her keys hanging up on the hook by the telephone. ‘Oh Lord!’ she suddenly cried out. ‘I’ve forgotten to give the children any tea, I’ve been so busy thinking about tonight and what with Mrs Braithwaite and Reverend Jackson, I’ve . . .’

‘Got any fish fingers in the freezer?’

‘Yes, and there’s some cake left over from this afternoon. Oh Tiffany, you are wonderful. What would I do without you?’

Tiffany smiled. If only her mother thought the same.

Pushing her trolley of luggage, Charlotte’s eyes searched the crowded arrivals hall for her sister’s welcoming face, but all she could see were rows of bored-looking men holding drooping placards bearing the names of their charges. There was no sign of Hilary.

Charlotte felt anxious. She wanted to get this bit of the day over with. Knowing her sister’s intense desire to do and say all the right things, Charlotte viewed the drive home with a mixture of uneasiness and hostility.

She paused for a moment with her trolley, letting her fellow passengers push ahead of her. She suddenly felt overwhelmed by the juxtaposition of this large, bustling, uncaring crowd around her and the thought of Hilary lavishing well-intended sisterly love on her. Frightened she was about to cry, she reached into her jacket pocket for a tissue. Instead of a tissue, she found the envelope

Christina had given to her at the airport in Brussels. She had kept it in her pocket until she was soaring over the Belgian coast with a glass of champagne in her hand. Then she had opened it and read the card with Christina's beautiful words.

'Leave your sadness behind, Carlotta; leave it in Brussels where it can no longer harm you. Take only your beautiful smile with you and offer it to everyone you meet; it will bring you and them such happiness.'

It was the loveliest thing anyone had ever said to her.

And then as if by magic there was Hilary rushing towards her. To Charlotte's surprise, relief flooded through her.