



Falling in love
is only the
beginning . . .

WE ARE FAMILY

Josie Lloyd & Emlyn Rees

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Authors' Note

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About the Book

In affairs of the heart, how far can family loyalties be stretched before they snap?

When Laurie Vale receives a phone call out of the blue from an aunt she never knew existed, she soon discovers that everything she ever believed about her family is a lie. Fifty years earlier, in the idyllic coastal village of Stepmouth, a forbidden love affair and a devastating flood drove the Vale family apart, but now her aunt is determined that Laurie should know the truth.

Laurie escapes to the balmy warmth of Majorca only to find the hopes and passions buried in the past resurfacing in the present. But the more she seeks to heal old wounds, the more she becomes ensnared in a complex love affair of her own. One that could destroy her family for good.

A wonderfully entertaining novel about love, family and the secrets that lie just beneath the surface...

About the Authors

Josie Lloyd and Emlyn Rees each had novels of their own published before teaming up to write bestsellers together. Their work has been translated into twenty-six languages. They are married and live in London with their three daughters.

Also by Josie Lloyd & Emlyn Rees

The Boy Next Door
Come Again
Come Together
Love Lives
The Seven Year Itch
The Three Day Rule

We Are Family

Josie Lloyd & Emlyn Rees



arrow books

For Roxie - welcome and enjoy!

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Chapter I

London, Present Day

Laurie Vale had good intuition, but it still took her a while to admit to herself that this, her first private view in over a decade, might just be a success. Taking a moment to sip champagne in the corner of the small London gallery, Laurie surveyed her guests, who were milling around the brightly lit space, admiring the canvases she'd painstakingly mounted on the newly whitewashed brick walls. She felt too dizzy with exhaustion to be excited, but nevertheless, the rising hubbub of arty chit-chat, the clink of glasses, the steady movement of stilettos on the polished floorboards gave her a buzz of satisfaction. In the background the Cuban salsa CD she'd chosen tinkled merrily as a burst of laughter rose above the crowd.

Just in time for the party, as always, Roz, Laurie's agent, waved from the doorway, before swooping over to where Laurie was standing. She was wearing high boots and a floor-length sheepskin coat, neither of which showed any signs of having been subjected to the onslaught of dank February drizzle outside.

'Fantastic turnout,' Roz gushed, handing over a large bunch of pink roses. She towered above Laurie as she shrugged off her coat to reveal the shortest of black minidresses. 'The cabbie got completely lost. Does this really count as the East End?'

‘It was all I could afford,’ Laurie said apologetically, kissing her and taking the roses and her huge coat. ‘Brick Lane’s up the road . . . honest.’

Roz swiped a glass of champagne from a waiter with a tray, not missing the opportunity to size him up. ‘Oh well. It doesn’t matter. There must be about fifty people. Good for you.’

‘Thanks, but I feel like I’m on one of those *Faking It* TV programmes,’ Laurie admitted. ‘I keep thinking there’s a hidden panel of people waiting to see whether I mess up.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous. You’re the real thing, honey. Any sales so far?’

‘A few maybes,’ Laurie said, looking around her for a place to put the flowers and Roz’s coat. ‘You see the guy over there in the tweed jacket?’ She pointed to the far corner of the room, to where a man was standing, his forefinger tapping his lips as he talked to another buyer Laurie hadn’t seen before. ‘He’s interested in the big sunset for some swanky new private members club in Soho.’ Laurie nodded to the huge canvas of red and orange paint dominating the far wall. ‘Maybe I’ve overpriced it.’

‘Don’t discount,’ Roz advised. ‘Stick to your guns.’ Roz’s eyes sparkled as she scoped the room. She loved this kind of event. ‘Where’s the toy boy?’

Toy boy was hardly a fair description of James. ‘He’s twenty-eight. That’s old by your standards,’ Laurie pointed out.

‘But young by yours,’ Roz said, counting on her long fingers. ‘Six years.’

‘Five and a half.’

‘But haven’t I always told you that younger men are where it’s at?’ Roz gloated. ‘And James is divine, you lucky girl. I bet he’s got so much stamina . . .’

Laurie shook her head. She wasn’t going to be drawn into a discussion about her sex life, even though it was Roz’s favourite subject.

‘Anyway, he’s *so* much better than you-know-who,’ Roz added. ‘*Thank God* you’ve got him out of your system at long bloody last.’

Laurie didn’t dignify Roz’s remarks with a comment. She knew she was only trying to be encouraging in her own way. Perhaps Roz thought enough time had passed since their fateful holiday for her to be honest. After all, it was three years ago that their group holiday had ended in that disastrous romance for Laurie. But it had taken those three years for Laurie to even consider dating someone else and, whatever Roz thought, Laurie wasn’t ready to hear it. And especially not tonight. Not when everything was going so well.

‘Look, I really should go and put these in water and get back to it,’ Laurie said. ‘Thanks for sending all the invites out and everything. You’ve done so much. Everyone has – Janey with the venue, Toby with the wine, even Heather’s agency has lent me the staff for free. Moral support and all that, it’s much appreciated.’

‘Friends, darling – we’re the new family,’ Roz said, putting an arm around Laurie’s shoulder and giving it a squeeze, before waving across the room at Janey and Heather.

Upstairs in the small kitchenette, Laurie filled up a plastic cup with water and took a moment to catch her breath. What was wrong with her? Why did she feel so hemmed in by the crowd downstairs? Especially when so many of her friends had come to support her. Maybe it was the contrast between working on her own for so long and now suddenly being publicly exposed which made her feel so unsure of herself.

She wished now that she’d let her father come, instead of deliberately putting him off. Why had she? she wondered. Because she was selfish and hadn’t wanted to babysit for him? Because she was embarrassed by how ordinary he was? Or was it simply because inviting him alone would have made it too painful that her mother wasn’t with him

and she wanted to protect him from well-meaning questions about his bereavement?

Laurie sipped the water, feeling guilty. She knew how much tonight would have meant to her mum. But she also knew, if she was being really honest, that her loss wasn't for Jean Vale, the woman who had finally slipped away nearly a year ago, having lived in a hazy world of her own. Laurie's loss was the ideal that she'd never had. The person she missed was her well-formed fantasy mother who would have been here tonight, graceful and elegant and making all her friends laugh. She missed the woman who would have publicly hugged Laurie, egged her on, given her confidence, bought one of her paintings and gently bullied other people into doing the same.

But Jean Vale hadn't been like that. Maybe she would have been if she hadn't been ill for years, slowly rotting from the inside, until it was almost unbearable to be near her. Laurie tipped the rest of the water away. She should have done more. She should have shouldered the burden instead of letting her father nurse and care for her mother, and, in the end, keep a bedside vigil beside her in the hospice.

She knew that his fierce determination that she should carry on with her life and not get involved in her mother's care arrangements had been a decision made out of love, but even so, Laurie still felt it as a rejection. It had made her feel as if she were being kept at arm's length, as if she were being protected from something she didn't need protecting from. It was the same feeling she'd had since her parents had sent her away to school when she was eleven.

Laurie sighed. It would all be so much easier if she had brothers and sisters – anyone to share the burden of grief she felt, but she'd always been entirely alone. Yet there was no point in wallowing in self-pity or wishing for anything different. She had her friends and she had her independence. And maybe Roz was right. Maybe her friends were better than family.

Laurie stared down at Roz's pink roses in the sink. She mustn't let her friends down. She'd been saying for ages that she was going to have one last stab at making a living out of her art, and now here she was with a chance to show the world that she was an artist. She mustn't blow it.

Laurie had no idea what time it was that James woke her the next morning, but as she swam up into consciousness from exhausted, alcohol-fuelled sleep, she was aware of her thighs being caressed. She grinned, stretching luxuriously towards James's tongue beneath the duvet.

Laurie sighed to herself, feeling herself becoming aroused, despite her headache. She wondered how many women James Cadogan had practised this particular wake-up exercise on, but she didn't care. In the three months they'd been seeing each other, she deliberately hadn't enquired about his past love life. And, more importantly, he hadn't enquired about hers. She was determined that this was going to be a baggage-free relationship - and so far, it was working.

'Good morning,' he said, flinging back the duvet and gasping for air, ten minutes later, as Laurie slowly sank back in a post-orgasm sigh. He exhaled happily, his head thumping back on the pillow as he laid down next to her.

'Christ, I'm thirsty!' he said, sitting up immediately and scratching his mane of thick black hair, so that it stuck up at an even stranger angle. In a second, he'd thrown the duvet off and was standing up on the sheepskin rug by the side of his futon.

Laurie couldn't help snorting with laughter.

'What?' he asked, looking over his shoulder at her, a grin on his face.

She shook her head. There was no way she could explain to him why she found him so funny. Why she found his lack of seriousness so refreshing. She liked his attitude to sex, she realised, as she sat up and drew up her knees under the

duvet. She liked the fact that he always treated it as yet another one of his – or in this case, her – physical cravings to be satisfied. Despite his trendy clothes and haircut and his blossoming career as a music producer, James, at heart, was as primitive as a caveman. Now that he'd scratched one particular itch, he was on to the next. The next being some form of liquid.

She watched his smooth buttocks, as he negotiated his way across the littered floor of his bedroom. He seemed completely happy within his own body, as if his naturally slim physique, with his long, lean legs and toned, svelte torso were the most obvious thing in the world. He probably didn't even consider for a second, she thought, how lucky he was to be so naturally good-looking and fit, and Laurie liked his lack of vanity.

She immediately checked herself. She'd vowed she wouldn't do this. She mustn't start overanalysing James or her feelings for him, or deconstructing the parts of his personality she liked and disliked, otherwise it was bound to go horribly wrong. Instead, she forced herself to concentrate on the present, piecing together the events that had led her to being in James's bed.

Now she remembered how he'd bundled her into a taxi at 4 a.m., after coffee and bagels in Brick Lane. She'd been too drunk and too tired after the exhibition to argue against staying at his, but she wished that she'd been more together. It wasn't that she didn't like sleeping with James, but she so much preferred doing it in her own bed.

She knew she was being a snob and that admittedly James had the largest room in his shared house, but even so, there was something steadfastly 'student' about the whole place, including its varying number of other inhabitants whom James had acquired without any sort of vetting process. Now she could hear the vague pitter-patter of someone playing bongos upstairs.

James's downstairs bedroom was large and draughty and entirely painted white, including the floorboards, but in a hurry, so that the whole effect was uneven and streaky, like a child's chalk scribble on a blackboard. At one end was a huge window, the curtains of which Laurie had never seen open. Beneath it was a jumble of wires and computers on a sagging desk, an electric guitar propped up against the wall. Piles of CDs and tapes teetered dangerously, while a hideous white wardrobe and chest of drawers took up the rest of the space, with clothes spilling out in every direction. There was also a life-size cut-out of Elvis in his Vegas heyday, which made phallic shadows on the ceiling at night.

The rest of the room was taken up with the large sprawling futon in which Laurie now sat, surrounded by piles of books and magazines, dirty socks and three lava lamps, their wax suspended into weird foetal-like sculptures.

James returned with a bottle of Evian he'd found by the stereo in the corner.

'Want some?' he asked, after taking a sip and waving it towards Laurie.

'How old is it?' she asked, amused that she found it perfectly acceptable to share bodily fluids with James, but not a stale bottle of water.

James swallowed another mouthful with a big gulp and looked at the label on the bottle, as if it would give him some clue as to the vintage. 'Dunno,' he said. 'Not older than a couple of months.'

He wiggled his thick eyebrows at her, challenging her to take the bottle, but she shook her head. James shrugged and got in under the duvet, holding her tight. His feet were freezing as he put them on Laurie's legs.

'So, Miss Arty-Pants. How's the hangover?' he asked, cuddling her.

'I wish you hadn't mentioned it,' she said, feeling it kick in. She reached over him and lunged for the water, after all. As she did, she glanced at the small travel alarm clock on

the floor. 'Oh shit,' she said, collapsing on James's smooth chest.

'What?'

'I'm supposed to meet Tamsin for breakfast.'

'Tamsin . . . Tamsin?' James was clearly searching for a face to fit the name.

'My flatmate,' Laurie said, fixing him with a long-suffering smile. She remembered all of *his* friends.

'Oh yes . . . blonde.'

Laurie rolled her eyes at him. 'I promised I'd meet her this morning. I've got to head home and shower.'

'Don't go,' James moaned sleepily, pulling her back down under the duvet. 'You can shower here.'

'In your bathroom?'

'What's wrong with it?'

'Let's just say that I like my creature comforts more than you do. Call it an age thing. You know, you can get up and come too if you want. And then we could -'

But James had already closed his eyes and was pulling the duvet up around his chin. Laurie got out of bed pulling on her clothes from last night. They stank of stale smoke.

'I'll see you, sleepyhead,' she whispered, ruffling his hair, before kissing his forehead. 'Call me when you're conscious.'

Laurie admired Tamsin. She had done since they'd been friends at sixth-form college where they'd smoked, read poetry, painted their nails black and chased unsuitable boys. Since then, Tamsin had achieved a much more complete make-over than Laurie, holding down an impressive job as a law consultant, which involved her flying first class around the world. She even had a handsome airline captain as a boyfriend.

It was petite, blonde Tamsin, dressed in a blue cashmere jumper and gold jewellery, who sat down with Laurie for the post-mortem of the private view in their favourite café in

Borough Market a couple of hours later. Laurie, meanwhile, was in paint-splattered jeans and no make-up, her wet hair pushed under a woolly hat.

'I mean, there were quite a few people interested, but no chequebooks flying about, apart from for the big sunset piece,' Laurie explained, 'but that was entirely thanks to Roz,' she added, as she slouched over the table and recounted the events of the night before.

'I wish I'd been there,' Tamsin muttered for the third time.

'Stop saying that,' said Laurie, stretching her arm across the table and touching Tamsin's arm. 'You couldn't help it that the flight was delayed. I know you would have been there if you could.'

'Can I at least buy a painting, to make it up to you?'

'Don't be ridiculous. My paintings are all over the flat as it is. There's no point in you buying one.' Laurie sat up as the waitress arrived with a large plate of banana pancakes with maple syrup. 'Talking of the flat, I think the shower is on the blink again. When I get some money from the exhibition - if I do - I think I'll decorate a bit, what do you say?'

Tamsin didn't reply. Instead, she sipped her latte from the glass. Then she wiped her finger along the edge of the table. Laurie caught her expression, as she loaded a forkful. Something in the delicate features of her friend's face made her put the fork down and wipe her mouth.

'OK, come on, spit it out,' Laurie tested, looking at Tamsin before sucking on the straw from her fresh-juice smoothie.

'What? Oh no. No, it's nothing, really.'

Laurie put the smoothie down. 'Is it something to do with Captain Mike?' Laurie said his name with a deep smooth voice and double chins. Usually, Tamsin shared the joke, but today she didn't laugh.

'We've decided to live together,' Tamsin blurted out.

'But . . . but I thought you'd only just . . .'

 Laurie stopped herself. She was about to say 'started seeing him', but who was she to be judgemental? If it was love, then of course

Tamsin was going to move in straight away. She smiled and half stood and gestured for Tamsin to lean forward so that she could give her an awkward hug across the small table. 'Wow!' she said.

Tamsin squeezed her back. 'I know, isn't it great? I keep pinching myself.'

Laurie sat back down and smiled, but inside she felt sad. Another one bites the dust, she thought. She'd seen it happen with nearly all of her friends. In no time at all, there'd be an expensive wedding and then there'd be pregnancy and a baby and in less than a year Laurie would have nothing in common with her at all. Now, despite everything Laurie had said about the private view, she felt more in limbo than ever.

'So . . .' she said, looking at her plate, but her appetite had gone.

'I guess it's all change,' Tamsin said happily, with a shrug, launching forth on Mike's romantic proposal of cohabitation while she was in the cockpit of his 747 flying across the Alps.

But Laurie's mind was already racing ahead. She and Tamsin had bought their tiny flat together almost ten years ago. At the time, signing up for a joint mortgage with each other had seemed a lot safer than with any of the men either of them were dating. Besides, the flat was low risk and cheap and it was an arrangement that had suited them both over the years. And recently, with Tamsin spending more and more time away, Laurie had the flat mostly to herself. Now, the thought of trying to find a lodger filled her with dread.

'So what are you going to do?' Laurie asked, bringing her friend gently back down to earth.

'Well, the thing is . . . I know you're hard up for cash. And I thought . . . Mike and I thought we could move into the flat together. Or you could buy me out instead?' Tamsin hurried

on. 'If you want. And Mike and I could buy somewhere else and you could keep the flat.'

Tamsin clearly felt guilty. She blushed furiously. Laurie stared at her, but she didn't meet her eye. They both knew that Laurie buying Tamsin out wasn't even a vague possibility.

'The point is, Laurie, that you've got your art underway now and well . . . I've been waiting for quite a while until you . . .'

'Until I what?'

'You know . . . felt more stable.'

Laurie was stunned. She felt as if she were being ditched by someone she considered to be her true friend. Even worse, she now felt embarrassed about all the times she'd confided in Tamsin. She'd thought that Tamsin was being supportive about her grief over her mother, her confusion over her love life and the direction of her career. Now Laurie realised she'd just been biding her time.

'I suppose it's best if you take the flat,' Laurie said. 'If that's what you want. I guess I'll move out.'

Tamsin smiled, clearly relieved. 'I knew you'd be brilliant about it. I've got it all sorted with a solicitor. It'll only take a month or so to swap over the paperwork, although I don't want to put you under any pressure.' When Laurie didn't say anything, she added, 'So what are you going to do? Where will you live?'

'I'll work something out.'

'That's you all over,' Tamsin laughed, drawing a line under the subject. 'You're so resourceful. You could always stay with James, couldn't you?'

Laurie could only manage a hollow smile. 'Er, no.'

There was a small pause.

'So. What are you doing next Sunday? Only, I've asked Mike's parents to come for lunch and I thought I'd cook it at home. You and James are very welcome to join us.'

'No. Thanks anyway, but I think I'll go over and see Dad.'

'How is he?' Tamsin asked, her voice full of sympathy.

'Oh, fine!' Bill Vale said, happily, when Laurie asked him the same question the following week. 'Never better,' he continued, then checked himself. 'Well, considering.'

Laurie wondered how many times her father had practised this answer. Now she couldn't tell whether her beloved, but slightly bemusing, father was putting this on for her benefit, or whether he genuinely meant it. There certainly seemed to be a grain of truth in his protestations. His cheeks were rosy and he'd put on weight, which he needed for his tall frame. His white hair was neatly combed and he was wearing a faun checked shirt and a red tie, along with an old cardigan and grey trousers. Laurie followed him into the small terraced cottage where he lived alone in Tunbridge Wells.

'How did it go?' her father asked, referring to the private view, as they walked into the small, cosy lounge.

'Exhausting. I felt bad you didn't come, Dad.'

'Well, I didn't want to cramp your style,' he joked, but she saw now that she'd hurt his feelings. 'Not to worry, you'll have plenty more.'

'I don't know about that,' Laurie replied, flopping down on to the beige velvet sofa.

'Drink?' asked her father, walking across the green carpet in his leather slippers to the small drinks cabinet, where his cut-glass tumblers gleamed in a row. He'd always had an air of formality about him, after years teaching maths in a school in Canterbury, and Laurie always more of a visitor, than his daughter.

She nodded, then rubbed her hat back off her head. She hadn't had a good week. The combination of Tamsin's bombshell about the flat and having to dismantle the exhibition had left her feeling deflated and miserable. Yet it was pointless asking her father for emotional support. He'd never understood that what she required was for him to

listen, not to take each problem and try to fix it. She knew that if she really unburdened herself of her angst, including her imminent homelessness, her father would probably try to make a spreadsheet of her expenses on his new computer, get in a muddle and resort to getting out his chequebook. She hoped that he still had at least several healthy decades of retirement left and she wanted him to save his money for that, not for bailing her out.

‘So did you make lots of money?’ he asked.

Laurie hated lying and couldn’t bring herself to tell him she was hideously in debt after the event. ‘It was more about getting my name out there, rather than the money,’ she said.

Her father made a grunt-like sigh as he sat down in the armchair, pulling the Sunday paper from under him. ‘Yes, well, your mother knew you were talented from the moment you started scribbling. Dreams are worth pursuing, you know.’

‘Yes, I know, but it would be good to start making even a meagre living out of it,’ she said, before she’d had time to censor herself.

‘It’ll all come right in the end, you’ll see. Something, or someone, will come along.’

Laurie bristled at his contrite advice. She knew he was only trying to help, but his confidence in her always had the odd effect of sapping Laurie’s own belief in herself. Something about his blind trust made her flare with annoyance. He made it all sound as if it were fate. As if it were all so easy.

‘So, what have you been up to?’ Laurie asked, changing the subject and taking a sip of her gin and tonic.

‘Well, there’s been lots to do on the Residents’ Association Committee. Trevor Sandler’s resigned as chairman while he has a hip replacement, so we’re now stuck for a stand-in . . .’

Later, as Laurie helped him prepare lunch in his small kitchen, she was amazed by how quickly and resourcefully Bill Vale had learnt to live by himself. Only once did he refer to her mother again, and when he did, he stopped talking and took a quick, sharp intake of breath and looked out of the steamy window.

'She would have been out in the garden, planting,' he said, wistfully. 'We would have had a garden full of daffodils in the old schoolhouse.'

'I know,' Laurie said, softly. She watched the lines around his eyes grow deeper. Then he rubbed his bushy white eyebrows.

'Come on,' he said, as if Laurie had been the one expressing her regrets. 'She wouldn't want us to sit here getting maudlin,' he said. 'No point in that, at all.'

Laurie nodded, sad that their conversation was over. That was probably the closest he would come to admitting that he missed his wife. That was all he was going to let out. But then, perhaps, Laurie thought - not for the first time - that that was all there was. Perhaps her father was lucky enough not to possess great depths of emotion at all.

She'd learnt long ago that her father considered all displays of emotion to be rather childish and silly. Even after her mother had died, Laurie hadn't seen him cry. Instead, he'd been stoical and brave, displaying the kind of stiff-upper-lipped attitude towards his misfortune that he'd always tried - and failed - to instil in Laurie.

And yet Laurie was sure that her father had loved her mother in his own way. It was just that their relationship seemed to be based on quiet companionship rather than any sort of passion. Whenever Laurie thought of them together, she always pictured them sitting down, showing their affection with a small touch of their hands, the making of a cup of tea for each other, or a thousand of their other traditional rituals. She'd never seen them do anything spontaneous, like dance together, and she'd never caught

them kissing, like her friends claimed to have done with their own parents.

When she'd been away at school, Laurie had always wondered whether her parents had a secret private life. But as soon as she'd been home, she'd seen how ridiculous such a notion had been. And over the years, her mother's aloofness and seeming contentment with her marriage had always prevented Laurie from asking her anything personal about her feelings. And now it was too late. She would never know how her mother had truly felt about anything. And she wouldn't even know where to begin with her father.

After lunch, her father went to his neighbours to pick up the Residents' Association newsletters. Laurie offered to go with him, but he wouldn't hear of it. Left alone in the house, Laurie felt a familiar kind of guilty boredom which made her limbs ache. Outside, the branches of the straggly peach tree in her father's small garden slapped against the patio doors, like fingers drumming. The bird boxes attached to the small shed looked damp and empty.

Her father had moved to this house when her mother had gone into the hospice and Laurie never felt quite at home here, although the furniture was the same and there were familiar objects around: the silver-framed photograph of her parents on their wedding day, her mother looking self-conscious at nearly forty in a modest white suit, a picture of Laurie looking gappy and happy on her first bicycle, the set of her father's model cars he used to build and his collection of action-hero novels in a glass-fronted bookcase.

Laurie drained her glass and walked into the small kitchen to finish clearing up after lunch. The chicken carcass was on the carving board next to the sink, the plates and small bowls stacked neatly beside it.

On the wall next to the small table was a pinboard covered in postcards. Laurie looked at them - some old and battered, some new. And then she saw the corner of the postcard she'd sent herself and she froze.

'No,' she said out loud, recoiling at the thought. She mustn't think about it. She mustn't let him enter her head. But already her hand was moving towards the board, removing the postcard and turning it over.

Dear Mum and Dad - having an amazing time. Here with Roz, Heather et al, but have met someone. I am in love! So, so happy. Will fill you in when I get back. If I come back. This is IT. Am in paradise. L x

For a second, she was livid with her father for keeping the postcard. How dare he still keep reminders when she had destroyed all of hers? But then, she couldn't blame him. It must have made him so happy to have read Laurie's words to her mother, when she was so sick.

The thought of this - the realisation that she'd somehow let down her parents, as well as having been let down herself - made Laurie feel instantaneously furious. She tore up the postcard into tiny pieces and put it in the bin. Then she dumped the chicken carcass on top of it and quickly shut the bin cupboard door.

Like an alcoholic, or a drug addict, reminders of another life had to be dealt with. Stamped out, not given in to. She would not let his memory back in. She brushed her hands together, mentally congratulating herself on dealing with the situation. It was over. Over and gone. For ever. She had James now. James and a new life. She may have been derailed once, but that was in the past. She was back on track and steaming towards her future.

Suddenly, the phone rang, startling her. She raced to the study door, to pick up the nearest handset, then lunged across the large wooden desk to pick up the phone, noticing that her father had installed a new computer table.

'Five-four-nine-oh,' she said, mimicking her father's telephone manner.

'Hello, is Bill there?' The woman's voice sounded tentative.

Laurie smiled silently as a shocking possibility occurred to her. What if her father had a new woman in his life? What if he was seeing someone else? What if that was the reason he looked so healthy and happy? No, it couldn't be! Not Bill Vale.

But maybe . . . just maybe there was life left in him after all . . .

Laurie stretched the curly cable of the phone and moved round the desk to sit in her father's leather swivel chair, pleased to have someone to talk to. 'He's popped out. Can I help? I'm his daughter.'

There was a long silence at the other end of the phone. So long in fact that Laurie looked at the receiver and then spoke again. 'Hello? Are you there?'

'Yes, I'm here.'

'Well, can I tell Dad who called?'

'Could you tell him . . . could you give him a message?'

'Of course. Go ahead,' Laurie said to the woman, turning over an empty envelope on the green leather blotter and plucking out a biro from the pot on the desk.

'Could you tell him . . . could you tell him that Tony . . . that Tony has passed away.'

'Tony?' Laurie repeated the unfamiliar name. 'I'm sorry, was Tony a friend of Dad's?'

'No, he wasn't,' the woman said. 'But I want Bill to know. The funeral is next week. If Bill wants to come, tell him . . .'
The woman trailed off. Laurie was about to prompt her, when the woman started speaking again. Her voice sounded more businesslike, as if she'd composed herself. 'Tell him to call me.'

Laurie wrote down the message and the number the woman gave, trying to fathom out the strange tone in the woman's voice.

'OK,' she said, gently, 'I'll tell Dad. Would you mind leaving your name?'

'It's Rachel.'

'Rachel,' Laurie said, writing it down. 'And he'll know who you are?'

'Oh yes.'

'You're a friend then?' Laurie prompted.

'No,' said Rachel slowly. 'I'm not his friend.' There was a pause. 'I'm his sister.'

It was Laurie's turn to be speechless. She felt her blood racing to her cheeks, as her hand started to sweat around the receiver.

'His *what?*'

'He never mentioned me?' Rachel asked.

Laurie's voice cracked. 'Listen, I don't know who you are,' she said, 'and I'm sorry for your loss, but I think you've got the wrong number. My father doesn't have a sister. I think you've made a mistake.'

'No, there's no mistake,' the woman said, wearily. 'I'm sorry to shock you. I know this must be hard. You're Laurel, aren't you?'

'I don't see . . .' Laurie trailed out. 'Yes, my name is Laurel Vale . . . Laurie.'

'He named you after our mum.'

Laurie swallowed hard. It was true that she'd been named after her grandmother, but how the hell could this woman, this Rachel person, possibly know -

'Laurie, could we meet?' Rachel asked. 'I don't think your father will come to Tony's funeral, but I would so love to talk to you. And you should meet your family. It's time.'

Chapter II

Stepmouth, March 1953

It was nine in the morning and Stepmouth high street was wide awake. Cold blasts of air funnelled up from the harbour. Swallows and house martins darted between the chimneys and gables of the brightly coloured shopfronts. Cormorants and gulls shrieked and duelled in the ice-blue sky.

People stood huddled in groups: at the bus stop, thumping gloved hands together, smoking cigarettes, discussing shopping lists, all waiting for the motor coach to arrive; outside Vale Supplies, peddling gossip, cooing at pram-bound babies, trading recipes and ration-book coupons.

Over beneath the fishmonger's rippling white awning, Mark Piper, the bald and bearded fishmonger, and his wife, Eileen, stood haggling with rubber-booted Stephen Able, the captain of the *Mary Jane*, over a trolleyload of fish, lobsters and crabs, which he'd wheeled up from the quayside to sell.

Outside the Channel Arms, ruddy-faced brewery men in smudged flat caps and sweat-stained vests rolled beer barrels down the ramp of their spluttering diesel lorry. Sandy, brown soapsuds slid down the windows of Ackroyd & Partners Solicitors, as Nick Meades washed them clean. A waxed black Citroën purred up the high street and on towards Summerglade Hill - like something out of a Chicago gangster film, Tony Glover thought, as it passed him by.

Tony was standing a couple of feet back from the end of the queue at the bus stop, with his arm round the slim waist of Margo Mitchell, his girlfriend of the last two and a half weeks.

The aroma of oven-fresh pasties and bread drifted through the open bakery doors, driving Tony nuts, making his stomach grumble, and leaving him wishing he'd taken his mother up on her offer of a fry-up before he'd left home.

But he'd been running late and hadn't had the time to spare. Because Margo Mitchell wasn't the kind of girl you kept waiting. Especially when you'd promised to take her shopping for the day - which he had, to the cosmopolitan stores of nearby Barnstaple. And especially when you wanted to impress her enough to get her to finally unfasten her Bastille of a bra and take a tumble with you up in the meadows some time soon - which he most certainly hoped that she would.

To get here on time, Tony had raced his bicycle at breakneck speed down the steep, treacherous, zigzagging road, which led from his village three miles up the West Step Valley to here.

And the rush had been worth it, hadn't it? *Margo* was worth it, wasn't she? Tony breathed in her sweet lemony perfume and kissed her pouting rouged lips, before looking her over again.

She was cute, all right, dressed in a rich cream woollen cardigan and sky-blue Terylene dress, with her golden hair tied up in bunches, showing off the silver earrings which she'd borrowed from her mother. And even if her and Tony didn't exactly have much in common, there were still a whole stack of reasons to be with a girl who looked like her.

'Like her tits, which are as big as beach balls,' Tony's best friend, Pete, had pointed out only last week with a faraway look in his eyes.

'And her lips, which could suck a golf ball through a straw,' their good friend Arthur had added with a sigh.

Margo was a catch, then, and certainly the prettiest girl Tony had ever been out with. Not that he was without assets himself. He was tall, a little over six feet, and lithe, from time spent boxing for his school (before he'd got himself kicked out, that was). He had a sartorial streak and was dressed today in a black greatcoat, buttoned up to the neck (in the style favoured by Richard Burton), along with razor-creased grey trousers and a pair of polished black leather boots. His eyes were twinkling and blue, the colour of the sea when viewed from the top of a cliff on a bright sunny day. 'Right bobby-dazzlers,' his mother had always said. His eyelashes were dark and long.

But if he'd been born handsome, he'd done his best to disguise the fact since. His face was a history of the scrapes he'd got himself into. One of his front teeth was chipped from popping beer-bottle tops for bets. The summer before, while showing off to tourist girls down at the beach, he'd misjudged a dive into a tidal pool and had crooked his nose on a rock. Up on his left temple ran an inch-long scar, a memento from the fight he'd got into at grammar school last September on his seventeenth birthday – the very same altercation which had led to his expulsion and put paid to any hopes he'd had of taking his education any further.

He didn't lose much sleep over his bumps and bruises, though. (The expulsion, however, *that* still made him mad . . . Since then he'd been washing dishes over at the Sea Catch Café on East Street, rubbing off grease and shining up glass, leaving his arms as hard as steel.) It was important, the way he saw it, to look tough, tough enough to stop people from messing with you. That's why he kept his thick dark hair slicked back with Brylcreem, like in the photos he'd seen in the newspapers of the notorious cosh-boy gangs from London.

Girls liked a guy to look tough, Tony reckoned, the same as they did in the movies. He thought he knew a bit about women, did Tony. Like how you could make them smile by