

THE NUMBER ONE BESTSELLING AUTHOR



Katie Fforde



She's building
the home of
her dreams ...

... but will she
find love?

Practically Perfect

About Katie

I live in the beautiful Cotswold countryside with my family, and I'm a country girl at heart.

I first started writing when my mother gave me a writing kit for Christmas, and once I started I just couldn't stop. *Living Dangerously* was my first novel and since then I haven't looked back.

Ideas for books are everywhere, and I'm constantly inspired by the people and places around me. From watching TV (yes, it is research) to overhearing conversations, I love how my writing gives me the chance to taste other people's lives and try all the jobs I've never had.

Each of my books explores a different profession or background and my research has helped me bring these to life. I've been a porter in an auction house, tried my hand at pottery, refurbished furniture, delved behind the scenes of a dating website, and I've even been on a Ray Mears survival course.

I love being a writer; to me there isn't a more satisfying and pleasing thing to do. I particularly enjoy writing love stories. I believe falling in love is the best thing in the world, and I want all my characters to experience it, and my readers to share their stories.'

Keep in touch with Katie.

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*To Louise Ratcliffe, Interior Designer,
who was the original inspiration for this book.
Lots of love and many thanks.*

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Chapter One



The candle at her side flickered, and Anna shifted her position on the pair of steps where she was perched. She was beginning to regret having the telephone connected so promptly. There was very little mobile reception and without a conventional phone she'd have been almost unreachable. As it was, her ear was getting hot and her hand was getting cold, but her sister was still interrogating her. Anna didn't bother to cut her short – it would only involve another telephone call later – she tucked her free hand into her sleeve and listened politely. The bib-and-braces dungarees she was wearing were fairly warm when she was moving around, but now she was getting chilly.

'So why was it you moved there again?' asked Laura for what felt like the hundredth time. 'You know, property's much cheaper up here in Yorkshire. We could have done the project together. Much more fun.'

Anna embarked on her explanation again – rather patiently, she thought. 'I didn't want to be so far from London, and Amberford is a much more desirable area. Commutable from London, just. We've been through this.'

Laura sighed. 'I just don't like you doing it all on your own, so far from us. And I really wish you hadn't rushed into buying it, without me having a chance to see it first.'

In fact Anna did feel a bit guilty about this. 'I'm sorry, but I had to decide very quickly. There were lots of other people after it. It was such a bargain.'

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'You were a cash buyer,' Laura pointed out rather snappily.

Anna sighed. 'I know, and that's partly thanks to you. But so was the other guy. It would have gone to him if I hadn't been in a position to write a cheque for a deposit on the spot.' She paused. 'I'm eternally grateful, Lo. Without that loan I couldn't have done it.'

'You know I was happy to lend you the money, and you're paying me more interest than I'd have got from anywhere else, I just don't trust you to buy—'

'I know you don't,' said Anna, quite gently considering her frustration. 'But it's time you did. I know you're my older sister, but I am an adult, you know.'

'Twenty-seven is not—'

'Yes it is.'

'I don't mean that, of course you're an adult, but this is all your capital and a bit of mine. It's your inheritance.'

'I know the money didn't come from the tooth fairy.'

Anna wished she'd supplied herself with pencil and paper and a space to sketch – she could have got on with some drawings while all this was going on. Not that it would have been possible in this light. She just hated wasting time.

'What I'm saying is,' Laura continued, 'you won't get that money from Granny again. And you could lose everything, you know.'

Anna shifted uncomfortably on the step. 'I watch all the same television programmes you do. I'm just as aware that the property market goes down as well as up, all that stuff. I haven't lived the last five years with my head in a sack.'

Laura sighed again. 'I expect I'm just jealous. It was such fun doing up the flat in Spitalfields together.'

'It *was* fun,' Anna agreed, 'but I'm a big girl now. I'm a qualified interior designer. It's time for me to go it alone.'

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There was a silence. Laura was obviously still not convinced. 'So how much money have you got left to live on?' she asked, setting off on a new tack. 'You won't be able to do everything yourself, however handy you are with your Black and Decker and your Workmate – and I admit you are quite handy. And you still need to pay the mortgage.'

'I took out a slightly larger mortgage so I can use some of it to pay it—'

'That doesn't sound sensible—'

'But I thought I might get a part-time job anyway,' Anna said soothingly before Laura could get any further, 'just to get to know people.'

'Ah! So you're already worried about being lonely and you haven't even spent a night in the house! Sell it quickly, and do the same thing up here, where I can keep an eye on you. You might still make a bit of a profit. You could get in touch with the other man who was interested—'

'No, Laura! I love this house! I'm not going to sell it.'

Laura pounced like a cat on a daydreaming mouse. 'Ah! I knew it! You've fallen in love with an investment project. Fatal mistake.'

Anna cursed herself for letting slip this sign of weakness. 'I didn't say "in love",' she said, knowing she sounded pathetic. '"In love" is quite different from loving it.' She bit her lip while she waited to see if her sister bought this rather specious argument.

'OK.' Laura seemed resigned at last. 'Just promise me you'll sell it when it's done. Falling in love is always a mistake.'

'I know.'

'With men or with property,' she continued menacingly.

'Come on, Laura! You and Will are ecstatically happy.'

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You and the boys could rent yourself to cornflakes ads as the perfect family!’

Laura laughed, trapped by her own argument. ‘I know, but—’

‘You’ve all got good teeth and shiny hair. You eat the right food—’

‘This conversation is not about Will and the boys,’ said Laura firmly.

‘I know,’ Anna admitted, ‘but I was hoping I could steer it in that direction. How is Edward’s spelling coming on?’

‘Anna!’

‘OK, but I really want to know if Jacob has got off that vile reading book.’

‘Oh yes.’ Her sister was momentarily diverted from sorting out Anna. ‘At last. But getting back to you, and falling in love—’

Anna accepted the inevitable. ‘You don’t trust me to fall in love as sensibly as you did?’ Will was the perfect husband: not only loving, good-looking and a good provider, he also did DIY.

Laura was silent for a moment, possibly realising that falling in love with the right person was about luck as much as anything else. Anna enjoyed the respite.

‘You make me sound terribly bossy.’

At the other end of the phone, Anna nodded agreement.

‘But I’m just looking out for you,’ persisted Laura. ‘Mum’s a bit taken up with Peter these days and doesn’t pay attention to what you’re getting up to.’

‘Mum’s entitled to be obsessed with her new husband. I am an adult.’ Although Anna was beginning to wonder if this was true, her sister seemed so unable to accept it.

‘And of course you’re just as capable of falling in love with the right man as I am. As long as I’ve checked him over first.’ But at least there was a smile in her voice now.

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'Fine. I promise I won't marry anyone without consulting you. Oh, I can hear the boys. You're needed, Laura.' Never had her nephews' shrieks sounded so endearing.

'Oh yes, better go. Speak soon!'

'Right.' Anna uncrossed her fingers, and then replaced the receiver on the handset and tucked it back into the little niche in the wall. It was only a white lie, she told herself as she stepped down to the floor. And you have to fall in love with a project a little bit, to really throw your heart into it. As for falling in love with the right man, that ship had sailed, too. She'd fallen in love with the wrong one years ago, and even knowing he was the wrong one didn't affect her feelings. One of the reasons she had come to look at the house in the first place was because she remembered Max saying that his mother lived near here. It had seemed like a good omen.

Anna blew out the candle and then reversed carefully down the ladder that was currently her staircase. Sometimes she let herself fantasise about meeting his mother, or running into Max while he was visiting her. She always chuckled at this dream in spite of herself. If he did run into her, she'd more than likely be wearing dungarees and builder's boots, and while she had always been a jeans and sweater girl, her clothes were even more utilitarian now than they had been when she was a student.

Still, she'd carried the torch for a very long time and it still burned as brightly as when Max had been the guest lecturer at college.

He'd been the hot young architect, coming in to talk to them, and she'd just been one of the students, taking notes. She was willing to bet she wasn't the only one who'd fallen in love with him, either. He'd been so dynamic and vital. Not really handsome, but with such a massive

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personality that his looks didn't matter. But she'd never talked about him to anyone else and, thank God, this included her sister. She hadn't wanted to find out that he'd slept his way through half the class but passed over her. Then, at their Graduation Ball, he had picked her out and danced with her. It was right at the end, and Anna had had to leave because there was a whole group of them sharing a minicab home. There'd just been time for Max to write his number on a bit of cigarette packet. 'Call me,' he'd said, his voice a husky whisper.

Anna had fully intended to call him, even though the thought was more scary than finals had been, but some hideous bug had laid her low for days. The first day she felt well enough to go out she had been on her way to the chemist when she saw him – with a woman. She had rushed home and torn up the bit of cigarette packet and then burnt the pieces. It was only a couple of days later, when the last remnants of the bug had left her and she felt less wobbly, that she realised she'd been incredibly stupid. The woman could have been just a friend: his sister, a colleague, anyone. She'd regretted her folly ever since.

Anna went to the place where the electric kettle and the toaster were plugged into the only part of the house where they could be. There was also a small wash-hand basin there, so it counted as a kitchen. To satisfy the demands of the building-society-turned-bank, she had left the slightly rusty cooker and cracked sink in place until after she'd been given a mortgage. Luckily for her, the address, and the relatively small amount she needed to borrow, meant the valuer didn't actually need to go into the property. She had secured her money on a 'walk by' – which normally would have been a drive by, had it been possible to drive past the cottages – and it was hers.

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Of course the mortgage didn't seem small to her, it seemed enormous, but from the building society's point of view, it was fairly insignificant.

While she made herself a cup of tea, using the last of the milk, she forced herself to stop thinking about the man she hadn't seen for three years and calculated how long it would be before Laura could stay away no longer and would descend, handyman husband in tow, to 'sort her out'.

Anna loved her sister dearly, and when they'd lived together they'd got on fine. But since Laura was no longer able to supervise her dates, steer her wardrobe in the right direction, and generally mother her, the word 'bossy' was becoming more and more appropriate. If she'd known where Anna intended to spend her first night in her very own home – investment project, she corrected herself hurriedly – she'd have had a blue fit. She would not consider a sleeping bag and a camping mat a suitable resting place, even if Anna did have a couple of blankets she could pull over herself. But without Laura adding her capital to hers, her mortgage would have been much larger.

And surely Laura wouldn't blame Anna for falling in love with the cottage, at least a little bit. It was heavenly! Or it would be when it had floors, a staircase, a proper kitchen and a bathroom. The previous owners had ripped all these things out and then either run out of money or interest. The estate agent was rather cagey about it.

Anna had tossed and turned her way through a week of sleepless nights while she waited for the surveyor's report. She was certain he'd discover some major problem: the reason why the previous owners had abandoned something with 'such terrific letting potential' as the estate agent put it. When no such reasons were revealed, Anna felt it was probably because there was so little left in which to

discover death-watch beetle, dry rot or perished timbers. The ground floor had been stripped of almost everything, including most of the floorboards. There was no staircase, so the only way to the first floor was via a ladder. Here there was at least a floor to walk about on, but there was no bathroom. And the very top floor, the attic, which in Anna's mind's eye was already the most wonderful bedroom-bathroom-dressing-room suite, was very much as it had been hundreds of years ago. Anna planned to sleep up there when everything was straighter downstairs, but at the moment she felt she needed to be nearer things. Up in the attic, the rest of the house could burst into flames and she would be unaware of it until it was too late. She'd bought and installed a smoke alarm, even without her sister's prompting.

Its lack of amenities had made the house very cheap, considering its position, both in the country as a whole and in Amberford in particular.

It was part of a row of cottages at right angles to the road. A path led between the houses and the gardens which overlooked the village. When the houses were built, the gardens would all have produced vegetables and not been used for leisure purposes. Even now, there was no space wasted in high hedges or fences. It gave the area an open-plan, allotment-like feel, that Anna loved. Laura would say that having the garden open plan would detract from the value. But there was a smaller, enclosed garden at the back, and if your children needed lots of playing space (and Laura's two boys definitely did) there was an attractive bit of common land not far away. A church, a school and a pub, and an easy journey to a mainline station, made it a very desirable spot. There was even a shop and a post office and, not too far away, a Chinese takeaway.

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Of course it only had two bedrooms, and Laura would say that cut Anna's target market down considerably. Anna had already prepared her speech saying it made it an ideal second home, although she didn't like the idea of second homes making once-thriving villages barren and empty during the week.

She had yet to meet her neighbours, and because it was beginning to get dark and people would be putting their lights on, a walk along the row would tell her which cottages were occupied permanently, and which were not. She needed a few things from the shop anyway; now would be a good time to investigate discreetly.

It seemed strange walking so close to people's windows and although she couldn't quite resist looking inside, she made her glances oblique and fleeting. She was grateful that she was the end cottage (she would tell her sister that 'end of terrace' was better than 'mid') so no one could look in at the building site she currently called home.

Her immediate neighbour was definitely a permanent resident. Anna could hear children and there were lights on everywhere. A sideways glance through the kitchen window as she passed showed a reassuring amount of mess. Anna's sister was terribly organised and it was what they argued about more than anything else. Anna didn't want to find herself living next door to another neatnik.

The next house was either a holiday home or belonged to someone not yet home from work: a commuter, possibly. The curtains were open but no light showed. Anna could see hints of a very stylish, modern kitchen, full of expensive appliances.

The house next to that was clearly occupied by an elderly lady. Her windowsill was covered with china ornaments, visible in front of the curtain that was already drawn. A

cat sat on the porch, evidently dismissing Anna as a blow-in, and refusing her offers of friendship.

The first cottage in the row, and the last one Anna passed before she reached the main road, was definitely a holiday cottage. The Christmas decorations were still up, even though it was mid-March. Going by the quality of the decorations, which were of the tasteful corn-dolly and red-ribbon type, she judged the house was not owned by disorganised people who just didn't get round to taking them down. More likely they were spending the winter somewhere warm.

Out of the five cottages, three – possibly four – including her own, seemed occupied which, considering how small they were, was not a bad ratio.

The shop bell jangled in a friendly way. It was a small supermarket, with a couple of short rows of goods and a counter for bacon and cheese. The man who stood at the counter, doing the crossword, looked up when she entered and smiled. 'Evening.'

'Evening.'

'Can I help you?'

'I think I can probably manage,' said Anna, feeling a little shy. She was used to the anonymity of London shops, where only the proprietors of shops you used very frequently ever spoke to you.

'Well, let me know if there's anything you can't find. Just moved in, have you?' he added later, when Anna had put a few things into her basket.

'That's it. I just need some basic provisions.'

'So you've moved into Brick Row?'

'Yes. How did you know?' This omniscience took some getting used to.

The shopkeeper smiled. 'It didn't take much detective work. We knew the house had been bought by a young

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woman; you're obviously dressed for work; and who else would come in here just before closing, at this time of year, who I don't know?'

Anna smiled. 'I suppose it does make sense.'

'Don't worry, we're not all nosy round here, and those of us that are are well meaning on the whole.'

Anna placed her basket of goods on to the counter so he could ring them up. 'I'm sure you are.'

She walked home feeling very satisfied. The shop didn't sell fresh meat or fish but otherwise it seemed to have everything else Anna might need and the town of Stroud was only a short bike ride away. Amberford was perfect, well worthy of being fallen in love with, and if being there without a car caused a few problems, well, she'd deal with them as they came up.

As Anna walked back along the lane she saw a young woman standing by the front door next to hers, looking out anxiously. Anna was pleased to see her as she'd been intrigued by the row of three small pairs of wellington boots, arranged in size order, on the windowsill of the porch. She overcame her shyness and smiled. The young woman smiled back, still preoccupied.

'Hello,' she said. 'You've moved into number five? You're very brave! It hasn't even got floors, has it? I was going to invite you round for a bath, but just now we can't even have one ourselves. I'm waiting for a plumber. He promised he'd be here before two, but I don't suppose he'll come now.'

'Oh dear, what's the problem?' Anna asked.

Presumably hearing her voice, three small boys abandoned their toys of mass destruction and clustered round their mother, eager to see whom she was talking to.

'Blocked drain,' the woman said with a grimace. 'I've pulled out the plug and nothing happens. It's full of cold

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soapy water. If these three don't have a bath at night, they take ages to settle. And it's beginning to smell.'

'Well, I might be able to help,' said Anna.

The woman's face lit up. 'Really? How?'

'I have a few building skills, which is just as well given the state of my house, but, more to the point, I have a tool that unblocks drains. I'll just pop home and get it,' Anna offered, 'if you'd like me to.'

'I'd love you to! I'll put the kettle on. Or open some wine?'

Anna grinned back at her. 'I'll be back in a minute.'

It took Anna a little longer than that to find the tool that she and her sister had had cause to use so often in the Spitalfields flat. When she knocked on the door of her neighbour's house and was let in, she found an agreeable amount of chaos.

'I'm Chloe,' said the woman.

'Anna.'

'And these are Bruno, Tom and Harry. Two, four and six, only in reverse order.'

'Hello,' said Anna, suddenly shy in front of three pairs of inquisitive eyes. 'I've got my gadget, if you'd like to show me upstairs.'

They all went up the steep and very winding staircase to the second floor, where the bathroom and the boys' bedroom was. The boys grabbed hold of her and towed her towards it.

'We haven't had a bath for two days!' said the eldest, who was probably Bruno, but might have been Harry.

'My husband's away,' said his mother. 'He would be, just when there's an emergency.'

Anna didn't think a blocked bath plug quite qualified as an emergency, but accepted that Chloe obviously did. She rolled up her sleeve as far as it would go, which was not far enough.

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'I don't suppose you'd all like to go downstairs while I do this?' she suggested. 'I want to take my jumpers off.'

'We want to watch,' announced one of the boys.

'Yes, we do,' said another.

Anna sighed. 'OK.' She undid her bib and peeled off the two jumpers that covered a long-sleeved T-shirt. Fortunately that sleeve rolled up obligingly high. She plunged her arm into the cold, scummy water. 'Right, pass me my plunger, would you?'

'This is so cool,' murmured Bruno.

'You're right there,' said Anna, shivering. 'Very cool indeed.'

Chapter Two



When the bath was both empty and clean, Chloe filled it again and then went downstairs to make supper while Anna sat on the floor of the bathroom and read stories to the little boys. She was accustomed to small boys, having nephews, and enjoyed their choice of reading matter hugely. Eventually, when the littlest one showed signs of becoming drowsy, she whipped them out, one by one, and enveloped them in towelling. Then, as instructed, she sent them downstairs to sit by the fire.

By the time she had cleaned out the bath, collected the bath toys, done her best to dry the floor, and gone downstairs again, the boys were sitting at the table in their pyjamas eating spaghetti and meatballs.

'We get a bit casual when my husband's away,' Chloe explained. 'It's better to feed them than bath them, but what with one thing and another, it just didn't happen. It was very kind of you to read to them in the bath. I'd never thought of that.'

'I have a couple of nephews and when I had them on my own one weekend, I discovered reading to them in the bath was a really good idea. And then we played dentists.'

'What?' Chloe handed Anna a glass of wine.

'They take turns to lie on my sister's bed, with the reading light on, and I say, "Open wide, E to E sound," while I brush their teeth.'

Chloe regarded her sons, one of whom was sucking up

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a strand of spaghetti, the end of which had just flicked his nose. 'That sounds a brilliant idea!'

Anna laughed. 'I don't think my sister was that impressed when she found toothpaste on her duvet cover, but she was so thrilled to find us all alive and well, she overlooked it.'

'I think I'm really going to like having you as a neighbour, Anna.'

While Chloe tried out this new tactic in the tooth-cleaning battle upstairs, Anna stacked the dishwasher, wiped all traces of spaghetti and meatballs off the table, and then set it again, for their meal. She wouldn't have told her sister unless given a truth drug, but she was as thrilled as Chloe to have such a jolly, friendly family living next door. It would make being on her own, on a building site, much more bearable.

Chloe came down and collapsed on the sofa. 'Putting them to bed is so exhausting. Mike does it, when he's home. He's my husband,' she added.

'And he's away?' Anna asked.

'Yup. He's a consultant engineer and works abroad quite a bit. He's due back quite soon, but you can never be sure how long a job will take. I used to go with him, before the boys came along.'

'Do you miss it?'

Chloe considered this. 'Not as much as all that. I miss Mike, of course, but being an ex-pat wasn't all joy. Although I'd worked as a temp in offices all my life, it wasn't easy to get work when they knew you'd be off soon. That's how I met Mike,' she added. She looked at Anna, retrospectively mischievous. 'I was working at his office. We met in the morning, went out for lunch, and never went back! I felt awfully guilty, I usually took my temp work very seriously.'

Anna laughed. Although Chloe did a lot of talking she

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was fun, and could be a useful source of information. ‘So have you lived here long?’

‘Bruno – he’s the eldest – was a baby when we moved here. It seemed ideal for us then. Now, two more babies later, it seems a bit cramped.’ She smiled sleepily. ‘You wouldn’t tip a bit more wine into my glass, would you?’

Anna obligingly tipped.

‘It’s not that I’m an alcoholic or anything – or at least, I don’t think so – but it’s so nice to have company in the evening, and I never drink when I’m alone.’ Chloe sipped and then, as if going over old ground, said, ‘We’d move if we could afford to, probably, but it took all our money just to get our foot on the property ladder.’

‘You don’t seem exactly cast down by your poverty, if I may say so,’ said Anna.

Chloe laughed. ‘Well, no! Being broke can become an absorbing hobby and it makes you terribly resourceful.’ She undug herself from the sofa and crossed the room. ‘See this table?’

Anna nodded. It was holding a small table lamp.

‘Nappy box, with a cloth over it. But don’t look too closely – there isn’t a hem on the cloth.’

‘Wow! That’s such a good idea,’ said Anna.

Now she was on her feet, Chloe drained her glass. ‘I’m going to put the kettle on. Mike’s parents think I’m a terrible slut. They don’t think making furniture out of cardboard boxes is clever.’

‘I do, but I usually use something more substantial myself . . .’

‘You probably don’t have access to nappy boxes like I do.’

‘Well, no.’

Chloe frowned. ‘I did use cloth nappies as well, but when you’ve got three . . . So, coffee, tea, or hot choc?’

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'Coffee please.'

'And grown-up biscuits?'

'I didn't know biscuits grew, I thought they just came the size they were always going to be.'

Chloe laughed. 'You are funny. I mean biscuits I don't let the boys have except for a treat. Too expensive.'

'So why did you move to this area? Do you come from round here?' Anna asked.

'It's more or less equidistant between the parents,' replied Chloe as she filled the kettle, 'which is a bit of a mistake, but I'd spent holidays here as a child and have always loved it. And I must say, although property prices are obscene, it's a great place to live.'

'That's good to hear.' Anna got up from the rather low armchair that was beginning to make her back ache and sat down again on something more upright.

'Oh yes, it's got everything,' said Chloe from the kitchen. 'Lovely countryside, views . . . a really good primary school, playgroups, things like that in the village. You probably know about the shop and the post office, but there's a great market on Saturdays, although there's another one in town, too. We have a pub that does really good food, a Chinese nearby—'

'I know about that. There were menus from it stuck up on the wall in my house.'

Chloe smiled and rummaged in the cupboard for the grown-up biscuits. 'And we've made some good friends here, all within pushchair distance, which is great when you go to dinner with each other: you just totter home on the stroke of midnight for the babysitter.' Chloe stopped and sighed. 'Sorry! I've completely run off at the mouth again. I do that. Mike's always telling me off, but when he's away I do miss adult company in the evenings sometimes. Feel free to tell me to shut up.'

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Anna chuckled. 'I wouldn't dream of it! I wasn't terribly looking forward to sitting on my own next door, and you've taken me in, fed me, got me drunk—'

Chloe looked shocked. 'Surely not!'

'Well, a bit tipsy then, but it's been a lovely evening. Thank you.' She smiled happily. Having Chloe as a neighbour was going to be a real boon. She was kind and funny and knew everything. It made her decision to buy the house even more right.

'There's your coffee,' said Chloe, placing a mug of steaming black coffee in front of Anna. 'Milk? Sugar? And have a biscuit.'

Anna helped herself as Chloe sat down on the rather uncomfortable armchair and put the plate of biscuits down on the floor beside her; there didn't seem to be room anywhere else. She turned to Anna. 'Aren't you going to be frightened, sleeping on your own in that house?'

'I don't think so,' said Anna. 'But I never have lived on my own, so I might be.'

'I was always hopeless before I had the boys.'

'Who protect you if the bogeymen come?'

Chloe laughed and shook her head. 'No, but they're company, all the same. You should get a dog.'

'A dog?' That didn't seem terribly practical in a tiny building site of a cottage.

'Mm. I'd have one like a shot if the house wasn't so small and I didn't have three children.'

Anna looked around the room. 'Yes, I did notice quite a lot of pictures of greyhounds.'

Chloe nodded enthusiastically. 'I think I must be the only person who works at rescuing greyhounds who hasn't actually got several herself. One woman I know has got four.'

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'Oh my goodness.' Anna couldn't help wondering if this was sensible.

'Yes', Chloe continued excitedly. 'They're very easy. They sleep most of the day, and only need quite a small amount of exercise.'

'I see.' Anna didn't believe it for a minute.

'In fact, I know of a greyhound that's desperate for a home, right now.'

'Do you?' Anna's dismay could no longer be disguised – it was horribly clear where Chloe was going with this.

'Mm. The most lovely brindle bitch. Her owner's going away, and if she can't – or we can't – find a home for her, she might have to be put down.'

'Couldn't you have her to stay?' Anna was positively alarmed now. 'Just while this woman is on holiday?'

'Chloe raised her eyebrows. 'Have you ever seen a greyhound in real life? They're enormous. This house is bursting at the seams anyway. We couldn't possibly have a dog – at least, not a greyhound.'

'Well, I'm afraid I couldn't possibly have one either. I haven't got floors in all the rooms, there's only electricity in one room downstairs and I've only got a cold tap,' Anna explained.

'Then you'll need a dog for company until things are a bit more civilised,' Chloe said triumphantly.

'I really don't think—'

'Honestly,' Chloe wheedled. 'You could just have her on trial. We're between homing officers at the moment, but I'm sure if you and she got on, the new one would let you keep her.'

'My sister would have forty fits!' Actually, this made Anna a little bit tempted.

'It's nothing to do with her, is it?' Chloe looked confused for a moment.

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'No, but that wouldn't stop her telling me what she thought about it. She's really put out that I bought a house so far away from her.'

'But it's a wonderful investment, surely?'

'Oh yes, but she doesn't want me to do it without her. We did up a place in Spitalfields together. We did really well, selling right at the top of the market, and I'm doing up next door with the proceeds. Or at least, the proceeds should pay for half of it, if it doesn't go too badly over budget.'

'Wow, all on your own. You are all on your own, aren't you? You haven't got a boyfriend?'

'Nope.'

'You're so brave.'

Anna liked hearing herself described as brave even if it wasn't how she always felt. Her sister's 'foolhardy' seemed like a better description sometimes. She reached for another chocolate biscuit, and suddenly caught sight of her watch. 'Gosh, its late! I'd better go home. It's been a lovely evening though.'

'Hasn't it? I haven't had so much fun in ages. And thank you so much for unblocking the bath. You must come and use it whenever you want to.'

When the last goodbyes had been said, Anna let herself into her own little house. After the warmth and life of Chloe's, it seemed very desolate. The torch she used in order to get to the kettle sent huge shadows everywhere, and until Anna had plugged in an old Anglepoise lamp, she did feel that staying there on her own would be scary.

However, with more light, a hot-water bottle and all the blankets arranged over the sleeping bag, things looked a lot better. She had a portable radio to go to sleep with, so the only trouble was that she couldn't put the lamp

near the sleeping bag and the room seemed unbearably spooky with the lamp out.

In the end she found a tea light, put it on an old saucer and lit that. As she realised that she was like a child, afraid of the dark and needing a night light, she thought that perhaps a dog was not such a bad idea after all.

Chloe knocked on Anna's door at half past nine on Monday morning, holding two mugs of coffee. 'I'm so sorry to call on you so early, but I was dying to see the house. Bruno's at school and I've just dropped the other boys off at play-group. I wanted to come without them or I'd have been round yesterday.'

Anna chuckled at Chloe's eagerness. 'Quite right. It wouldn't be safe for the boys just yet.' And she was quite pleased that she'd had one more day of getting things vaguely organised before her first visitor. She took the offered coffee and sipped it. 'That's delicious. Come in.'

Chloe took the two steps that were possible before the floorboards ran out. 'It could be lovely,' she said eventually, not commenting on the fact that it was not in a state any normal person would consider habitable. 'How on earth did you get a mortgage?'

Anna laughed. 'A "walk by"'. Fortunately the area is expensive enough not to need too close an inspection for the house to be valuable. And it will be gorgeous eventually. There are some joists that need replacing, then I'll get the floorboards back down. They're mostly lovely wide elm boards that'll look gorgeous.'

'There's a reclamation place quite near,' Chloe offered. 'I could give you the address.' She paused. 'Why no staircase?'

Anna shrugged. 'The people I bought the house from

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took it out to move it and then ran out of money. Or at least I think they did. Didn't you know them?'

Chloe shook her head, clutching her coffee as if it was her last contact with civilisation. 'They used to come down at weekends and rip things out. They didn't seem to get round to putting anything back in.' She teetered along a joist towards the back of the house. 'This will be the kitchen, presumably.'

Anna nodded. 'With double doors leading out to the garden. They've already knocked the wall down for me.'

'And they got listed buildings consent? I'm surprised. They're very fussy about this particular row of cottages. We applied to move an internal door and they wouldn't let us.'

'Oh.' Anna's enjoyment at showing her new friend her house dimmed. 'I don't think they were the sort of people who'd bother about things like that, were they?'

Chloe shrugged. 'Two men, trying to make a quick profit – probably not.'

Anna chewed her lip and swore softly. 'I really want to do things by the book or it can make things so difficult when you come to sell.'

'You can apply for retrospective consent,' Chloe suggested. 'Perhaps you should go to the offices and ask advice.'

'Mm. I might wait until I've got some floors before I start panicking about that sort of detail.' Anna decided to worry about it later. 'Are you OK with ladders? Would you like to come upstairs?'

'Would you call this a property ladder, then?' Chloe asked with a grin as she got to the top, aware that her information about listed buildings consent had not been welcome.

Anna regarded her for a few seconds and then smiled.

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'I suppose so. The floors are fine up here. Come and look at the view.'

'It is wonderful, isn't it? Is that what made you come to Amberford?'

'Partly. It's such a lovely area, and I wanted to buy something that was within reasonably easy reach of London.'

Chloe nodded. 'People do commute from here, although it must cost a fortune. So is this an investment? Or do you want to live here?'

Anna sighed deeply. 'I can't afford to live here, not really. I'll have to sell to pay back the mortgage and my sister. I borrowed some of the money from her.'

'Shame,' said Chloe quietly. 'I was looking forward to having you as a neighbour.'

'Well,' Anna smiled, 'you're having me for a neighbour for quite a long time. Besides, you may not stay here for ever, either.'

'No. If Mike was promoted, he wouldn't have to travel so much, but he couldn't commute from here.'

'Shall we go on up to the attic? I think I'll sleep up there once I've got the wiring done.'

Chloe started up the stairs. 'Do you know good people to do things like that? I can give you some names, if you like.'

'I hope to do as much as I can myself,' Anna replied. 'I'll have to have it checked, of course.'

'I'm very impressed. I can hardly change a lightbulb,' Chloe admitted rather ruefully. 'No, actually, I can change one, perfectly well, but Mike always says I've used the wrong wattage or something, so I leave it to him, mostly, to save the argument. I think it means I've been de-skilled. When he's away I get a bit more self-sufficient.'

Anna nodded in understanding. 'My mother was a

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widow when my sister and I were growing up. She certainly couldn't change a lightbulb. She was always getting neighbours' husbands to come and fix things for her. It made me determined to learn to do things for myself. My sister and I did loads in the Spitalfields flat.'

'But your sister's got children! How did she manage?'

'This was a few years ago. She didn't have them then.'

Chloe nodded. 'So what have you been doing in the meantime? Sorry! That sounded dreadfully rude. I'm awfully nosy. Lonely, I expect.'

Anna laughed. 'It's a perfectly valid question. I'll tell you my CV. I trained as an interior designer, couldn't get a job—'

'Is that like they have on *Changing Rooms*?'

Anna frowned. 'Not really, I'm not an interior decorator. I'm an interior *designer*. Another four years, plus some more time working in an architect's practice, and I could have been an architect.'

'So why didn't you, then?'

'Money,' said Anna bluntly. 'My mother couldn't support me and I got fed up working in bars and things while I studied. I wanted to earn real money.'

'And did you?'

Anna laughed. 'For a bit, before I got made redundant. Interior designers are the first to go, before architects, when there's any sort of slump in the building market.'

'So then what did you do?'

'I had various jobs and then my sister and I were left some money. Quite a lot of money. We decided to buy a flat together, and we did really well. We were really lucky with the timing, of course – buying at the bottom of the market and selling at the top. That makes such a difference. It's why my sister is so worried about me losing all

my money with this place. It was such a golden time for property then, and now it's not.'

Chloe nodded again. 'So your sister got married and had babies. And did you go back to doing interior design?'

'Sort of, but I was working for other people, on their projects, in between having other jobs. I was saving and looking for the right property all the time, but eventually I realised if I wanted a project, I'd have to move out of London. Too expensive otherwise.'

'You didn't feel all weak and feeble when you saw how much work needed doing?'

Anna shrugged. 'I did, a bit, but it was such a bargain. I couldn't *not* buy it, in spite of what my sister said.'

'Which was?'

'That it would have been better to have bought near her, so she could help me. She lives up in Yorkshire now, so I could have afforded something bigger than this.'

'But you chose Amberford?'

Anna couldn't decide if Chloe was digging for more information or if it was just her own guilty conscience that made her think that. Either way, it was a bit early in their friendship to confess about the good omen she felt that finding a property in Amberford was. It was such a ridiculous secret. Like her feelings for Max, which, however deep and lasting, were definitely ridiculous.

'It's such a heavenly spot,' she answered evasively.

'It is.' Chloe seemed content with that, and she moved on. 'So what else are you going to do here? How many bedrooms?'

'It's difficult to make space for more than two, however you look at it. But would you like to see the plans?'

Anna had set up her drawing board and other equipment in a corner of the attic. Next to her drawing board was a pasting table that served as a desk. There was a pile

of plans laid neatly next to her pens, geometrical aids, tracing paper: all the sundry bits and pieces of her trade. Now, she pulled off the dust sheet and revealed the plan that was on the drawing board.

Chloe came close and looked admiringly. 'Goodness, you have worked out every detail.'

'Not every detail, but the broad plan. You have to know where all your soil pipes are now, and where you want them to be. Better not to move them if you can avoid it.'

'What I don't understand,' said Chloe after staring at the plans for a while, 'is how you seem to have room for an en suite on the attic floor. Our houses must be almost identical. Have you just drawn a tiny loo?'

Anna laughed, refusing to be offended. 'No! I measured it all out on graph paper. A mistake in the plans could cause hell in a bucket later, when you come to the actual installation.'

'Where have you got the space from?'

'I've just stolen it from here and there. It's easier if you look at the space without anything in it, only on paper, of course. But it's only a shower room and loo and a space for a walk-in wardrobe. It's tiny really, though I hope it will be lovely.'

'What I wouldn't do for a shower room and loo! I hate having to go down those steep stairs in the night. I would have resorted to a potty when I was pregnant if squatting had been an option.'

'I thought people had their babies squatting these days.'

'Only when supported by lusty helpers.' Chloe shuddered at the memory. 'It's been so nice seeing it all,' she said, 'but I'd better get to the shops before it's time to pick up the boys. Do you want anything?'

'I think I'm all right at the moment. I'll have to go to town myself a bit later.'

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'Oh,' Chloe paused on her way down the ladder. 'I was going to ask you: where have you parked your car? I didn't see one up at the top.'

'I haven't got a car,' said Anna a little defensively. 'I've got a bicycle.'

'Oh my God,' said Chloe, reaching the bottom of the ladder. 'You really are mad!'

Anna understood a little of Chloe's horror a couple of hours later as she pushed her bike up the long hill from town, but she'd been managing by bike for so long, she felt she could get round the worst of the disadvantages. After all, she had explained to her sister, while fending off another barrage of objections to her project, you can pay for an awful lot of taxis with the money you'd spend on a car.

Now, all her purchases fitted neatly into her panniers. At other times, when she was buying materials, she could get them delivered. She was jolly hot by the time she finally got home, though.

As she got off her bicycle at the top of the lane, a van whizzed by and hooted. She realised it was the man from the shop and smiled. It was nice to be recognised.

A few days later, Anna had finally replaced the joists, which turned out to be a much bigger job than she'd anticipated, but had still not got her floorboards back in place. Sheets of plasterboard would have to suffice until she had time to do it. She recognised Chloe's knock on the door. She was by now a regular visitor and Anna was always glad to see her.

'Come in,' she yelled. 'I'm upstairs. Down in a minute!'

It seemed to take Chloe longer than usual to get in, but it had become her habit to bring coffee from home, and

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perhaps she'd brought biscuits, too. Anna knocked a pin delicately into the bit of skirting she was fixing to the wall, looking forward to a break and a caffeine hit.

Then there were more strange noises, voices and, eventually, a strange scrabbling sound. Anna wrinkled her brow. What was going on down there? Reluctant to leave her task unfinished, she carried on.

When she did finally negotiate the ladder, and emerged backwards into the downstairs space, as yet undefined by room names, she got a shock. Cowering in the corner, terrified, was the most beautiful dog Anna had ever seen – or at least so it seemed to her, possibly because the fear in its eyes made them huge, dark pools, standing out against the cream and brown stripes and velvet ears. It had very long legs that were waving helplessly as the dog lay on its back.

'Oh, you poor thing!' Anna moved towards it and then stopped. 'You're petrified! What are you doing here?' She turned towards Chloe and a woman dressed in layers of purple muslin and partially spun wool.

'I brought Caroline to meet you,' said Chloe, tentatively.

'Hello, Caroline,' said Anna to the woman, hoping she didn't sound as confused and unwelcoming as she felt. Why had this woman brought her extremely nervous dog with her?

'I'm not Caroline, I'm Star. Caroline's the dog. She's an ex-racing greyhound.'

Thinking that she must have got her wires crossed somehow – the woman seemed to have a dog's name, and the dog a woman's – Anna said, 'But why have you brought her? She's scared witless.'

'We were, er, hoping you'd like her,' said Star hesitantly. And then added, 'I'm going travelling.' She looked down at her hands nervously and Anna noticed that the fingernails were bitten to the quick.

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'She's lovely, I'm sure. But you can't go travelling if you've got a dog.' Anna felt rather uncomfortably as if she was missing something.

'You can't put your life on hold for a dog,' said Star, sounding as if the words may not originally have come from her. 'And she's never really settled with me. If you could have her . . . until she can be rehomed of course . . . I'd be really grateful.' She picked up the tiny bells that were attached to a piece of braid hanging from her dress and started winding them round and round her finger.

Finally, Anna realised exactly what Star meant. 'But I can't have a dog! I told you that, Chloe. Look at the place! Besides, I've never had a dog in my life before!' Giving Star a good chance to see the fact that her house wasn't fit for a human to live in, let alone a nervous dog, Anna turned to Chloe, who was now looking agonised.

'I only mentioned you in passing to Star,' Chloe said guiltily. 'She told me she was going abroad and asked – well, begged, really – if you'd have Caroline. I said it was unlikely but there doesn't seem to be any alternative.'

Not satisfied with this explanation, Anna said, 'But, Chloe, the house isn't fit for a dog! Let alone one with legs as long as that!' She couldn't quite believe that Chloe had put her in such an awkward position.

Caroline was no longer lying on her back, but was now trying to make herself as small as possible. Although she hadn't been shouting, Anna lowered her voice, feeling a bit desperate. 'You must see that I can't have her, although she is beautiful.'

She knew this last remark was a grave mistake before she'd uttered it. She sighed, and went over to the frightened dog. She crouched down, keeping well out of snapping range, in case Caroline's fear got the better of her. 'Hello, Caroline. How are you?' she said in a low voice.

She realised she was talking to the dog in exactly the same way that she talked to children, and as she talked to them in more or less the same way that she talked to adults, she felt this probably wasn't right. But not knowing any other way, she continued.

'You don't need to be frightened, you know. No one here's going to hurt you.' Anna cast a resentful glance at Star who might not have hurt Caroline, but was prepared to abandon her, and another at Chloe, for good measure.

'She is very nervous,' said Star apologetically. 'She's terrified of my partner. He does shout rather, but he says dogs have to know their place.' The braid and bells were showing signs of serious wear as Star continued to wind and unwind them. 'He did kick her once.'

Anna stifled a gasp of horror, put out her hand and very gently stroked Caroline under the chin with her finger. Caroline looked frightened, but didn't say anything. 'Darling, it's lovely to meet you, but I'm afraid I can't have you to live with me. I haven't got stairs, or a bathroom, or anything.'

'She won't care about the bathroom,' said Chloe, gaining in confidence. 'And if she did, she could always come over to our house to have baths, like you do.'

Aware she was being teased into making a bad decision, Anna ignored this. 'She *would* mind about the stairs. A dog like this would want to be near you all the time.'

'She is very clingy,' said Star. 'It's one of the things about her that annoyed my partner.'

'I would have thought that the rehoming people would check out that both partners liked the dog before they let you have it,' said Anna sniffily.

'Usually they're very strict,' explained Chloe, still somewhat abashed, 'but the person in charge of rehoming had left the area and no one else wanted to take it on.'

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'Can I look round your house?' asked Star, changing the subject. 'I love what you've done to it so far!'

Taken aback, but suppressing her irritation, Anna said, 'Help yourself. Be careful going on the ladder though, there are no stairs.'

'I can see that.' Star gathered her skirts and made her way up the ladder.

When they could hear her clumping around in her walking boots, Anna whispered to Chloe, 'She's mad! Why did she want a dog in the first place?'

Chloe shrugged. 'Lots of people want dogs.'

'Yes, but they don't have them if their houses aren't suitable or whatever! Look at you, you love greyhounds, but you haven't got one!'

'No,' Chloe conceded.

'I think she's totally irresponsible. As for her partner – he should go to prison.'

'I couldn't agree more. And you must see, she's totally unfit to have a dog.'

'So am I!'

Before Anna could say more, they heard Star making her way to the top of the ladder. 'Can I look round the garden?' she said as she climbed down. 'I want to see the view from the end of it.'

Star didn't wait for permission before going out of the front door.

'Oh, for God's sake!' Anna said to Chloe. 'The woman's completely off her tree! Honestly, Chloe—'

Chloe put up her hand. 'I know, I know, really I do, but I only mentioned your name and she fell on me. I think she was frightened the neighbours might call the RSPCA or something.'

'I think they should!'

Chloe was biting her lip. 'You're perfectly entitled to be

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