

Charlotte Nash

saving
you

Three escaped
pensioners

One single mother

A road trip to
rescue her son



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you



Book proof published in Australia and New Zealand in 2018
by Hachette Australia
(an imprint of Hachette Australia Pty Limited)
Level 17, 207 Kent Street, Sydney NSW 2000
www.hachette.com.au

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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A catalogue record for this
book is available from the
National Library of Australia

ISBN: [[to come]]

Cover design by [[cover design credit]]

Cover photographs courtesy of [[cover photography credit]]

Typeset in [[[xx]]/[lyy]] pt [[fontname]] by Bookhouse, Sydney

Printed and bound in Australia by Griffin Press, Adelaide, an Accredited ISO AS/NZS 14001:2009 Environmental Management System printer



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*For Vic, who keeps my faith in the goodness and
kindness of people's hearts.*

Chapter 1

MALLORY COOK HAD LIVED IN THE LITTLE PALE GREEN cottage since the day she'd left school, seven long years ago. She and Duncan had taken it because of the extremely low rent, and because after being rejected from several other prospects, they were rather desperate to find a place to live. It was the cottage or couch surfing, and standing at the end of the long drive, the cottage seemed the better choice.

From a distance, the place had certainly looked like a colonial postcard: all cosy beneath the trees, with a distinguished gable, a big brick chimney, and a stack of firewood in an outhouse promising comfort on cold winter nights. Up close, though, even an enthusiastic real estate agent would have had trouble ignoring the lean in the floors, the hideous mould problem, and the cracks and holes that let in all the spiders. The curtains were so thin that they lit up like ghosts in storms, and the house being located on an old avocado farm meant they were far from any potentially helpful neighbours. But these features had never bothered Mallory.

Only two things really bothered her. The first was the black-cloud storms that thundered in off the sea and collected the cottage in a full-frontal assault every few days in the summer. One of those storms had lashed the windows last night, even though it was autumn already.

The second was the fact that a year ago, Duncan had suddenly moved his fledgling company all the way to New York, leaving his fledgling family – Mallory and their five-year-old son, Harry – to manage on their own. They'd grown apart anyway, he'd said, which was news to Mallory. The shock had felt just like one of those storms, only it had taken much longer than a night to blow itself out.

Despite storms and absent husbands, Mallory woke on this particular Friday morning with a firm knowledge in her heart: today would be the best day of her life.

She danced to the radio as she pulled the limp doona up to make the bed, removing a large bear from under the covers. It belonged to Harry, and she'd taken it with her for comfort last night. But she wouldn't need it again after today. By the time midnight came, her little boy would be back across the hall, tucked in the red racing car bed they'd painted together. Duncan would be sitting on the lime green sofa, the one they'd recovered from a skip bin when they were first married. They'd laughed so much that day, delirious with the delight of moving into the cottage, even though Duncan's computer desk had to be made from planks and milk crates. Mallory crossed her fingers, deep in full-fantasy imagining: Duncan would laugh when she reminded him of the sofa's origins. Then she would tell him about her new promotion, showing him he wasn't the only one who could make it. They would talk into the late hours while Harry

slept, mending whatever it was that had gone wrong to make him move halfway across the world.

After all, the signs were good. Duncan had finally paid for Harry to visit him in New York, which must mean that the business had stabilised. The round-the-clock stress of being a newly successful CEO, which had made Duncan unavailable so often this last year, appeared to be over. The two of them were flying back today, and Duncan had said that he wanted to ‘talk’. Mallory had heard all kinds of apology and hope in his voice. They could work everything out.

Mallory held onto that thought as she shook out her blue work uniform and mixed her first instant coffee of the day. She drank it at the kitchen window, looking out on the chickens scratching about in the grass. Water drops hung like jewels on the shaggy jasmine around the window; it was always in need of a prune. The tiny kitchen, however, was unusually immaculate. The tiled benchtops wiped, all the water spots removed from the single sink, Harry’s pictures arranged to cover the rusting cracks on the fridge, and the wonky cabinet door coaxed into a straight alignment. Mallory had enjoyed the temporary calm of her boy being away, but she missed the signs of Harry being home: the half-finished bowl of Weet-Bix on the sink, the drawing pencils and paper on the bench, his favourite blue vinyl chair always pulled out. The house was too empty without him.

Mallory rinsed her cup and checked her diary, supressing the nerves that sprang from reading ‘job interview’ scrawled across one o’clock. Mallory normally rated job interviews somewhere between the spiders that lurked in the shower and the thunderstorms. And while she was tired of dealing with both of those on her own, the interview was something

she could handle. She wasn't even worried about freezing up with nerves, or launching into some awful verbal diarrhoea.

Today, everything was right with the world.

Her ancient Corolla started on the first try, and she caught every green light into work. The morning seemed full of good omens.

Her workplace, The Silky Oaks Residential Care Facility, sat on a hilltop looking down on Moreton Bay, its double-storey white walls rising from beautifully kept gardens, a stand of wild and untamed eucalypts kept at a safe distance beyond the southern boundary. Mallory waved to a gardener who was busy clearing fallen branches, no doubt casualties of the storm, and paused to appreciate the view of two white-sailed yachts out on the sparkling water. Unlike her cottage, everything close up matched the postcard beauty of that view. Silky Oaks boasted white walls, bright lights, and a gentle smell of lavender and rose petals. And if it was a little too bright and clinical for Mallory at times, the place was certainly organised, clean and efficient. It couldn't have run any other way with Mrs Crawley, Director, at the helm – the same person who Mallory would face at her job interview.

Mallory wasn't that worried. After all, it was a promotional interview. Mrs Crawley knew her. Mallory had worked at the Silky Oaks Care Facility almost as long as she'd lived in her cottage, all that time as a staff carer. She was one of the very few veterans, and had seen many other staff come and go. Now, a position had opened for an Engagement Manager, and Mallory wanted it more than anything in the world, beyond having Harry and Duncan back.

She stowed her bag in the staff room and jogged into the nearest ground-floor resident's room, humming the same

boppy pop song as she went about transferring her residents down to the breakfast tables, chatting with them about the day ahead.

‘The kindergarten class is coming at eleven,’ she told Evelyn, and Sue, and Mr Burgundy, who’d been a music teacher and still insisted on being called ‘Mr’. But his smile was the broadest, knowing the class was coming. Mallory loved those moments with her residents. It was the whole reason she did this job. She was humming again by the time she returned to help strip beds.

‘You’re in a good mood. What’s that you’re singing?’ asked Bridget in her broad Scottish accent. She was Mallory’s closest work friend, serial pusher of baked goods, and occasional font of motherly advice.

‘Just the last thing I heard on the radio this morning.’

Bridget laughed. ‘I thought you’d still be turning inside out with nerves, after the storm last night. I nearly rang you up to see you weren’t under the bed.’

‘I was fine,’ Mallory lied, glossing over the hour of clutching Harry’s bear so hard, she’d had fur under her fingernails. She checked her watch; her interview was still hours away, but her stomach was already filling with butterflies.

‘I’m sure you’ll do well,’ Bridget said, when Mallory admitted her nerves.

‘What’s the worst that can happen, right?’

Bridget shook her head. ‘Well, no, I don’t like to think like that,’ she said. ‘But no one deserves it more. Lord knows you’re braver than me. Crawley scares me witless.’



Bridget's statement had the unfortunate effect of priming Mallory to notice the intimidating side of Mrs Crawley. By the time the administrative assistant showed Mallory into Mrs Crawley's office, Mallory's stomach had a full crew of tapdancing butterflies on high alert. The office was neat and tastefully appointed, with plush red chairs, soft tan carpet, and a framed modern art print on the wall. A large window faced out into the garden with a glimpse of the water. For families and relatives, it was probably soothing and orderly. Mallory simply felt out of place.

Mrs Crawley sat with her back to the window in a dove grey suit and black-rimmed glasses. A minimally applied coral lipstick was the only brightness in her face, the skin around her mouth smooth from being a career non-smiler. The air smelled of vanilla, which normally reminded Mallory of Bridget's home baking, but today seemed the scent of foreboding. Mallory tried to sit up straight and not fidget as she waited for Mrs Crawley to finish reading a letter. She could feel her heart crashing around in her ribs, and the cramp developing between her shoulder blades. Finally, Mrs Crawley briskly signed the letter and filed it in her out-tray. She removed her glasses.

'Mallory. Well. Thank you for your interest in this role.'

'Of course,' Mallory said, her tongue so thick she had to force the words out. 'This position is just such a dream job. I was really excited to see it come up. You see, ever since I started working here I've wanted to, and I just thought, yes ...'

She trailed off, aware she was doing the verbal diarrhoea thing. Mrs Crawley was staring at her. Mallory clamped her lips shut and smiled.

After a small pause, Mrs Crawley picked up a sheaf of papers and said, ‘Yes, well, your application was certainly thorough. I think it might be useful if I talk a little bit about this position, and what we need from the applicant.’

Mallory sat forward, eager to move on. She knew every inch of Silky Oaks’ white walls and lino floors, and all about the lives of the residents on her roster. She knew the number of seconds it took to get hot water in the tap in each bathroom, and how to pound the third locker in the staff room when it stuck. At eighteen, she’d come needing a job, but Silky Oaks was now her second home. She wanted to take the next step.

‘The Engagement Manager is responsible for all the activity programs we run within Silky Oaks for all the residents, including weekly, monthly, and special events. That’s everything from craft, to film screenings, to group visits, like the community choir. It’s across both floors and four wings. We need someone who can coordinate a large number of people’s needs and resources within a strict budget, and follow through in an orderly way. The residents’ lives need routine.’

Mrs Crawley paused. So far, all this had been on the job description. Mallory took a breath. She didn’t exactly agree with everything Mrs Crawley had said, but she knew she could do this job.

‘Yes, I understand,’ she said. ‘Because I’m really very passionate about Silky Oaks and the people who live here. I’ve loved the changes I’ve helped make and I think I can continue to do that as the Engagement Manager.’

‘Good, good, that’s all good. You have a lot of enthusiasm.’ Mrs Crawley gave Mallory a smile, but it was a

careful smile, one that said she didn't quite mean the praise she was offering. Mallory's stomach dipped.

'I have more ideas than what I put in my application,' Mallory rushed on, needing Mrs Crawley to believe she was serious. 'I've managed a tight budget, and I have good relationships with all the elders.'

'We prefer "resident" here,' Mrs Crawley corrected.

'Of course. Sorry. I mean, I'm good with people.'

Mallory wasn't quite sure that Mrs Crawley fell into the group of people she was good with. She tried a warm smile, which was usually a good fall-back move. Mrs Crawley lifted the bridge of her glasses and rubbed at her nose, as if all this smiling had given her allergies.

'Tell me more about your ideas,' she said as she replaced the glasses.

'Well,' Mallory began, 'I know that many residents are lonely. That was one of the reasons I proposed the kindergarten class.'

Lonely was sometimes an understatement. It happened so often that families began by visiting regularly, but then life took over and those visits dropped away, leaving mothers and fathers and grandparents separated from the people who defined their life. It broke Mallory's heart. A year ago, in the wake of Duncan's departure, she'd approached Harry's kindergarten teacher, and proposed that the class visit Silky Oaks each week. She thought it would be easy, since the kindergarten was just over the hill and behind the trees from Silky Oaks: the very reason Mallory had chosen it. The weeks of negotiations that followed left Mallory sleepless and jittery. But while weekly visits had to become fortnightly, and outdoor activities abandoned for story time

in the lounge, the program was still an unqualified hit. The residents loved it, and so did the children. The residents told fascinating stories, and the children were delightfully spontaneous and unpredictable.

‘But I want to take the idea further. The class can’t be here every day, and I think many of the eld— residents would love that connection and companionship more of the time.’

‘So you’re proposing pets.’

Mallory paused, seeing the twitch at the corner of Mrs Crawley’s mouth. ‘It’s been done in some other care facilities, and they have seen these amazing increases in happiness and even less medication. I really think—’

‘Yes, I see.’ Mrs Crawley clasped her hands together on her desk. ‘The thing is, Mallory, this is a management position. And managers have many considerations to make. The kindergarten has been an interesting pilot program, but it has come at a price, one that I’m not sure you’ve quite understood.’

Mallory sat absolutely still, feeling small and vulnerable, as though she’d landed in the principal’s office. She knew Silky Oaks hadn’t been wild about the class visits at first, but she’d thought the success had swept those views away.

‘The administrative load is very high. All the residents had to have Blue Cards. We had to check insurance and liability, and then there was the guinea pig incident.’

Even under pressure, Mallory had to purse her lips to avoid laughing, even under Mrs Crawley’s scrutiny. One of the children had smuggled a guinea pig into Silky Oaks on one of their first visits. Bridget had been the one who discovered three children introducing the animal to Mr Burgundy. The children had been teaching Mr Burgundy about the guinea

pig, and Mr Burgundy had been suggesting composer-themed names, like Mozart and Brahms, and humming rousing bars from symphony scores, which fascinated the children.

Mallory had been shown the whole thing on the security tape, and she had been delighted because Mr Burgundy was often so quiet. Just watching him open up over the tiny furry visitor had prompted her thinking about pets to start with. Evidently, Mrs Crawley had neither been fascinated nor delighted.

‘I know we had a few problems,’ Mallory said carefully. ‘But we’ll learn from that. And anything that improves the lives of the residents has to be a good thing. Craft is great, but it can’t give you that sense that someone else understands you and loves you. I think having animals here could do such amazing things. Even if it was chickens – they could be outside. And a garden – then we could have eggs and food for cooking, really involve everyone in our community. Of course, I’ll make a proper plan with all the research supporting it.’ She rushed out the last sentence, aware her earnest words were failing to move Mrs Crawley.

‘I’m sure you would.’ Mrs Crawley gave her another, not unkind smile. ‘But that’s not the only issue. In a management position, the hours are more regular, but longer. The work schedule can be tough if you don’t have much . . . family support to share the load.’

So, Mrs Crawley really *did* know everything.

‘My husband’s just been in New York while his business was setting up,’ Mallory said, tweaking the truth. ‘He’s coming back. Today, in fact.’

‘Really? I see.’

A long pause settled, during which the automatic scent dispenser on the wall puffed out a fresh shot of vanilla. Mallory suppressed a sneeze, which nearly turned into tears. It dawned on her that this promotion was not only *not* going to be hers, but that she had probably never been a serious contender from the start.

‘Look, Mallory, I will be honest with you. You’re a hard worker, and that’s something I value. But you’re young. Most of the people we interview for this position have university qualifications. I’d like to see you gain some more experience, perhaps we could even help with some courses, and then apply again in another couple of years. When you have a much better grasp of the role. All right?’

Mrs Crawley squared the pages and slotted them into her out-tray.

And that was the end of Mallory’s first hope.



Bridget found Mallory splashing water on her blotched face in the staff locker room.

‘I take it that didn’t go well,’ Bridget said. Then, when Mallory turned to face her, ‘Lord above! What on earth did she say? You look like you’ve been crying all morning.’

Mallory pressed the damp towel to her cheeks. ‘I just blush like this. Mum used to think I’d been sunburned. I was hoping to look less fluorescent before I go back out there.’ She sighed. ‘And no. She’s looking for someone older, and more . . . managerial, I suppose. But she did say she liked my enthusiasm,’ Mallory said, trying to find a way to lessen the

bruising on her hopes. She hung the towel. ‘Do you think she might change her mind, if they don’t find another candidate?’

Bridget popped an eyebrow. ‘I suppose there’s chilly nights in hell,’ she said.

Mallory winced, still wounded. Not just because she really hadn’t been in the running for the job, but that her ideas wouldn’t find a ready welcome. How could she keep working here if she couldn’t promise better days ahead for her residents? She pulled open her locker, where a series of Harry photos lined the door.

‘I’m so sorry, Mal,’ Bridget was saying. ‘I know how much you wanted this, and you’d have been wonderful. I have no doubts.’

‘At least Harry’s coming back tonight,’ Mallory said, staring at the photo of him holding his bantam chicken in the cottage’s backyard, eyes scrunched: his standard response to being asked to smile. She touched the photo, wishing her love to him.

‘Wait a minute.’

‘Mmm?’ Mallory turned to find Bridget with her hands on her ample hips, peering at Mallory’s locker. Bridget pointed a finger.

‘What is that?’

Mallory knew exactly what Bridget had seen. The dress was hardly unnoticeable. Blood red, it was covered in delicate embroidered gold flowers. Mallory had worn it to her senior formal, her first date with Duncan. She’d been seventeen, and it still fit. Duncan had said he loved it, loved the way she’d worn the bold colour and short skirt among a crowd of slinky black floor-length numbers. Mallory had kept it in plastic in the back of her cupboard ever since.

She shrugged. 'I'm going straight to the airport after work. I wanted to get changed.'

'Into that?'

'I wanted to look nice,' Mallory said, hoping nonchalance would fool Bridget's Scottish intuition. That it wouldn't be obvious that Mallory was only wearing the dress because of Duncan.

Bridget heaved a sigh and gave Mallory a kind pat on her shoulder. 'Please tell me you're not doing what I think you're doing. You're not thinking of taking him back?'

Mallory closed the locker. 'He wants to talk. I have to give him that,' she said, defensively, trying to suppress the hopes she had of far more than *just talking*.

'Do you really think that's a good idea? I'm not judging, mind. I just care about you. I don't want to see you so hurt again.'

'He's still my husband, and Harry's father,' Mallory said. 'Here, look.'

Mallory pulled a letter out of her pocket. It had arrived two days ago and was already creased from handling. Bridget unfolded the letter, full of Harry's large, childish letters, and a stick-figure drawing with three figures labelled with 'Mum', 'Dad' and 'me'. Next was a printed photo: Duncan and Harry together, identical grins on their faces, the same little ruffle at the end of their left eyebrows, holding a homemade sign that read, 'Wish You Were Here'. The New York Aquarium was behind them.

Bridget sighed, and slipped Mallory's justifications of love and forgiveness back into the envelope. 'I suppose,' she said doubtfully.

‘And his company is doing really well, he says. It wouldn’t be like before.’

‘You mean, like when you were struggling to feed all three of you while he sat at home tinkering with his computer? What would you do, move to New York?’

Mallory hesitated. She hadn’t even thought about the details. All she’d wanted was time to talk with Duncan, without all the pressures that had been around them a year ago, when his company was just taking off. She was certain that if they could just spend some time together, they could work it out. She didn’t like Bridget’s doubt.

‘We haven’t worked out any details,’ she said. ‘But I don’t want to be that person who couldn’t give him another chance. I know you think he bummed off me until he didn’t need me anymore, but it wasn’t that simple. He was under such pressure. Look at how many people here don’t have their families anymore, Bridge. I want mine back.’

Bridget sighed. ‘Aye, I understand, that. Good luck to you, then. And you’d better wish me luck, too. One of the ladies I’m taking down to the lunch room next took a swing at me last time. I think she didn’t like my jokes.’

‘Good luck,’ Mallory called, sneaking another look at the photos in her locker before she headed back to work.

Once lunch was over and her residents resettled in their room for an afternoon rest, Mallory was rostered to cleaning duty in the south wing, a tidiness and cleanliness check of the family lounge, computer room, and the small TV room. Mallory moved through the lounge, straightening chairs, re-sticking BluTac on the Easter drawings the children had made on their last visit, and trying not to dwell on the lost promotion. She listened to the news headlines while

she changed the bins in the TV room: Trump had tweeted something outrageous again, a volcano somewhere in the Pacific north-west was threatening to erupt, a footballer had won some kind of medal. She shut off the TV.

In the computer room, she tucked the chair into the desk, turned off the monitor and collected a page left in the printer tray. She was on her way to the paper bin when she noticed it was an airline itinerary.

Brisbane to Los Angeles, then Los Angeles to Nashville, it said. That was a big trip. She knew many of the people who lived at Silky Oaks, but she didn't recognise the name at the top: Ernest Flint.

'Is Ernest Flint in this wing?' she asked the nurse who was eating lunch at the desk across the hall. 'I think he might have left something in the computer room.'

The woman made a face. 'Ernie hasn't used a computer in his life. Jock's the only one who's been in there today. Room twenty-six on the second floor.'

Mallory found the door to room twenty-six open, and immediately glimpsed a resident with a difference. The room might have held the same furniture as all the others – the king single bed on one wall made-up in a plain blue quilt, a desk under the window. But the opposite long wall had been painted a deep navy blue, and supported a huge open-backed white bookshelf, crammed with books and jam jars filled with miniature brushes. Hand-painted military plane and helicopter models hung from the ceiling on fishing line. Jock himself sat at the desk, ringed with neat piles of logic problem books, his pencil poised above a crossword. He was short and wiry, and wearing a worn green fishing

hat covered in badges. Under the back, Mallory glimpsed short grey hair.

Mallory knocked, and the eyes that swung around were bright blue and wary.

‘Hello,’ she said. ‘We haven’t met. I’m Mallory and I work over in the north wings. I found a print-out in the computer room and wondered if it was yours?’

She held it out. Jock slowly pushed his chair back.

‘Oh, uh, okay,’ he said, taking the paper and frowning at it. The badge at the centre front of his hat was from the Stockman’s Hall of Fame. Mallory tried not to stare at the others, or to try to count how many there were.

‘Thank you,’ he said quickly, folding the paper in half.

‘Do you know Ernest Flint?’

‘He’s just down the hall, but he doesn’t know how to work the computer.’ He paused. ‘I think he’s allergic.’

Mallory laughed. ‘I’m just glad to see someone’s using the computer room. We tried to organise a course last year but there was some funding problem. And I always thought it shouldn’t be locked, but they’re concerned about theft or something.’

Jock’s expression warmed. ‘Sounds like standard bureaucracy. Though maybe it’s my collection has them worried?’

He gestured at a small set of movie cases on the shelf, where *Ocean’s Eleven*, *The Italian Job*, *The Thomas Crown Affair*, *The Bank Job*, and *3000 Miles to Graceland* poked out their spines.

‘Wow,’ Mallory said, with a laugh. ‘I’m seeing a trend there. Like a good heist?’

‘Don’t worry. Not planning anything.’

Mallory straightened. ‘I won’t tell anyone. Don’t you have a great view up here,’ she said, catching a glimpse through his window. He had one of the north-east windows that faced the ocean, a bright expanse of cobalt blue framed in gum trees. Below, the gardeners were still working on the fallen branches.

‘It’s not bad, is it?’ he said. ‘The storms are spectacular. And I can see the sun come up over the water.’ Jock blew out an audible breath. To Mallory, he seemed a little shy, and was more comfortable now she wasn’t facing him.

‘You ever paint it?’ she asked, nodding towards the paints on the bookcase, and choosing not to think about storms.

‘Oh, no, just the models,’ he said. ‘You know, I’ve seen you around downstairs, when the kids visit.’

Mallory brightened. ‘Have you? I’m sorry if I haven’t said hello. I’m always running around making sure no one is missing, and no stray guinea pigs, that sort of thing. I’ll try to do better today.’ She gave him an encouraging smile.

‘All right, then.’

Mallory looked around. ‘This room is really nice. How did you get the changes past the board?’

Jock gave her a quick smile. ‘You know the phrase, “better to ask forgiveness than permission”?’

‘I see,’ Mallory said, nodding and smiling. She admired a touch of subversion. ‘You know, these models are very good. Would you ever be interested in teaching a class—’ She broke off, and took a breath, remembering that she wasn’t going to be the Engagement Manager. ‘Well, anyway, my son’s very interested in these kind of models, though mostly trains. He comes in sometimes when the babysitter drops him off here

at the end of my shift. Would it be all right if we dropped by sometime? Maybe you could give him a few pointers.'

Jock smiled. 'Anytime.'

By the time Mallory left Jock's room, she'd completely forgotten about that piece of paper.

Chapter 2

MALLORY ARRIVED TWENTY MINUTES EARLY TO THE airport, jangling with excitement. She smoothed her hair in the Corolla's rear-view mirror. Was the dress too much? Too late now if it was. She had to force her wobbly knees to carry her all the way to the terminal, changing the handmade welcome poster between hands so that her clammy fingers wouldn't warp the cardboard.

She camped out by the arrivals rail, imagining Harry flying through the door. She would catch him up in an endless hug and press the softness of his hair against her cheek. In her mind, she went over and over what she would say to Duncan, the apologies she'd offer for any part she'd played in him leaving. Two weeks before, Duncan's timetable had been so tight, they'd not even had time for a coffee in the airport café.

'I'm sorry it's so tight, Mal,' he'd said then, and he really had looked sorry, and tired too, in his beaten jeans and polo shirt at the end of a seventeen-hour journey. No one would

have known he was the CEO of a hot software company he'd built from scratch. 'And we need to talk about everything. Can we do that in two weeks?' He'd given her an uncertain smile, the same one he always used when he wasn't sure of his reception. She'd agreed, nearly breathless with possibilities and hope. She'd known then that he wanted them to try again.

So Mallory was ready to talk, to be calm and mature, and not to repeat the questions of the last year that had so often gone unanswered. Impatiently, she watched a previous flight's passengers dribbling out of customs, searching for their loved ones in the crowd. A few people strode out towards the taxi rank, dragging suitcases alone, and Mallory could only feel sad for them.

Time dragged on, and the crowd thinned. Mallory paced, down to the end of the terminal and back. Oh, why did she have to be early? Waiting was just awful. Finally, the board said the flight had landed. She tried to do the maths in her head. How long would customs take? Half an hour at most, perhaps?

The first passengers appeared after twenty-five minutes. Mallory pushed her way back to the rail, bouncing on her feet with the 'Welcome Back Harry and Duncan' sign ready. She measured each shadow through the frosted glass wall, hope surging with every adult-child pair. After an hour, when she was the only one still waiting, Mallory dropped the sign. Had she made some mistake?

She checked the flight number again. The airline. Maybe they were simply stuck in customs. Oh no, had Harry brought in something he shouldn't have? Or worse, had they missed the flight? Mallory groaned at the idea. She couldn't bear having to go home alone again and come back later. But

surely Duncan would have let her know? They must just be held up in customs.

The woman behind the airline's enquiry counter was sympathetic but firm. 'I'm sorry, I can't give out any information about passengers. Privacy, you understand.'

'But it's my son, and he's only five. I only wanted to know if they were still in customs.'

The woman's expression momentarily softened. 'He's travelling alone?'

'No . . . with my husband. I'm supposed to pick them both up.'

The woman shook her head. All that she could confirm was that, yes, the plane had landed, and it was the same one as the flight information Mallory had.

Mallory backed away, dejected. How much longer should she wait? The airline counter had told her passengers couldn't take calls in customs, but she called Duncan's mobile anyway. The call went straight to voicemail. Of course. Slightly encouraged, she waited through another half-hour. But when a new flight was disgorging its passengers, desperation started setting in and Mallory tried Duncan's mobile four more times. She scrolled through her phone for the New York number. Duncan had a housekeeper called Maria; maybe she could confirm whether they had made the flight.

The line only rang once before it picked up. 'Hello?' Mallory's relief changed to confusion. 'Who is this?' The man insisted, his voice thick with sleep. 'Hello?'

Mallory took a quick breath. 'It's Mallory,' she managed. 'Duncan, it's Mal.'

In the long pause that followed, Mallory heard sheets rustling. She imagined him sitting up in bed and rubbing his eyes. ‘Mal. It’s four in the morning,’ he said.

‘Did you miss the flight? I’m at the airport.’

‘Ah, shit,’ he said, as though he’d just forgotten an appointment at the dentist. ‘I meant to call you. But then we had this meeting with the VC guys and things were intense for a few days. I forgot.’

‘You forgot?’ Bright streaks of annoyance and sadness and relief shot through Mallory’s heart, forming a muddy and indecipherable emotion. ‘Duncan, I was so worried! I didn’t know where you were.’

‘We’re right here.’ He had a tone now, as though she was being melodramatic. ‘But I did mean to call you. Harry’s staying here, Mal.’

‘What?’ Mallory tried to grasp what he was saying. ‘Does he want to stay longer?’

The other end of the line muffled, but she could still hear Duncan’s footsteps, the sound of a door catch opening and closing. Then the creaking of a leather chair. He must have closed himself in his office.

Duncan let out a sigh. ‘Please believe that I didn’t want to do this on the phone, but I don’t think I can possibly get away for a while now. I think it’s better for everyone if we keep things as they are right now. Harry’s happy. And you’ll have an easier time, too.’

‘What are you talking about?’ she asked. ‘Harry’s got school on Monday.’

‘You’re not listening, Mal,’ he said, very calm, very reasonable. ‘I’m saying he has a school here. We already talked about this possibility.’

Mallory felt the skin between her eyebrows crease together. 'When did we talk about it?'

'At the café, at the airport, two weeks ago. When I asked about Harry living in New York. You said you'd be open to it.'

'I never said that . . .' she began, but suddenly, she really couldn't remember what she'd said two weeks ago. She'd been so busy thinking about the possibilities with Duncan, of the three of them being a family again, she hadn't even finished her coffee. Had she given him the idea that he could do this? Had she misinterpreted his words as a romantic gesture, thinking he meant the two of them should try again, when really he meant something else?

'I never meant that he would just stay there now,' she said, as a wave of nauseating panic hit. 'He's supposed to come home.'

'That's not what you said, Mal,' he said, with an exasperated sigh. 'Look, I understand this isn't the best way of doing things. But I really do have it all sorted out. Harry loves it here. He can go to an amazing school just down a few blocks from the office. He's already made some friends this last fortnight. He can have a home here that he can only dream about in Australia. Opportunities. We talked about this. He won't have to grow up in such a tiny place, and it will be easier for you too. Of course, I want you to be free to call anytime, visit anytime you like. But him staying here is best for everyone.'

Mallory's back met the glass wall of the terminal with a thud. She pressed a single shaking hand to her forehead. What was he talking about? He was the one who'd left her and Harry for his company's big chance in New York. He

was the one who'd said their lives had moved apart. She couldn't fathom what had happened.

'Let me talk to Harry,' she said in a rush. 'Please.'

'He's asleep, Mal.'

She had the awful sense of finality, that Duncan was about to close the shutter on this conversation without any resolution. 'He gets up early. Please. He'll be awake. I just need to hear his voice.'

'He's only just adjusted to the time zone,' Duncan said, firm. 'Now, as I said, you feel free to call anytime you like. He loves seeing you on Skype. We'll need to iron out the small details. We will. But that will have to be later. I've got an early meeting. Take care, Mal.'

With that, the line clicked. Mallory re-dialled, again and again, and heard the engaged signal.

She lowered her phone in cold, stomach-sinking disbelief. A few people milled past with trolleys and bags, oblivious to the gulf of empty space Mallory felt. Her ridiculous dreams of winning Duncan back lay like shredded paper at her feet. It had all been a fantasy, like the faint lingering trace of Harry's shampooed hair she could almost smell in the air. The far-off whine of a vacuum sounded just like the anguished wail that came from her own throat.

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