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Winds of Change

ANNA JACOBS

Allison & Busby Limited
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Chapter One

Australia

Miranda Fox had the dream again that night. She dreamt of freedom to go where she wished, and strode off towards the horizon in the rosy light of dawn to meet the daughter she'd given away at birth. She held her close – a young woman now, not a baby. Where had all those years gone? As always her daughter's face was indistinct, but she too had wavy ash-brown hair and wasn't tall.

Joy and energy pulsed through Miranda and she laughed aloud for sheer happiness. Then her half-brother Sebastian intruded on her dream, blocking her way, looking at her scornfully – as usual. The feeling of joy faded and the shackles of duty gripped her so tightly that when her daughter slipped from her grasp and walked away into the

mist, even in a dream she could only watch sadly.

Then Sebastian grabbed her arm, dragged her back in spite of her struggles and she became Minnie again, because her family insisted on shortening her name.

Only her mother had ever used her full name, but her mother had died forty-two years ago when she was five. Her father had found another wife within six months, making his third marriage and creating his third child – to his disappointment another daughter.

But Regina's mother left him after five years, not daring to take her daughter with her because Judge James Fox was a powerful man.

From then on, he had eschewed women and had nothing good to say about them. He boasted that he'd brought up his three children on his own, with the help of a series of housekeepers, and had created a son and heir anyone would be proud of. He never expressed pride in his two daughters.

Miranda woke suddenly, staring round the bedroom for a moment, feeling as if she was in an alien place. She'd slept later than usual. What had woken her? She sighed as she realised it was her father calling for help in getting to the commode chair next to his bed. He'd turned ninety-four two days ago and was as cantankerous as they came. Someone had to take care of him and Sebastian had made sure it was her.

What kept her going was her father's promise that after he died she'd be looked after and would be a woman of 'independent means'. It wouldn't make up for all the tedious, lost years, but it'd help her enjoy the rest of her life. And he never broke his promises.

He hadn't always been this bad-tempered. She remembered another father, intelligent and quite good company as long as things went his way. But she'd lost that man during the past year or two and a querulous stranger had taken his place, a stranger who didn't always remember things clearly.

'I'm ready to die,' he grumbled as she helped him. 'What's it coming to when my daughter has to pull my trousers up?'

'I'm happy to help you.'

'It's still not right.'

No, she thought. Her whole life wasn't right. What he and her brother had done to her wasn't right or fair. But you couldn't change the past.

Her days had now blurred into a round of small tasks, small thoughts and even smaller hopes. Besides, she knew her father would have gone mad in a nursing home – and driven everyone else mad, too. She'd been locked away once herself and wouldn't put anyone else in that terrible situation. So she waited to be released from this duty with as much patience as she could summon up.

Mid-morning she caught sight of herself in the hall mirror and grimaced. Her hair was scraped

back into a tangled clump, the grey streaks at her temples showing all too clearly. Her expression was grim and she looked older than her years. She tried to smile and when she failed, turned away from that unflattering reflection.

Her father spent the morning in his sitting room, which had once been the spare bedroom. When she peeped in, he was staring into space, which wasn't like him. 'Are you all right, Father?'

'Of course I'm all right. Stop fussing. Can a man not have a peaceful think in his own home?'

Just before one o'clock, he moved slowly along the corridor, leaning on his Zimmer frame, his breath coming in gasps with the effort. But he refused to let her take him in a tray and would not use a wheelchair, let alone contemplate one of the little motorised vehicles that would allow him to go outside again.

Five minutes after he'd taken his place, Miranda brought in the quiche she'd made for lunch.

He was drumming his fingers impatiently. 'You're late. You know I like to eat at one sharp.'

She knew better than to argue that five minutes made little difference. He set a great store by what he called maintaining standards. 'The food's here now. Quiche. Your favourite.'

Before she could even set it down, he pressed one hand to his chest, tried to speak and leant sideways, falling slowly out of his chair.

She dumped the tray on the table, but before she could get round to catch him, he'd fallen to the floor.

He didn't cry out as he hit the carpet or move from the twisted, awkward position.

She stood stock still for a moment, her breath catching in her throat, then knelt to feel for the pulse in his neck. Was he . . . could he be . . . ?

No pulse. No life in his eyes.

For a moment she could only stare at him in shock. Then she reached out to close the staring eyes.

It was time.

She didn't feel sad or weep. Her father had had a long life, dominating the whole family until a couple of years ago, when Sebastian, also a lawyer, had taken on that role.

No, her main emotion was relief, huge waves of it washing over her.

She was free at last!

Oh, she had so many plans, so much lost time to make up for. Her father had promised to leave her enough to buy a home of her own with sufficient left to invest and live on. She wasn't going to rush into anything but would take time to explore the possibilities for an interesting and fulfilling life.

She kept telling herself forty-seven was the new thirty-seven, but she didn't really believe that. She felt nearer to fifty-seven.

Then guilt crept in and her moment of euphoria

vanished. How could she think like that? For all his faults, he was her father. ‘Goodbye,’ she said softly and went to phone her half-brother at his rooms. ‘Sebastian? It’s Father. He’s just died, I’m afraid.’

‘What? Are you sure?’

‘Of course I am.’

‘Don’t touch anything. I’ll come round at once. Oh, hell, I can’t! I’ve got an important client coming in ten minutes, only time I could fit her in. Look, I’ll be round in an hour, hour and a half max. Don’t touch anything.’

‘Shall I call the doctor?’

‘No! Leave everything to me.’

She put the phone down and went to change her clothes. A rose-coloured top didn’t feel right on such a day. Her father had hated to see her in bright colours anyway, muttering comments like ‘Mutton dressed as lamb’.

When she was more sombrely clad, she hesitated in the doorway of her father’s bedroom. She’d been itching to clear it out for years. The drawers and shelves were crammed with decades of rubbish and old clothes because he would never throw anything away from his magpie hoard.

The top drawer was slightly open. Her father usually kept that particular drawer locked. She went to shut it, but saw something beneath the papers: a box. She recognised it at once. Her mother’s jewellery box. Why was it here? Her father had told

her years ago that he'd put it in the bank for safety, because some of the pieces were quite valuable.

The jewellery was hers, left to her by her mother, and was nothing to do with her half-brother and sister. She clutched the box to her chest, happy to see it again.

Guilt kicked in once more. He wasn't even cold and she was going through his things.

But the box and its contents *were* hers. She'd have claimed them years ago if her father hadn't made such a fuss about looking after them for her. And anyway, what chance had she ever had to wear expensive jewellery? None, that's what. She'd always been shy, had dated a few guys in her teens, had had that one disastrous relationship and never had the chance to go out with anyone else since.

Feeling like a thief, she took the box into her bedroom and went through it. Two of the most valuable pieces were missing. Where could they be? She went back to check her father's drawers, but the matching diamond brooch and necklace weren't there.

She hesitated, unable to face going through the whole room. If the jewellery was there, they'd find it when they cleared out her father's things. She'd better put the box away safely. Where? In the end, she put it into her suitcase on top of the wardrobe, locking the case carefully and putting the key in her purse. Once he found out two pieces were missing,

Sebastian would want to whisk the rest of the jewellery away for safe keeping but she wouldn't let him. From now on, she intended to look after her own life and possessions.

She sighed, not looking forward to Sebastian arriving. He was so like their father, both of them chauvinists, and while there was some excuse for a ninety-four-year-old man having that attitude, there was no excuse for a man of fifty-two, who'd been born in an era of women's liberation and should know better. Perhaps being a lawyer had made him so conservative, or perhaps it was his elderly father's influence, or maybe he'd simply been born that way. How his wife put up with him, she didn't understand, because Dorothy was an intelligent woman.

She heard a car draw up outside and hurried to open the front door to let her brother in.

'Where's Father?'

'In here.' She led the way into the dining room.

Sebastian knelt beside the body. 'Must have been a heart attack. Leave everything to me.'

While he made the necessary phone calls, Miranda wandered along to her bedroom and stared out of the window. It was a relief when the undertaker removed the body. Sebastian said he'd arrange the funeral and she nodded as she saw him out. He stopped halfway down the path to call, 'Don't touch anything, Minnie! I'll be

round this evening to start on Father's papers.'

Then she was on her own. How long since she'd had time to herself? Too long.

With a tired sigh, she went to sit in an armchair and spent a lazy couple of hours with the latest book by her favourite author. No interruptions. No sharp rapping of a walking stick on the floor.

Bliss.

In the afternoon she did some gardening, another favourite pastime.

The phone rang at six. Sebastian.

'I can't come round tonight, after all. Dorothy and I have a dinner engagement that's too important to cancel. Remember what I said. Don't touch anything.'

What did he think she'd do to her father's papers? She knew roughly how things had been left and that was all that mattered. Anyway, she didn't want to go into her father's bedroom again. Every time she passed the door, she kept expecting him to call out, wanting something.

She poured herself a glass of wine, found her library book and settled down for another quiet read. She didn't even want to switch on the TV. What she craved was peace and silence.

In England, Nikki Fox leant against the kitchen door frame, staring defiantly at her mother. 'All right, so I'm pregnant. I wasn't going to tell you yet.'

For a moment the silence seemed to hum with her anger, then Regina snapped, ‘You stupid girl! Didn’t I teach you better than that? Couldn’t you at least have gone on the pill?’

‘I *was* on the pill. But I forgot to take the tablets with me when I went for that weekend in Brighton. I didn’t think a couple of days without would matter.’

Her mother sank on to the bed, groaning. ‘We’ll have to arrange the abortion quickly. You can’t be more than six weeks gone, so it’ll be a very minor procedure.’

Nikki stared down at her feet in the fluffy pink slippers. ‘I’m not sure I want to get rid of the baby.’

Another heavy silence while her mother looked at her incredulously.

‘Let’s get one thing straight. I’m not having a baby here. I’ve done my share of child-raising with you. Without any help from your father I’ve built a career for myself – and got a life. I’m not going back to sleepless nights and a baby screaming its head off.’

Nikki swallowed hard. She’d guessed her mother would react like this, which was why she’d not said anything.

‘Who’s the baby’s father? Tim Whatsamajig?’

Nikki shrugged. She did a lot of shrugging when her mother got a bee in her bonnet about something, because whatever she said was usually

wrong. She wasn't sure about having an abortion, but she was very sure she didn't want to get married, not at eighteen.

'I can't believe you've got yourself into this.'

She tried to think of an answer to that but couldn't. She'd asked herself the same question again and again.

'We'll arrange for you to have an abortion. It's the only sensible thing to do. You're an intelligent girl, sure to get into university, with your whole life ahead of you. You did brilliantly in your AS grades, and you're right on course for top A levels. There'll be plenty of time to have children later when you meet someone who—'

'Mum, I just can't get my head around the idea of killing a baby.'

'It's not a baby yet; it's a tiny blob.'

'It's a baby. Its heart is beating already. I looked it up on the Internet.' She glanced at her watch in relief. 'I've got to go to work now. I need to earn as much money as I can.' Thank heavens for fast food outlets! She might not enjoy the job, but the money did give her some independence. At the moment she was saving as much of her wages as she could . . . just in case.

'I'll look into what we need to do,' her mother promised. 'You'd better get off to work. You don't want to lose your job.'

Nikki left the house without another word. She

knew she wouldn't change her mother's mind. She never had before, so why should she succeed now?

Would she change her own mind?

The phone rang and Regina hesitated before picking it up, not feeling like chatting to anyone. Then she looked at the caller ID. Her brother. What did he want? He never called just to chat. 'Hi, Sebastian.'

'It's Father. He died yesterday. I didn't ring you straight away because, given the time difference between Australia and England, you'd have been in bed.'

'Well, it's not unexpected at his age. How did it happen?'

'He dropped dead at lunchtime. His heart's been failing for a while. Luckily, he'd seen the doctor recently, so they don't need to do a post-mortem. I need to know if you're coming to the funeral.'

She hesitated, then sighed. She'd never forgive herself if she didn't attend. Bad enough that she hadn't seen her father for several years and had left his care to poor Minnie, who had definitely not had a good life. Unthinkable to miss the funeral.

'Yes, of course I'm coming.'

'You can stay with us, if you like.'

She hesitated. Sebastian wasn't a comfortable person to live with. He seemed to think that she was as meek as his wife and barked orders at her. 'I'll probably split my time between you and Minnie,

though that rambling old house of Dad's gives me the creeps. Is it still full of rubbish?'

'Worse than ever. He was getting very strange; Alzheimer's starting, the doctor thought.'

'What about the will? How are things left?'

'I'll tell you when you get here.'

'What's the big secret?'

'Nothing you need to be upset about. You'll get your share.' She put the phone down, chewing her thumb. Not a good time to be nipping off to Australia. But still, if Nikki was only six weeks gone, there was still plenty of time to sort out an abortion after she got back. She'd make it a quick trip, just a week or so.

She went online and booked herself a seat to Perth, then began to pack.

The following day, which was a Saturday, Sebastian and his wife arrived while Miranda was having her breakfast and walked straight in without even knocking. She pushed her plate aside, losing her appetite completely at the sight of him.

'I rang Regina,' he said by way of a greeting. 'She's coming to the funeral.'

'Oh, good. I'll get a room ready for her.'

'No need. She's staying with us.'

'But—'

'Finish your breakfast. I'll start going through the things in Father's bedroom and sitting room.'

Dorothy will do the living room. We'll leave the kitchen till later.'

Did he think there were papers or valuables in the kitchen? she wondered. 'I've nearly finished eating. I'll come and help you.'

'It's not your job. I'm the executor as well as the main beneficiary, so it's up to me to make all the decisions about what's thrown out.'

'What if I want to keep something?'

He looked round scornfully. 'Most of this stuff's rubbish, but you can go through the discard piles afterwards, if you must. Anything valuable will be considered part of the estate, however.'

Her appetite gone completely, Miranda scraped the rest of her scrambled eggs into the rubbish bin as she listened to the sound of his heavy footsteps. In the living room Dorothy was opening and shutting cupboards and drawers. She and Sebastian were avid collectors of antiques and had been dying to get their hands on this house and its more valuable contents for years.

A door squeaked. Miranda recognised that sound and hurried along to her bedroom. Inside she found Sebastian opening a drawer.

'What on earth are you doing in here? This is *my* room!'

'I'm just looking at this chest of drawers.' He made as if to pull the drawer right out and she prevented him.

‘I don’t appreciate having you go through my things.’

‘I need to check that it’s a genuine antique. We’ll have to catalogue all the furniture. This is about 1820, I should think. The wood’s in excellent condition, mahogany, and that bow front is very elegant. I reckon it’ll go for a couple of thousand pounds.’

She shoved the drawer back into its slot. ‘No, it won’t. The furniture in here is mine, so are quite a few of the other good pieces in the house. You were working on that project over in Sydney at the time I got them and it was before you got interested in antiques.’

‘I didn’t think they were particularly valuable.’ He sounded as if he disliked the thought.

‘My mother’s aunt said they were nice pieces, but I like them because they’re attractive not because they’re valuable.’

‘Your great-aunt wasn’t wealthy and, anyway, I’m pretty sure I remember *this* chest of drawers from a long time back. Can you prove that it’s yours?’

She stared at him open-mouthed. Did he really think she’d lie about this? The days of him browbeating her into doing what he wanted were over, and he wasn’t getting his hands on her things. ‘I can easily prove it. I still have her will *and* her lawyer’s letter to me *and* a list of what she left me.’

He scowled at her as he looked round. 'Does that include everything in this room?'

'All except my mattress. That was new last year. Father did pay for that, so if you want it . . .' She went and tugged at a corner of it as if to pull it off the bed.

'Don't be stupid, Minnie. I hope you're not getting silly again.'

He looked at her smugly and she felt herself shrivel at the implications of that. He wouldn't. Surely he wouldn't do that again! 'I'm telling you the simple truth.'

'Well, I shall want to see your aunt's lawyer's letter. We have to do things properly.'

She recovered enough to say, 'Good. You can start by using my proper name: Miranda. Now Father's gone, I'm going to use that. I never did like being called Minnie, just because I was a small baby.'

He let out a scornful grunt. 'I couldn't think of you as anything but Minnie now. The name suits you.' He walked to the door with a last regretful glance at the chest of drawers, but popped his head back inside to add, 'What about your mother's jewellery. That's too valuable to leave lying around. If you give it to me, I'll put it into the bank for you.'

'That's not part of the estate, either. Father left it lying around and you didn't worry then.'

'I'm just trying to help. I didn't agree with him

on that. Keeping expensive jewellery at home in a rambling old house like this is asking for trouble.'

'I've put it somewhere safe, don't worry. Father had it in his drawer. But there are two items missing, the most valuable: a diamond brooch and matching necklace. If I don't find them, I'll have to call in the police.'

There was silence, then, 'Ah. Dorothy borrowed those to wear to a special function. I've got them at home in my safe. No need to worry about them.'

Miranda nearly gave in, because he was so hard to pin down, and as he'd said, the most valuable jewellery was safe, which was the important thing. But she was angry at the casual way he'd dismissed the idea of using her proper name, angry that her sister-in-law was using the jewellery without even asking her and found the courage to say, 'I want them back. Straight away.'

'There's a ball coming up. They go really well with Dorothy's blue dress, which is why Father lent them to her.'

'Then you'd better buy her some diamonds of her own. I want mine back.'

'Don't be foolish. You never wear them.'

She was so angry, she forgot her usual fear of him. 'That's not the point. You shouldn't have borrowed them without my permission. I want them back tomorrow.'

'I'm busy all day. You'll have to wait till I have

time to sort it all out.’ He fixed her with that gloating gaze which always made her shiver. ‘You *are* acting in a foolish way today. What’s got into you?’

When he’d gone, she collapsed on the bed, blinking away the tears. She’d tried to be brave and face up to her bully of an older brother, but as usual, he’d ignored her wishes. He might not hurt her physically these days, but he still continued to put her down and trample all over her. And he still continued to threaten her with her greatest fear. He didn’t need to put it into words, only hint and she caved in.

She got out some yellow stickers and went round the house, putting them on her own pieces of furniture. She and Dorothy had sharp words about this several times. It appeared her brother-in-law had coveted these particular pieces for some time and had intended to have them moved out.

After that Miranda stayed mainly in her bedroom until her brother and his wife left in the late afternoon. She made short forays to the bathroom or kitchen, glad that such an old-fashioned house still had locks on the bedroom doors.

They didn’t call goodbye, so she knew Sebastian was seriously annoyed with her and she could expect some sort of retribution from him.

Well, she was angry too. Only, what good had that ever done her before?

When she bought her own house, she would look

in a country town, as far away from her brother as possible. Or go to live in England, as Regina had. Her mother had been English and her father had made sure Miranda kept her British passport up to date, because he considered it a valuable thing to possess.

Miranda strolled along the street, intending to go to the corner deli for some bread and ham. But before she got there she gave into temptation and took a detour through the small park, which was looking parched with the summer heat. It'd start getting cooler soon. February was the hottest month of the year, usually.

She came here sometimes for a bit of peace, snatching a few minutes to sit in the cool shade of a huge Moreton Bay fig tree.

Lou watched the woman walking towards him, thinking how sad she looked. He'd seen her a few times before and she never looked happy. Harried, yes, upset, yes, but never, ever happy. That intrigued him. Since he'd come out of hospital he'd been confined to a damned wheelchair, with only the short range of an electric mobility scooter when he went out.

He was a lot better now, though, and was planning how to reorganise his life to cope with his new disability. In the meantime he came here most days just to get out of his flat. He could only sit and

watch others, for lack of energy to do more, but that was better than watching the wall. You could only spend so much time on a computer, after all.

The woman sat down on an empty bench, and brushed back her fair hair impatiently as she stared across the murky water of the small lake and the two black swans sailing majestically past.

When she wiped away a tear, he could bear it no longer. She was such a tiny, slender creature, surely not more than five foot tall, and had a vulnerable air. He moved his chair forward, stopping beside her bench. 'Lovely, aren't they?'

She jumped in shock as he spoke, but no one was afraid of a man on a mobility scooter, and he watched her relax a little.

'I've seen you here before,' he offered, hoping for some conversation.

'I've seen you too. Just in the past few weeks. Have you recently moved to the area?'

'Yes.' He held out one hand. 'I'm Lou Rayne.'

'Miranda Fox.'

'Great name.'

She looked at him in surprise. 'Do you really like it?'

'I wouldn't say so if I didn't.'

'My family call me Minnie. I hate that.'

'Tell 'em not to.'

'They refuse to change.'

Perhaps they were the ones who were putting the

deep sadness into her face. 'I can't resist asking: do you come here often?'

She smiled. 'Yes. I love to watch the birds. And it's so peaceful.'

He moved his scooter slightly so that he was facing both her and the water. 'You live in that big house on the corner a couple of streets away, don't you? I've seen you go in. I love the wrap-around verandas. They built much prettier houses a hundred years ago.'

'It's not quite that old. It was built for my father and his first wife. He died yesterday, so I have to move out soon.'

'I'm sorry. Both about your father and you having to leave.'

'He was ninety-four and ready to go. I always knew I'd be leaving after he died. I've a half-sister and brother to share the inheritance with, you see.'

'Chucking you out to sell it, are they?'

'I wouldn't want to stay. The house is far too big for one person and the past few years haven't been easy, so the place doesn't hold very good memories for me. I'm looking forward to buying my own home. Where do you live?'

'In that block of flats custom-built for people with disabilities. Ugly place. The architect should be shot, and the sooner the better, before he inflicts any other monstrosities on the world.'

'Why did you move there, then?'

‘I was between houses when I fell ill. My niece bought the flat for me when I was in hospital. I wasn’t in a state to protest at the time. It was touch and go whether I’d recover.’

‘But fortunately you did.’ She stood up. ‘I’d better get back, I suppose.’

‘I’ll keep you company as you walk, if you don’t mind. I haven’t heard a human voice all day.’

‘I don’t mind at all. Would you like to come in for a coffee? We can sit on the veranda and—Oh! There are steps.’

‘I can manage steps if I take them slowly. I just can’t walk far. That’s why I have my trusty steed.’ He patted the scooter affectionately.

Miranda set off, matching her pace to his. Impossible to be nervous of being alone with this man, not because he had some sort of disability, but because he had a friendly, open face – cheeky even, for all his hair was silver and very thin on top.

There was a book in the basket at the front of the scooter and she studied the title. ‘Dean Koontz. Do you like horror stories?’

He grinned, a surprisingly boyish grin for a man who must be at least ten years older than her. She couldn’t help smiling back.

‘I love ’em,’ he said. ‘Silly, I know.’

‘I couldn’t sleep if I’d read something that frightened me.’

‘They don’t frighten me. Most of them amuse me, though this chap writes better stories than most. I don’t sleep much anyway, so it doesn’t matter.’

He said that matter-of-factly, not in a self-pitying or angry tone. Her father had been very angry after his stroke and had let the whole world, which mainly meant her, know it.

She watched Lou climb painfully up the veranda steps, then settle in the big upright chair her father had used. She went inside to make the coffee, bringing out a home-made cake as well. It was gratifying that he ate two large pieces.

‘I’ve not eaten anything as delicious for months!’ he said, as he pushed his plate away.

‘I can wrap you up a piece to take home.’

‘Yes, please!’

They didn’t talk much or if they did, she didn’t remember what they’d said. But time passed pleasantly and she was sorry when he said he’d have to get back.

‘I’m afraid I need a rest now.’

‘It must be hard coping on your own.’

He shrugged. ‘You get used to it. I have a carer come in every day to help me shower, and a cleaner three times a week. My niece brings me food, or I have it delivered.’

‘I’ll walk back with you. I need something for tea from the deli.’ She’d thought she wasn’t hungry but now realised she was.

They stopped outside his block of flats and he scowled at it. ‘Ghastly, isn’t it?’

‘More like an egg box. Did you have a stroke?’ Miranda felt herself flushing. ‘Sorry. None of my business.’

‘It’s cancer of the spine that’s put me in a wheelchair. I had a minor heart attack and while I was in hospital they found the cancer. They operated a couple of times and now they’ve given up on me. I’ve got about six months to live.’

‘Oh, Lou, I’m so sorry! I shouldn’t have asked.’

‘I don’t mind you asking. And I’m sorry too. I’d wanted to slay a few more dragons before I shuffled off this mortal coil. As soon as I’ve sorted a few things out, I’m moving into a house more to my taste, whatever my bossy niece says. These flats are designed for disabled people, with lifts, wooden floors and wide doorways, but they’re pokey places and the building echoes like a damned cave. It drives me crazy.’

‘Your niece is probably trying to do her best for you.’

‘She doesn’t listen to me, just tells me what I want.’

‘I can relate to that. Family can be . . . difficult!’

‘Tell me about it. Your brother sounds a real control freak.’

‘He is. And he’s always so sure he’s right. I can’t wait to get a place of my own, I must admit.’

When she got back, she found she'd left the front door unlocked and got angry with herself for being so careless. Picking up the weekend papers, she took the property pages into the kitchen and indulged in some research and daydreaming as she ate a simple meal.

Nikki listened to her mother's parting instructions and waved goodbye from the window as the taxi pulled away from their smart town house. Not that her mother bothered to look up at her, she never did, was always too busy rushing somewhere else.

Rain was beating against the windows as she went to sit down, feeling wobbly. She'd been sick that morning, but had managed to hide it from her mother.

Two hours afterwards she woke, so late for school that she didn't even bother getting ready. She was feeling better so she had something to eat then worked on revision for a coming test.

When the doorbell rang she peered through the little spy hole. Her heart sank at the sight of Tim standing there, hunched up in a hooded anorak. She made no attempt to open the door, willing him to go away. But he didn't.

He rang again, then called out, 'I know you're in there, Nikki, because there's nowhere else you could be in weather like this.'

The bell rang again and again, until in the end

she flung the front door open and yelled, 'Come in, why don't you? How lovely to see you. Not.'

She ran through into the living room, terrified of throwing herself into his arms, but he followed and pulled her close. She struggled half-heartedly for a minute or two, then gave into temptation and sagged against him, doing what she'd promised herself not to: bursting into tears.

He rocked her and made soothing sounds until the sobs stopped.

With her arms laced around his waist, she looked up at him. His face was bony and boyish still, but he'd be quite good-looking once he filled out a little. 'Sorry, Tim. I didn't mean to do that to you.'

'Doesn't matter. Come and sit down. You look terrible.'

She led him through to the kitchen. 'I'll have a cup of peppermint tea. Can't stand coffee just now.'

'So it's true.'

She closed her eyes, furious at herself for blurting that out, when she'd tried so hard to keep her news from him. She opened her eyes to find him gazing at her so seriously that for a moment he looked just like his father. Not that she minded that. Everyone should have a father like Mr Heyter. 'How did you find out?'

'I met your mother in town yesterday and she stopped me to say she thought it pretty bad of me to abandon you at a time like this, when we'd been an item for so long. When I said I didn't know

what she meant, because *you* had dumped me, she looked surprised. She told me you're having a baby. Is that true?'

'Mmm.'

'It's got to be mine. You've not been with anyone else for over a year.'

She turned her back on him, not knowing what to say. His voice grew softer. 'Nikki, why didn't you tell me?'

'Because it was me who was careless, not you, so why should you be lumbered with a child? And because I don't know what I want to do. I need to work things out – only I can't seem to think straight.' She began to cry again and when he put his arm round her shoulders, she leant against him with a tired sigh, not even aware they were moving across the room till he spoke.

'Sit down, Nikki. Peppermint tea, you said?'

He made two cups and came to sit across the coffee table from her this time, not beside her like he usually did. 'It doesn't matter who was careless. If it's my child, it's my responsibility too. What does your mother think?'

'She wants me to have an abortion as soon as she gets back from Australia. Grandfather's just died and she's gone to the funeral.' She peeped at him over her cup and saw him go very still.

'Do you want to do that, have an abortion, I mean?'

She took a sip, then another. When she looked up, he was still waiting. 'I don't think so.'

Then he was the one who cried, silent tears that he tried to wipe away.

'I don't want you to kill our child, Nikki. Promise me you won't do that. *Promise.*'

'If I have it, I won't be able to go to university. If you and I raise it together, neither of us will be able to get a degree, or not for years and years. That seems stupid.'

He was silent for a minute or two, then gave her a wry smile. 'I can't imagine you with a baby.'

She couldn't help smiling back. 'Like, you're an expert on them.'

'I've never even held one.'

'Neither have I.'

They looked at one another. 'It's scary.' Her voice wobbled.

'I know. But don't do anything without me, Nikki love, especially not something so irrevocable.'

He moved across to sit beside her and she cuddled up to him with a sigh of relief.

His breath was warm on her cheek. 'Are we back together?'

'I suppose.'

'Aren't you sure?'

'It's Mum. You know what she's like. She says she's not having a baby here and I've got to have an abortion or get out. And . . . well, when she sets her

mind to something, when she gets *that look* on her face, she's like, Bulldozers R Us. I've never been able to stand up to her.'

'You've never been responsible for a baby's life before, either.'

She shivered.

'Besides, you won't be alone. I'll be facing her with you.'

She didn't say it, because she appreciated the offer, but as if that'd make a difference to her mother!