

## Chapter One

'So what do you think that's all about?' Josie Clark murmured, almost to herself, as she put down the phone.

'All what?' her husband wondered from behind his latest copy of *Exchange and Mart*. It would be a flipping miracle if they could afford a new car, second-hand of course, but there was no harm in looking.

Josie's lively violet eyes flicked in Jeff's direction. Though she couldn't see his face, her own was partially reflected in the mirror hanging over their faux-brick fireplace, and what she could see were small, delicate features, with a pixyish chin and nose that seemed to belong more to a child than a woman of forty-two years. Her crowning glory, as her dad used to say, was the mop of honey-red curls that shone and tumbled about her head as though they had a life all their own.

'That barnet of yours is the envy of half the women I know,' her neighbour, Carly, regularly complained. Not that Carly's hair was bad, it just wasn't naturally blonde, and in truth it didn't have all that much verve in it either. However, on Friday nights when she went out with the girls, her artful handling of it ensured that no one would ever have guessed

how many extensions, pieces, pins and lacquer sprays were holding it all up.

At five foot two Josie could never be described as tall, but then neither could Jeff at five-five. What he was though, or certainly in her opinion, was the best-looking bloke in Kesterly-on-Sea. Or on their street, anyway. Probably on the whole estate, because not a single one of the blokes she knew, young or old, looked a bit like Tom Cruise when they smiled, nor could they make her heart skip a beat the way Jeff sometimes did. That was really saying something after twenty-two years of marriage, which didn't mean they hadn't had their ups and downs along the way, because heaven knew they had. In fact, there had been a time when she'd seriously feared they wouldn't make it, but she didn't allow herself to dwell on that too much now. No point when the other woman, Dawnie Hopkins, had moved up north after it had all come out about her and Jeff. That had happened five years ago this Christmas, and had totally spoiled the holiday, that was for sure. In fact, Christmas had never really been the same since, given all the painful memories that seemed to pour down the chimney instead of seasonal cheer.

Last Christmas had been the worst, though not thanks to Dawnie this time – in the circumstances Josie might have actually preferred it if her ex-best mate had staged an unexpected return. No, the source of their upset last year had been Ryan, their eighteen-year-old son, whose gift for getting into one scrape after another after another had surpassed itself so spectacularly that Jeff would no longer have the boy's name spoken in his hearing.

Oddly, the crisis of Ryan's trial and imprisonment

had seemed to bring Josie and Jeff closer together for a while, probably because it had given them more to think about than how much damage the shenanigans with Dawnie had done to their marriage.

She still couldn't help wondering if Jeff ever regretted staying.

She didn't ask, it wouldn't do any good, not only because she was nervous of the answer, but because she herself had banned Dawnie's name from being spoken inside number 31 Greenacre Close. This was their home, a tidy little semi at the far end of a cul-de-sac, next to a lane that ran through to the playing fields behind, and they didn't need to sully its fresh, lemony scent with stinky reminders of a so-called friend's betrayal. (Josie would never admit this to another living soul, but she actually missed Dawnie more than she'd imagined she would, though she supposed it wasn't all that surprising given they'd been best mates practically since birth.)

Just went to show, you could never trust anyone, even those closest to you, which had been a very painful lesson for Josie to learn when she herself was so loyal she didn't even like to change a dental appointment.

The real light of her and Jeff's life was Lily, their twenty-one-year-old angel of a daughter, who was currently at uni doing a BA honours degree in history and politics. Imagine that! No one, from either of their families, had ever done so well, nor, come to that, had anyone else on their street. However, Lily was special; everyone said so, and had been saying it for most of her blessed little life. She sparkled and laughed and made everyone feel so good about themselves that love just came cascading back at her like a rainstorm of stars.

'She's her mother all over,' Dawnie always used to say, but Josie didn't think she'd ever been as lovely as Lily. True, she enjoyed a good laugh, and she wasn't backward in offering a kind word when one was needed, but she didn't have the same inner glow, or the innate belief in goodness that constantly shone out of her daughter.

Maybe she'd had some of it once, but definitely not any more.

Now she had scars on her hopes and shadows over her dreams, though to look at her, or talk to her, no one would ever know it. She simply went about her days in her usual cheery way, with a duster and polish in her hands on Mondays and Wednesdays, a teapot and frying pan on Thursdays and Fridays and, until recently, a telephone headset plastered to her ears while she engaged in a spot of telemarketing at the weekends. (Living where they did, on the notorious Temple Fields council estate, there wasn't much in the way of swearing, cursing and death threats she hadn't heard before, but not until she'd taken this last job had she ever been on the receiving end of it. Honest to God, the things some people said when you rang them up out of the blue . . . She'd never repeat their abuse, not even to Jeff, who, it had to be said, had some choice phrases himself for when his taxi broke down. And best not get him started on the kids who treated his back seat to a tactical chunder after a skinful on a Friday night, because that really wasn't pretty, for anyone.)

The telemarketing had ended up proving a waste of her time, since she'd never made a red cent out of it, so these last couple of weekends she'd been enjoying a bit of time to herself. Just as well, given

the commitment she had for every other Saturday, and nothing was ever to get in the way of that.

She had to wonder if it was why her reflection was showing a woman who was worried, stressed, even drawn. Strange, since she wasn't aware of feeling anything in particular at the moment, apart from mildly intrigued to know what was behind the call she'd just taken.

So, should she run upstairs now to make herself a little more presentable ready for the visit? A quick rub of foundation, brightened by a couple of dabs of blusher and several waves of the magic mascara wand? She didn't usually wear make-up on her cleaning days, and since today was Wednesday she hadn't bothered when she'd got up this morning. Jeff always said, in his usual gruff way, that she didn't need it, she was lovely au naturel. He didn't often lace his compliments with fancy French phrases, mainly because that was the only one he knew, but on the rare occasions he remembered it, it pleased her no end, especially in the light of all they'd been through.

'Have you got any bookings today?' she asked, going through to the kitchen to put the washing machine on for a second spin. One was never enough these days, a warning that the old tub was probably about to break down. Joy! Another expense they couldn't afford.

'Mm?' Jeff grunted.

'That was Lily on the phone,' Josie called out. 'She and Jasper are on their way over.'

Sounding surprised, he said, 'In the middle of the week? To what do we owe the pleasure?'

'She wouldn't say, but she wants to talk to us both, so if you've got any fares . . .'