Chapter 1

A blonde head bounced on the floor in time to the yelling. Rays of the early morning sun caught her golden hair, and motes of dust hung in the air. Sophie Saunders was eight years old. Kneeling down on the floor, she played with her dolls, drumming Ken and Barbie against the carpet, her body bent forward, almost as if she were praying in her immaculately clean and pressed school uniform. But today her school uniform was the last thing on her mind. She bashed the dolls’ heads off the pink floor in unison.

‘Ring-a-Ring-a-Rosie,’ she sang aloud to herself as she tried to drown out the voices that rose up through the floorboards.

The noises from downstairs were a regular occurrence, and fast becoming the norm. Sophie felt her dad’s anger, ever-present in his voice as it vibrated through her bedroom, positioned over the kitchen. Scared, she dropped her dolls, raising her arms and clasping her small hands over her ears. Sophie closed her eyes. Blinded, she felt for Barbie and Ken and gripped the toys by the legs. With one in each hand, she remained still for a moment, and as the voices intensified beneath her, she sensed them possessing the dolls.

‘You’re an old bag. I hate you!’

Sophie’s voice was deep and rough, as she rammed Ken’s head into Barbie’s chest.

‘Why are you always so nasty to me?’

She raised the pitch of her voice as she shook the dolls hard.

‘Because you make me want to vomit when I look at your fat ugly face,’ she growled.

‘Please stop being so cruel to me,’ she enunciated.

‘Who do you think you are? Don't you dare tell me what to do, bitch!’

With each word, she struck Ken against Barbie, again and again, until finally Barbie’s head popped off and rolled across the carpet.

That hadn’t been her intention. She didn’t mean to decapitate the poor doll. Shocked, she stood up as she searched for the missing head. She found it under the bedside cabinet at the back, by the wall. She crouched down, stretched out her arm and grabbed it. Sophie sat up on her knees, struggling to reattach the plastic head to its body.

‘Bloody shit! Why won’t it go on?’ The racket from below grew ever louder. ‘Bloody shit.’ Frustrated, she gave up, and flung the dolls across the room.

Downstairs, her father, Alan, almost lost his head. He shouted louder as his wife, Kate, persisted as the peacemaker.

‘As useless as a one-legged woman in an arse-kicking contest.’

His voice echoed around the large stark white room, drowning out the soothing music from the old radio sitting on the window ledge.

‘You’re one useless bastard!’

The barrage of abuse had just hit average level.

‘Fucking useless.’

The kitchen had seen better days, as had their marriage, but Kate worked hard to keep both spotless and functional.

‘Can you hear me?’

She strived hard at everything, as she had for a lifetime.

‘Hello? Is there anyone home?’

However, her efforts now went unnoticed or drew heavy criticism for no reason.

‘I’m fucking talking to you, whore.’

She knew only too well what was about to come her way, as she moved the blonde strand of hair out of her blue eyes and concentrated. She placed the boiled egg safely into its cup.

‘Where’s this fucking breakfast, for fuck's sake?’

She reached out her arm, picked up the knife and, clenching it tight in her hand, she decapitated the top of the egg.

‘I can hear you, Alan.’ The toast was the light side of brown, just as he liked it, but who knew these days? ‘There’s no point keeping on at me, shouting. I can’t go any faster.’

She set the breakfast plate before Alan. His face was dark and menacing—the antithesis of the light sense of fun that had been knocked out of her.

‘About fucking time. Talk about slow. You’re like a human fucking sloth.’

After ten years together, she found it more of a challenge to stay positive. Alan had turned negativity into a vocation.

‘What the flying fuck is this?’

She stared at the top of his head, bristling with the military-style haircut he’d had since he was a child, raised by an army commander who gave no quarter.

‘Do you seriously expect me to eat this fucking lot of shite?’ Alan had adopted the same rank in the family, but hadn’t served a moment in the services. ‘All these years, and you still can't boil a fucking egg? I mean, it's not fucking rocket science.’ She watched him as he snarled at her. ‘You’ve got to be having some sort of a laugh.’

He pushed the plate away with such force, it shot forward and hit the condiment pots. Kate flinched as the sharp noise pierced her ears. ‘Why, what’s wrong with it now?’ She clenched her fists as her body shook. Her nerves were all on the surface, as he mocked her and revelled in her fear.

‘What's bloody wrong with it? It’s the wrong colour, undercooked and looks like my fucking snot. You really are a fucking retard!’

She watched as his sneer took what used to be a pleasantly rugged face – a lifetime ago – and warped it monstrously.

‘Well, I can do another for you, if you like. It won’t take me a minute!’

She tried her hardest to stay calm, fearful of what might come next.

‘That’s how long I think you boiled that one for, a fucking minute, so what's the bloody point? You'll only mess it up again, you thick tart.’

Kate, petrified, noticed the pure evil as it manifested once again across his face.

‘You’re miles away these days. Maybe you should go see a doctor and get some happy pills from him. For fuck's sake, you can’t even time an egg.’

Once again defeated, she bit her lip and her voice broke.

‘Well, I did boil it for three minutes.’

She watched his face as it reddened. She knew the inevitable was about to happen, and wished it over and done with.

‘Yeah, yeah. Let’s face it, darling, you’re no good at cooking, no good in bed—in fact, you’re no good at fucking anything really. I bloody dread mealtimes in this house.’

The victorious grin that had taken residence across his smug face frightened her.

‘I try my best, Alan, I really do.’

Kate’s voice sounded weak. Alan fed off her vulnerability as he chipped away at her. He cranked up the volume another notch.

‘You really are a fucking retard. You’re trying to poison me with salmonella.’ Alan stretched out his arm, picking up the boiled egg. Terrified, she eyed him as he gripped it tightly in his hand. ‘Trying to do me in with food poisoning, are you?’

Kate jerked as he lobbed the egg towards her, raising her arm, shielding it from her face as it side-swiped her head. She tried to pick fragments of sticky shell out of her hair.

‘That’s what I think about your boiled eggs. Now go and fucking clean it up!’

She decided the best defence was to stay silent. Terrified, she turned her back on him, and tried to disappear into the background.

‘Don’t turn your back on me, I’m fucking talking to you! You’re one ignorant bitch. Don't you dare fucking ignore me!’

She closed her eyes tight and gritted her teeth, trying hard to remain calm.

‘I'm not ignoring you. I'm trying to get Sophie's breakfast ready or she’ll be late for school.’

Her smooth tone stoked his fury more.

‘I don't even know why I fucking married you. I could’ve done so much better. My parents were right on the money when they said I married down. An army bigwig and a doctor they were, and what are you? A washed-up failed actress, a shit teacher, and a poor excuse for a fucking wife.’

She ignored him as the vile comments became more and more aggressive.

‘I mean, have you taken a fucking good look at yourself lately?’

He rotated his chair towards her. She watched him in terror as he looked her up and down like he’d just stepped in a massive turd.

‘Please don’t, Alan. Please don’t start again today.’

She arranged the plate of food as fast as she could. Jumpy and exasperated, she picked up the tea towel from the draining board and wiped the edges clean, as he continued to mock her.

‘“Please don’t, Alan – please don’t, Alan.” Can you hear yourself, Kate?’

The onslaught continued towards danger point.

‘You've really let yourself go over the years. You need to get yourself to the fucking gym and start exercising. I married a woman, not a lard arse. Just look at you!’

She was tall and well-proportioned. If Alan wanted an anorexic model, he was living in cloud cuckoo land – and the wrong neighbourhood.

‘Oh, for crying out loud, Alan.’ Her adrenalin kicked in, and she snapped out of her former resignation. She threw down the tea towel on the worktop. ‘I do exercise, Alan, when I have the time!’

‘Ha! Are you having a fucking bubble? You keep telling yourself that. You’re a silly stupid fat tart. You should take a leaf out of your friend Jill's book. Now she looks great. Perfect little figure, and a great pair of tits!’

He did nothing to hide the wicked grin that was plastered across his face, or his semi-erection. Watching him, repulsed, she tried logic.

‘Well, Jill hasn't got any children to worry about, or a husband for that matter, so she has more time on her hands than I bloody well do.’

She continued to busy herself, reaching into the cupboard next to her and removing a plate.

‘Excuses, Kate, always bloody excuses with you! Don’t you know the truth always comes out? Mind you, you wouldn’t know the truth if it jumped up and took a bite-sized chunk out of your big fat fucking arse, you thick bitch.’

Her stomach churned. She didn’t want another fight. Against her better judgement, she apologised. ‘I’m sorry about the egg, Alan, I really am, but do you have to do this now? Sophie will be down for her breakfast any minute.’

She showed him Sophie’s plate. Desperate, she reminded him of their daughter's existence. Kate was taken aback as she heard the almighty roar that bellowed out of his mouth.

‘Who the fuck do you think you are? You think you can tell me what I can and cannot do in my own house!’

The house belonged to both of them, a wedding gift from his parents, but she wasn’t about to argue the toss about that now.

‘Please, Alan, Sophie will hear you. It's not fair she has to listen to this day in, day out. Do you not think about what this is doing to her? She's your daughter, for heaven’s sake.’

She hated the sound of her weak voice.

‘Well, that’s fucking debatable.’

Sickened, Kate watched him as he swayed in his chair like a hypnotised cobra. A dreary Coldplay song rang out on the radio.

‘I don’t give a toss about you or your fucking daughter.’

The saliva flew in all directions across the kitchen, as he continued to spit more venom in her direction.

‘It’s my fucking house, my rules. Anyway, look at you. And what’s that on your face? Is that make-up and lipstick you’re wearing? Where do you think you're going today with all that crap on your face? You look like a washed-up old whore!’

She was frozen to the spot, and the colour drained fast from her face.

‘It's just pink lip gloss, for goodness sake. What the hell’s wrong with you?’

His eyes bulged from their sockets like a bullfrog’s, his tongue sharp like a flickering whip, as he leapt from his chair and grabbed her firmly by the hair. ‘Lip gloss, my arse.’ She fought hard to hold on to Sophie’s plate as he ground his thumb into her mouth and smeared the tacky pink gloss across her cheek.

‘Ha! That’s more like it! As if lipstick or lip gloss is going to help you.’

She felt the sting as the palm of his hand connected hard against her cheek. He picked up the dirty tea towel.

‘Please, Alan, stop this.’

He rubbed it hard across her flushed skin. Kate, struggling to breathe, heard the crash as the plate fell to the floor.

‘Look at the tea towel, cunt. It’s fucking make-up. Stop fucking lying to me!’

She could smell the remnants of the stale booze on his breath, which made her heave. ‘I’m not lying.’ She struggled hard to pull away from him, her eyes drawn towards the doorway. She noticed Sophie standing there, her perfect angelic face pale and in shock.

‘Go away!’ Kate mouthed to her terrified daughter.

‘What was that, bitch? Are you talking back to me again?’

She felt the sharp pain hit, as he punched her hard in the stomach. As Kate fell to her knees, she heard Sophie’s voice.

‘Leave my mummy alone!’

Kate looked up at him, and at the same time his expressive dark eyes narrowed. Alan turned around and faced his daughter.

‘Oh, it’s you! Have you seen your mother? Doesn’t she look like a cheap whore? This is what you’ll look like one day if you let yourself turn into a sack of shit like her!’

He hoisted Kate up from the floor by her hair, on to her feet, and slapped her viciously again across her cheek.

She screamed. ‘Get out, Sophie! Get out!’

Kate watched Sophie as she turned around and raced from the kitchen in floods of tears. She pleaded with him:

‘Alan, please stop this! Please!’

She stumbled as he pushed her hard into the side of the Formica worktop. Unsteady on her feet, she reached out with both hands and gripped on to it.

‘You’re lucky I’ve got things to do today and that I don’t have to spend another minute looking at your gormless fucking mug!’

She watched as he grabbed his jacket off the back of the kitchen chair and threw it across his right shoulder.

‘What have I told you about lying, Kate?’

She saw the triumphant expression on his face as he left the kitchen and whistled down the hallway. Kate listened out as he opened the front door, and jumped as she heard his voice again.

‘Make sure you clean up all the mess and scrape all that raw egg off those bloody tiles.’

She closed her eyes for a split second and there came another almighty loud bang as the front door slammed shut behind him. Kate’s whole body trembled with this aftershock.

‘God help me,’ she said to herself.

She crawled across the kitchen floor, picked up the newspaper off the chair and gathered the food and shards of broken plate onto it as she chanted to herself.

‘Come on, Kate, come on, Kate, you can do this.’

She eased herself up, grabbed a cloth from the sink and rubbed away at the mess as she spoke to herself again. ‘What did I do to deserve this bloody life?’ Her thoughts turned to her daughter and she made her way out of the kitchen, calling out her name: ‘Sophie.’ Kate stood in the hallway and listened, but got no answer from her daughter. She spotted the photograph of Alan on the floor and was distracted for a moment. She looked at his sadistic face staring back at her through the cracked glass. She hung it slapdash back in its pride of place on the wall, and made her way back into the kitchen. Kate started once again on Sophie’s breakfast, calling out to her again.

‘Sophie darling, I’m making your breakfast. He’s gone out. Please come down.’

Unable to stop the massive flow of tears that streamed fast down her sore, swollen cheeks, she placed another piece of bread in the toaster. She pulled a tissue from the box on top of the fridge as Sophie called out to her. Kate dabbed her swollen eyes.

‘I’m coming now, Mummy, I won’t be long, I’m just putting my toys away.’

Kate always worried at how much the arguments and fights her daughter had witnessed throughout her parents’ volatile relationship had affected her and it made the anger inside her rise when she looked at him.

‘Okay, Sophie, hurry up.’

She blamed him for being such a nasty, horrible bastard, a terrible father to their daughter. She had to get away from this monster somehow, but where would they go?

‘I’m here, Mummy.’

The bread popped out of the toaster as Sophie’s voice broke her from her reverie. ‘Oh, good. I timed that just right.’

Surprised by Sophie’s small arms around her waist, the intimate contact made Kate cry. Sophie’s tears leaked out of her and soaked through her blouse as they sobbed together.

‘Are you okay, Mummy?’

Sophie’s angelic face was so wan and she worried so much for her. Determined, Kate pulled herself together for the sake of her daughter.

‘Mummy, please don’t cry. Are you okay?’ She knew Sophie worried about her also.

Sophie continued to cry. Kate reached out for her face and kissed her flushed cheeks.

‘I'm fine, Sophie. Don’t you fret about me, Daddy is just in a bad mood, what with him losing his job.’

She held Sophie close. As she felt the small girl’s heartbeat close to hers, she regretted the day she set eyes on Alan, and married the heartless bastard.

‘Daddy is always in a bad mood, Mummy.’

The emotionless statement of fact chilled her to the bone.

‘That job meant the world to Daddy. It’ll be okay, Sophie, he's just upset.’

She didn’t believe it but felt she had to say it anyway.

‘But, Mummy, it's not your fault Daddy lost his job, is it? Why does he hit you all the time and say nasty things to you?’

She knew Sophie wouldn’t understand the reasoning.

‘Daddy doesn't mean to act like that, baby, he’s just frustrated, and he feels upset a lot. He’ll be fine once he gets another job, you'll see. Come on, Sophie, no more crying now please,’

She wiped away her daughter’s tears with the sleeve of her blouse as she faked a smile. Resolute as she got back to the job at hand, she busied herself once again.

‘Well, I don’t like it, Mummy.’

She removed the lightly toasted bread from the toaster, buttered it and popped it onto another plate, as Sophie continued to talk. ‘He’s a big bully.’ Kate didn’t feel the need to answer as she removed a glass from the cupboard, picked up the fresh orange juice carton and poured her daughter a drink.

‘But Mummy, Daddy was mean to you even when he had a job. Why does he talk and smell funny when he drinks that stinky brown stuff? Children notice everything you know.’

Kate carried on regardless as she placed the toast and orange juice down in front of Sophie on the table.

‘It’ll be okay, Sophie, we just have to be a little bit more patient with him, that’s all, and—’

The sound of the doorbell echoed off the kitchen walls and caused them both to jump. Kate, on tenterhooks, panicked. Had Alan forgotten his keys?

‘Sophie, just sit there properly and eat your breakfast, love, let me go and get the door, okay?’ Her heart pounded in her chest.

‘It might be Daddy back again, Mummy.’

Unruffled, she pushed the hair out of her eyes, and snagged the dishcloth by the sink as she tried to wipe the rest of the sticky lip gloss from her face.

‘Did I get it all?’

She watched Sophie; as she looked up at Kate’s face she smiled.

‘Come here, Mummy, you can’t go to the door like that, let me help you.’

Kate perched herself on the kitchen chair as she handed Sophie the cloth, and with a delicate hand, she finished the job.

‘All done, Mummy.’

Kate kissed her on the cheek, and smiled at her daughter. She knew Sophie was the only person that kept her going every day.

‘What would I do without you? You eat up now like the good girl you are, Sophie.’

She stood up, as she stroked Sophie’s hair, as fine as silk. It was the same burnished blonde as hers.

‘I love you, Sophie.’

Sophie picked up her glass and sipped the tart soft drink. Kate watched her as she stared miserably at the cold toast on her plate, unimpressed.

‘I love you too, Mummy.’

She breathed a sigh of relief as she recognised the voice that shouted through the letterbox.

‘Sophie, Sophie, it’s Megan. Are you ready for school?’

Kate started as Sophie gulped the rest of her orange juice, threw the cold toast back on its plate, and jumped up from her chair like she had just undergone an electric shock.

‘It’s okay. It’s Megan and her mum. I’ve got to go or I’m going to be late for school, Mummy.’

Sophie picked up her school bag and kissed her on the cheek. Kate was captivated as Sophie raced towards the front door and shouted back to her.

‘See you tonight, Mum. I love you.’

Relieved, Kate collapsed onto the kitchen chair, and tried to collect her thoughts. As she heard the doorbell again she spoke to herself as it echoed through the kitchen. ‘I wonder what she’s forgotten this time.’ On her feet again, she walked along the hallway as Alan’s father’s Army headshot stared back at her. Ahead, through the glass in the door, she could see a silhouette of someone, as she called out.

‘Sophie, is that you?’

Kate stood still, surrounded by the photographs in the hallway; a complete record of Alan’s life from a Boy Scout bully armoured in badges, whistle and toggle to one of him with his distant half-brother, Barry, made her feel uneasy as she spoke to herself.

‘What have you forgotten this time? I bet it’s your pencil case again.’

Her brain was flooded by childhood photos of her first time on stage as an angel in the school nativity play and on a family holiday, as well as Christmas shots that once hung there. Saddened, she pushed them from her mind as she called out. ‘Hold on a minute, Sophie, I’m coming.’

Kate knew nothing survived the passage of Alan. Like a slow-motion tsunami, he’d sluiced through their shared lives and swept them entirely from the landscape.

She smiled as she heard the voice from the other side of the door.

‘It’s not Sophie, it’s me. Open the bloody door, Kate, I’m bloody freezing my tits off out here.’

Little did Alan know, right there, on the second step up against the skirting board, years ago, Kate had carefully raised the carpet and slipped the photo of her and Sophie underneath. So, now each time she walked past, or mounted the stairs, she’d know that no matter how much Alan battered and pounded her, a part of her would always survive and that part had so many plans. But right now, all Kate had was uncertainty.

Chapter 2

Kate walked towards the door and pulled it open. She reeled backwards at the sight that stood before her.

‘What took you so long?’ She looked like the bride of Chuckie in a white braless dress. Her bleached blonde curly hair and scarlet red lips made Kate blink hard.

‘Bloody hell, Kate, are you going to let me in or what? I’m starting to turn blue.’

Kate managed to raise a smile at her friend as she spoke. ‘Where the hell have you been?’ It was obvious she hadn’t been home the evening before. Kate wondered what on earth had possessed Jill to do the walk of shame.

‘Never mind that, let me in.’

Kate looked her up and down in a deliberate manner. As Jill stood in the doorway, she shivered in her flimsy dress.

‘Did you get dressed in the dark or have you been out all night again?’ Kate was almost flattened as Jill’s large chest knocked her out the way as she stumbled down the hallway towards the kitchen. ‘Bloody hell, Jill, careful.’ Kate closed the front door and shook her head as she followed behind her friend. Jill was already sitting at the kitchen table as she caught up with her.

‘Stick the kettle on, Kate. I’m spitting feathers here. It’s that vodka I drank last night. Gives me a mouth like Gandhi’s flip-flop.’

Confused at her friend’s arrival, Kate did what she was told and studied her only confidante in the world. All dolled up like a back-street whore. Mesmerised, Kate forced a smile as she listened to her.

‘I’m sorry for turning up unannounced, but I heard about your Aunt Beth passing away. As I was around the corner staying with my new man friend last night, I thought I would come and see how you’re doing, but by the look of you, not so good!’

Kate, distracted by her sympathetic face, wondered if she was aware she only had on one false eyelash caked in thick black mascara. ‘That’s good of you. Thank you, Jill.’ She decided not to mention Jill’s latest conquest. She was touched that her best friend had tottered through the streets like an extra from *A Clockwork Orange* just to come and console her.

‘I’m bearing up, Jill. It’s been awful. I can’t believe I’m not going to see her again. I’m really going to miss her, and Sophie is heartbroken. I just find myself bursting into tears all the time. I’m so glad you popped in.’

She appreciated her friend’s kind, selfless act.

‘Oh Kate, I can’t imagine what you’ve been going through. You know I’m always here for you—you’re my best friend, for heaven’s sake. Just pick the phone up and call me; don’t matter what time it is.’

Kate watched as Jill opened and reached into her handbag.

‘Oh, and before I forget, these are for Sophie, I know she likes them, but that’s all I could get this morning, and don’t forget to give her a kiss from her Auntie Jill.’

Kate smiled as she watched her pull out four large bags of sweets and place them on the table. ‘You didn’t have to do that! Sophie will be pleased.’ She felt blessed Jill was always there during the good times and the bad, although the latter had taken precedence these days.

‘I’m so sorry, Kate, I know it must have been a big shock to you and Sophie. Wasn’t Aunt Beth the one that was well off? The artist? I don’t want to sound heartless but she might have left you and Sophie a few quid.’ Kate raised a half smile. ‘You never know. You and Sophie might be able to get away from that bastard of a husband, Alan, sooner than you think.’

She could feel the bile as it started to rise in the pit of her stomach at just the simple mention of his name.

‘Oh Jill, we have had another bad morning with him, the aggression and violence. It’s all getting too much. All I think about is Sophie, she has seen some terrible things. The guilt I feel is terrible. Why is he like this, Jill?’

Kate’s thoughts drifted. Years ago, when Kate and Jill were at university, they were on a night out to the theatre in London’s West End to see the play *Les Misérables*. It was during the interval that Kate bumped into a stranger and spilt her drink all down the front of his shirt as the thirsty stampede of theatregoers charged towards her to purchase their drinks from the bar. Kate cringed with embarrassment as she watched Jill launch herself at him. She started to rub a tissue across his torso in a seductive manner then proceeded to thrust her large chest into his face, as he gasped for air.

Jill’s voice brought her back to the present.

‘I told you from the start that bastard was no good the night you met him. There was something about him, I could see it in his face, Kate. I’ve met blokes like him before, but you didn’t listen to me, though, did you?’

Kate eyed her friend, surprised that she had adopted a selective memory. She took a deep breath and raised her eyebrows, as she looked across at her.

‘That’s not quite how I remember it, Jill.’

‘Well it was a long time ago, Kate, but he was still an arsehole in my book.’

Kate replayed the vivid comedy scene from her youth yet again. She remembered the shock on Alan’s red, angry face as he struggled to force Jill’s hands off him. Jill, rejected, was taken aback and told Kate not to entertain him and called him a loser as she walked away. Kate had caught his gaze and noticed his anger was short-lived as it dissolved from his face.

He was quite easy on the eye. His thick brown hair was clean cut and the subtle scent of his sweet-smelling aftershave filled her nostrils. He apologised and let out an awkward laugh as he offered to buy her another drink.

They talked and laughed through the whole interval, as Jill watched them from the other end of the bar, perched on a bar stool with a face like a slapped arse. Kate decided to ignore her. It was when she had got up to leave for the second half of the show that he asked her out on a date.

A long week had passed by until he called her up and arranged to take her out. It was on that first date he told her that he couldn’t stop thinking about her and after six dinner dates, he said one day he would marry her. Kate, embarrassed, brushed it off, as she turned a light shade of crimson.

It was almost four months later when he proposed, in front of his friends and family at a top-notch posh restaurant.

She had never seen such a place before, all crystal glasses, fine china and chandeliers. He had kept it such a surprise that none of Kate’s friends or her dear Aunt Beth had been invited. But swept off her feet, in love and caught up in the moment, she had said yes, unable to believe she could feel so happy and content.

They had moved into the house his parents had bought for them after they were married, but it had been hard for Kate being left on her own as Alan continued to work abroad, sometimes six to ten months at a time, only to return for a week here and there, then off again to another secret location.

It was during one of Alan’s return trips that by chance happened to fall on their three-year wedding anniversary that she became pregnant. She was ecstatic, hoping that the child would bring them closer and complete them as a family.

Having gone through a difficult pregnancy, it was during a scorching hot summer on the last day of June that she gave birth to a healthy baby girl at the local hospital and named her Sophie.

Jill had come to visit her and had brought Sophie some beautiful gifts. Kate was grateful but it didn’t make up for Alan’s absence. All she received from him was a drunk gibberish phone call telling her he would be home in a few months.

Devastated and alone, Kate balanced her job as a teacher in the local school and motherhood, which helped fill the void of Alan not being around.

She was eternally grateful and happy that Jill was nearby to lend a hand whenever she needed it.

They had been married nine years when Alan was offered a permanent position in London. Kate was so happy he had accepted it, and although she had worried that they had never really lived together for long as man and wife, she was still pleased he would be home for good.

Once again, Jill interrupted her thoughts.

‘You jumped in too bloody quick, let’s face it, Kate. You didn’t know him that well, or what he was all about, and not being there when Sophie was born, phoning you up drunk, that was unforgivable and selfish. That’s when the alarm bells should’ve started ringing.’

She knew Jill was right, and the alarm bells should have been ringing like Bow Bells.

Kate’s mind drifted back to the past again.

Alan had been home for almost a year and not much had changed as Kate started to wish he still worked abroad. He left the house before she got up in the mornings and came back most nights after she had gone to bed. Kate had started to notice how he would fly off the handle over the silliest of things and had a bit of a short fuse. He began to stay out most nights for a few drinks after work, which never bothered her much. She put it down to the stress of his job and didn’t dwell on it for too long.

But on the rare nights out they had together, he would end up paralytic and become vulgar and obscene as he tried to embarrass her. He’d play the big ‘I am’ as she tried, in vain, to get him home and when she did finally manage to, as soon as he was through the front door he would pick up where he had left off and drink the house dry. She often went to bed without him.

He became more and more distant and had no bond with his daughter. On weekends, he never played with or even acknowledged Sophie, which saddened Kate. She thought his job abroad was a lot to blame for how detached they had all become, and it left her with a heavy heart.

It was at his work’s annual party that he began the abuse outside the marital home, in front of his colleagues. Alan had made jokes at her expense, hinting to them that his wife had put on a lot of lumber since he had worked away, and her arse just about got through the kitchen door most days. Kate was mortified and upset as to how cruel he had become as she walked out, flagged a cab and went home alone.

That night, she lay awake in bed trying to figure out where it had all gone wrong as she cried herself to sleep.

The next morning an almighty row erupted as he screamed at her about how she had embarrassed him in front of his work colleagues and who the fuck did she think she was?

Kate was gobsmacked by the way he had turned the previous night’s scenario around in his favour. Scared, she watched in amazement as the hate manifested in his face and became physical, as Alan picked up his coffee cup and threw it hard towards her. Kate was petrified as it smashed against the kitchen tiles. Alan, without another word spoken, turned around and left the kitchen.

Alan had sulked for weeks afterwards and refused to speak to her. He spent more time in his study with a fresh batch of booze from the local shop, where he was on first name terms with the shopkeeper.

It was a good six months later when the shit really hit the fan. Alan told her he was going down the pub. Kate had asked him to forget the pub and suggested it would be nice if he spent the day with her and Sophie.

She knew it was a big mistake as soon as the words left her lips. His face turned red. He morphed into someone else as the veins in his neck stood out, and his eyes protruded from the sockets as they pierced into her. He exploded, punching her hard in the face. Her legs turned to jelly and she hit the floor hard.

Kate’s body shook. Unable to speak, she tried to pick herself up. She wondered who this person standing over her was as he rained down blow after blow to her limp, fragile body. In that moment, she knew just how short his fuse had now become. She was terrified.

The next day he was like a sad puppy with its tail between its legs. She watched the tears flow from his big soppy blue eyes, all apologies and promises on how it would never happen again, and how ashamed of himself he was. She listened to him as he begged forgiveness. He blamed it on the stress and pressure he had been under at work. She looked at the slobbering mess before her, who promised he wouldn’t go out as much if she were home more for him, and not teaching and running drama classes after school hours.

He convinced her she would be a better wife and mother if she stopped these things, and told her he earned enough to provide for all of them and that she didn’t need to go to work anymore. She felt sorry for him and started to feel guilty. She thought maybe she could cut back the hours from her job a little bit and, going against her better judgement, she decided to forgive him.

She loved her job, but maybe he was right. Perhaps she should spend more time with her family now he had returned back home. He had made a sacrifice, why shouldn’t she? So, both in agreement, she went ahead and handed in her resignation.

She felt a fresh start was on the horizon, and started to put extra effort into their home, being creative, decorating and cleaning more. She had Alan’s dinner on the table every night when he walked through the door. This soon became a thankless task. Often, he stood with a perplexed look on his face at the dinner plate, refusing to eat most nights. He always asked what the fuck it was he was meant to be eating. Kate could hear his voice in her head as he protested;

‘I should be rewarded a *Blue Peter* badge for attempting to eat that lot of shite!’

How she wished she had never succumbed and given up her job and her independence. She had little money of her own and never got to see her friends any more. Depressed and isolated, she was on a downward spiral and so was Alan’s drinking, and then the dreaded phone call came.

Alan had been made redundant. Kate knew it was because of his alcohol consumption but was too frightened to mention it. He fell quickly back to his old ways. He preferred to spend most evenings with a bottle of cheap Scotch in his study as he tinkered with his computer gadgets.

He became more venomous with each mouthful of the golden nectar, and continued to mentally abuse her. Putting her down for one thing or another with every opportunity he got.

Jill’s voice brought Kate back to the present again…

‘Kate, I’m talking to you, are you listening to me, honey? Kate?’

Kate turned her head as she looked at Jill. ‘Sorry, Jill, I was miles away. I was just thinking about years ago. Do you want another cuppa?’

The sound of whistling from the hallway panicked her as she stared hard at Jill.

‘Well, to be honest, Kate, I need to get home and have a shower. I’ve been out all night. Are you going to be okay?’

Kate reeled back in shock as she heard his voice behind her. He staggered in the doorway as pissed as a pudding.

‘Oh, look who it is! Jill, how are you, darlin’? Bloody hell, you look like Marilyn Monroe in that outfit. All you need is a windy draught between your legs, and I can sort that out for you, sweetheart.’

Kate cringed. Repulsed by him, she watched Jill as she laughed out loud at Alan’s lame joke.

‘Hello, Alan, how are you? I just popped in quick to see Kate. So sad about Aunt Beth passing away like that, you must be gutted.’

Kate kept her eyes on him as he stumbled towards the kitchen table.

‘Yes, shame about the old bird but she did creep me out with that glass eye of hers. It was like one eye was going down the shop and the other was coming back with the change. To be honest, I couldn’t look her in the face, she made me go cross-eyed.’

Kate sat bolt upright in her chair, as he laughed at his own joke, and looked across at Jill.

‘Well, look on the bright side, Alan, as I said to Kate, she might have left you a few quid, so don’t go knocking her just yet. Anyway, I’ve got to make tracks, my lovelies.’

Alan continued to make a fool out of himself. Embarrassed, Kate sensed her face was the colour of Jill’s red lipstick.

‘Going already, Jill? Don’t you fancy a quick one before you go? Drink that is,’ he went on.

Kate rolled her eyes towards Jill. Standing up, she shook her head in amazement. ‘Jill’s busy today, Alan.’ The cheesy grin that had accompanied his eyes as they fixated on Jill’s large breasts made her feel sick to her stomach.

She shuddered at the image she had conjured up in her head, of him panting like a dog.

‘Another time, Alan, got to dash I’m afraid. Kate, I will give you a call in the week. Oh, and if you need to call me, do it on my old pay-as-you-go mobile number. Take care and look after yourself, and don’t forget to give my love to Sophie. Bye.’

Jill left the same way she arrived, in a whirlwind. Unnerved as her friend banged the front door, Kate was faced with a pissed-up Alan.

‘So, what’s going on?’

She didn’t answer as he started his verbal assault. The cheesy grin that was plastered across his face had dispersed, replaced by a much more sinister one.

‘So, what the fuck was she doing here today? And what’s her fucking problem? Leaving in such a fucking hurry? I suppose you’ve been sitting here slagging me off no doubt, you pair of fucking whores.’

She knew he was three sheets to the wind and not wanting to argue with a drunk, she tried to stay calm.

‘Don’t be silly, Alan. Jill just popped in because she heard about Aunt Beth, that’s all. Don’t be so paranoid, for heaven’s sake.’

She wished she had kept quiet and not opened her mouth at all, as he was at her once again.

‘You’re a lying cunt! You’ve been sitting here mugging me off. I can see it in your fucking face.’

Her hands trembled. He reached into his pocket and she watched nervously as he pulled out one of his prized Cuban cigars and lit it.

‘We haven’t even mentioned you, Alan. Not once.’

The stench of the cigar smoke made her throw up a little in her mouth, as the colour drained away from her face.

‘I’ve told you before, Kate, the trouble with you is, to be a liar you need to have a good fucking memory.’

She watched Alan as he took a long drag on the cigar and blew it straight into her face. Kate coughed and waved her arms about frantically, as he continued to take deep drags on the rolled Havana concoction and blow it towards her.

‘I’m not a liar, Alan, why do you keep saying…’

He lunged at her with the cigar before she had finished her sentence and as the pain seared through her arm, she screamed out.