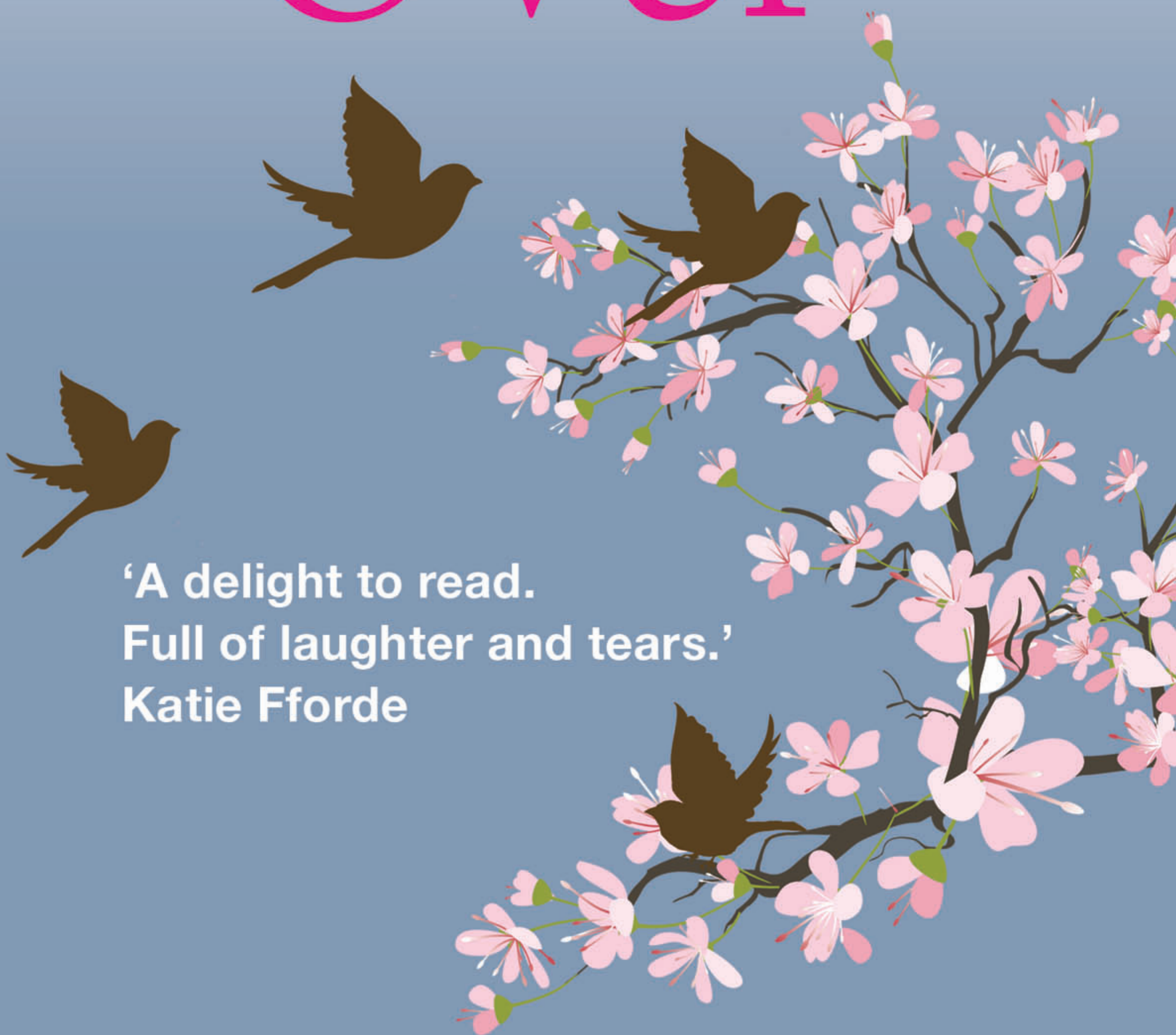


Starting Over



'A delight to read.
Full of laughter and tears.'
Katie Fforde

Sue Moorcroft

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For Carl
Forever singing in our hearts

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Prologue

~ (Priority)

Subject: Wedding ...

From: Olly<ollygray@ollygray.co.uk>

Time: 18:14

To: Tess<tess@tessriddell.co.uk>

Tess,

No easy way to say this so will be direct.

Given it loads of thought and the idea of moving in with you & your messy workroom has got to me. I've gone cold on the wedding.

You're normally the first to walk away from a bad situation but this time it's me that's recognised the issues & I think you'll be glad I did, some day.

I've spoken to the travel agent re the honeymoon. I expect you will want to see to the return of the prezzies & whatnot, as I won't be around. Am taking a contract in Scotland for a couple of months – good opportunity. As soon as I send this I'll be out the door.

No point talking, anyway. My mind's made up.

Sorry.

Married bliss is just not me.

Love

Olly x

Chapter One

Tess's vehicle stopped as if a giant had slammed a door in its face.

Metal screeched, glass crashed, the seat belt wrenched the breath from her body and the airbag thumped her in the face.

Then, slowly, the bag deflated.

And everything went quiet apart from the ringing in her ears.

She found herself gazing into the flatbed of the breakdown truck she'd been following for the last two miles. Her windscreen had dissolved into a million crystals twinkling in her lap, on her chest, on the floor, on the dash and on an Izmir Blue bonnet bent up like a broken beak. One wiper twitched in mid-air. The rain that, until now, had been pounding on her windscreen, began to pound on her.

'*Shit*' she croaked.

A man ran from the breakdown truck, dark curls swinging around his eyes as he leant through the space where the windscreen used to be. 'Are you hurt?'

'My face is hot,' she mumbled.

'Yeah, airbag. But you seem to be breathing and thinking. Sit still.' He fished out a phone.

'Don't ring anyone. I'm fine.' She swivelled her head from side to side, flexed back and legs, then pushed at the driver's door. It groaned outward, allowing her to fumble out of the seat belt and slither gingerly onto the road where the rain burbled into a gully.

The man glared, phone still poised. 'What are you *doing*? You could have a spinal injury!'

She pointed to her legs. 'Working!' Checking her nose for blood, her hand came away wet only with rain. She didn't think it was the rain that was blurring her vision, though.

'You need checking over.' He seemed not to feel the torrent that flattened his hair and rolled down a hard-cut face and into blue eyes. If he needed two shaves a day it looked as if he seldom bothered.

Tess tried again to flex. Her back felt as if she'd just done a bungee jump. She hunched her shoulders. 'I don't like hospitals. Look, sorry I didn't see you stop, I turned on the heat and the windscreen misted. My insurance will cover your truck OK.'

He glanced at where her Freelander was gnawing at his breakdown truck. 'Doubt you've done more than add a couple of new scratches to the wrecker. It's your Freelander that's bent.' He narrowed his gaze on her once more and his voice softened. 'Better go to hospital, you know.'

She shook her head. And winced. 'You're from a garage, right?' She indicated the sign on the side panel of the truck. 'MAR Motors is the garage in Middledip, isn't it? At the Cross.'

'Yes. You're not local, are you?'

'Just moving in - to Honeybun Cottage.' Not that it was any of his business. 'Can you give me a tow?'

He grimaced. 'You'll sue me if it turns out you've got a cracked neck.'

'I won't because I haven't!' she snapped. 'But the Freelander's undrivable. I'd appreciate a tow. If I have to call someone else I'll be sitting here in the rain for hours.'

He hesitated. Then sighed. 'Come on, then!' Ungraciously, he installed her in the passenger seat of the wrecker before spending ten minutes clanging around at its rear, while Tess sank her swimming head on a seat that smelt of old oil and closed her eyes.

Finally, he climbed back into the cab, shook the rain off his hair and drove her the remaining mile or so to Middledip village. As the breakdown truck began to rumble along, he flipped his thumb in the direction of her poor Freelander. 'Were you fond of it?'

'Loads. Everyone said it was a posey vehicle - I was living in London. But I love it. What's left of it since it hit your truck.'

'Nobody forced you to run it up my backside,' he pointed out,

disagreeably.

Tess's head was pounding and sudden tears pricked her eyes, blurring the already blurred raindrops that drummed on the windscreen and hissed beneath the wheels, bouncing and bubbling off the expanse of tarmac at the centre of the village, where three roads converged at the point known inaccurately as the Cross, and where there was a building with the sign: 'MAR Motors'.

Wordlessly, she eased out of the cab and squelched across the forecourt, following her disagreeable saviour out of the deluge and in through a long run of folding doors. The floor was painted grey, like the pit garages at the motor races on television.

An office chair stood in front of a computer. He nodded at it. 'Sit there while I have a look at your car, then we'll talk about what to do.' He raised his voice to a masked figure welding under a ramp at the back of the garage. 'Jos! Can you get her a cup of tea? She's had a prang. Pete! Give me a hand, will you?' A man uncoiled himself from under the bonnet of a little red sports car, pushing back floppy fair hair, smiled at Tess and ran to help at the back of the breakdown truck.

Aching and shaking too much to object to being ordered about, Tess gazed out through the hammering rain to where an old-fashioned van in baker's livery graced the forecourt along with two old cars. Not banger-type old but 1950s old, all grinning chrome grills, candy colours and swiping tail fins. The forecourt looked like a classic car show.

She let her chin sink onto her fist and once again closed her eyes. What a crappy beginning to her fresh start.

Jos, welding mask discarded, wiping his hands on his overalls and stamping about in motorcycle boots, rattled cups and filled the kettle. His long dark hair was pulled back in a ponytail and he had a beard like Hagrid, not the trendy goatee worn by so many men she'd

known in London. He brought her steaming tea in a mug with the MG logo on the side and an open pack of sugar with a spoon sticking out.

Through the strands of dripping hair she managed a smile, even as she shivered. 'Thanks.'

His eyes were gentle. 'Ratty'll soon get you sorted.'

Presumably, he meant the disagreeable man. She made a face. 'Ratty? Yes, he is, a bit.'

The eyes smiled. '*Rattenbury*.' And pointed to the 'M. A. Rattenbury' sign on the wall.

'Oh. I get it.' The owner of the blue eyes and black curls was the boss. She should've known.

In a few minutes, he was back. Draining a mug of tea, he bent over the computer, so close that Tess could feel the chill of the rain from his arms and shoulders. The sleeves had been cut from his T-shirt to exhibit small tattoos. Sculpted by physical work, he was a different breed from Olly with his designer labels and career in IT.

She jerked her gaze away.

She was done with men. She was here to concentrate on getting better, on freeing herself of the lassitude that had left her vegetating these past months.

He tapped the computer screen. 'Want me to book it in?'

Her mind flipped to Channel 4 documentaries about tow bandits. Maybe he'd stick her with a £500 bill and she wouldn't be able to argue because she'd *asked* him to bring the Freelander ... 'Wouldn't it be better at Land Rover?' she enquired dubiously, through her headache.

He tapped the screen again, harder. 'Yes! There's their number – ring and arrange for it to be fetched.'

Belatedly, she realised that what he'd called up on the computer was the contact details of the Land Rover main dealer in Bettsbrough.

He turned to a toolbox, obviously having a hundred better

things to do than deal with her any further.

She didn't need his tight expression to tell her she'd been out of order. Having run up the arse of his truck and demanded he rescue her, she supposed it would, actually, have been polite to put the resultant business his way. And starting at square one with another garage suddenly seemed exhausting. 'Actually ... I'd like to book it in here for the repair.'

A flash of those hard eyes. 'Probably better at Land Rover.'

She propped her head back on her hand. 'So you can't do it here, at your garage?'

'I can do it, but it'll be *best* at Land Rover.'

He was annoying, scraping through his tools and not wanting her business. 'It'll be *convenient* to have it done here.'

'Oh shi-- Book it in, Pete. Sheet it up until we can bring it inside.'

In silence, Tess watched as Pete and Jos fixed a faded blue tarpaulin over where the windscreen used to be, to direct the rain away from her front seats.

In silence, Ratty worked at the bench.

The Freelander looked so forlorn all bashed, squashed and abandoned on the forecourt. Tess groaned. 'All my gear's in the car.'

He glanced up. 'Anyone you can call?'

She sighed. 'Not really.' It sounded so sad.

Silence. Then, 'OK! Just to Honeybun Cottage? I'll bring the van round.'

It was shameful, really. The situation was all her fault and yet she sat in the echoing chill of the garage and watched the three men like ants in the rain, transferring her sacks of clothes and boxes of books into the back of a van. But concrete was setting into her muscles, her head clanged and she felt so sick.

Boxes, cases, bags, a behemoth of a computer and an awkwardly large printer ... Finally, Ratty had everything transferred to the van, what seemed to be all the worldly possessions of the accident-prone owner of the Freelanders.

Impatiently, he loped back over to the doorway. 'Anytime you're ready ...'

He watched the woman hunch her shoulders against the rain and clamber stiffly into the front seat, obviously prepared to endure the tortures of hell rather than admit that she was hurting. Her hair was a sodden rope and her T-shirt clung interestingly. During the short, rattly journey she stopped shivering only long enough to offer, 'It's this road.'

'Yep, this is Little Lane all right.' He nodded. 'What happened to the commuters who had Honeybun after Herbie died? Mortgage rate get them?'

'I suppose. I bought it as a repo. My father's field of expertise.'

'Profiting from someone else's bad fortune.'

'Like you, fixing breakdowns?' Her face was tight with irritation.

He half smiled. 'Got me. But repair's not my market.'

'Really? But you are going to fix my car?'

'When you get the OK from your insurance company.' He turned in between the gateposts of Honeybun Cottage and pulled up as close to the kitchen door as possible, beside a lawn full of clover and daisies. He knew these cottages and the way the door opened straight into the house. 'They'll probably tell you that it has to be done by Land Rover. I'll dump all this crap in the kitchen, shall I?'

For the first time she smiled, and it lit her face like a sunbeam on a stormy day. 'You're a regular Sir Galahad.'

Trotting to and fro from van to kitchen, he got wetter and wetter, until he was really tired of it. He didn't suggest the woman should help, though, because she was so pale that a dusting of

freckles was standing out across her nose. Then he saw her rubbing her eyes and blinking. 'I think you're concussed,' he said shortly, piling four black bin bags, round and puffed with clothes, beside the kitchen table.

She pressed her palms to her forehead. 'Probably.' She turned both her palms into a *Halt!* sign. 'But I'm not going to hospital.' She picked up one bin bag and one overnight case. 'This is all I need for the first night. I'm going to be incredibly rude and ungracious but do you mind if I go to bed?'

'No prob.' He waited until she'd clambered up the twisting staircase before adding under his breath, 'You seem pretty good at being rude and ungracious.'