

WALNUTS Pat Garwood

CHAPTER ONE

Eileen Taylor was thirty-nine years old. She had a husband, two children, a new house and a headache. She made herself a cup of coffee and thought about the evening.

She and Keith had been asked over the road to have a few drinks with Michael and Penny, who lived opposite them. 'Come about eight-thirty' Penny had said. If there was one thing that threw Eileen into a state of instant depression it was the thought of a few drinks with Penny and Michael, or indeed anyone. She had a strong anti-social streak and whenever she and Keith were asked out, or whenever they found themselves having someone to dinner, she always wished that something would happen to prevent it. Given that, she also knew that once any of these occasions were actually happening, she quite often really enjoyed them. So she sat with her coffee, trying to reason with herself - she didn't want to be a drag for Keith and she needed to think positively about Penny and Michael.

Penny had come over to say hello on the day that she and Keith had moved in. She was mid-thirties and attractive, in a rather bright, pushy sort of way. Michael, she had only seen a couple of times. Once in his front garden and the second time, striding down the centre of the road, wearing a white shirt, open at the neck. He'd made her think of summer and the countryside. However, tonight, she wasn't in the mood to meet him or anyone else. She'd had an exhausting day. After Keith had gone off to work, she'd made sure that Jack had got off in time to make the journey to his college, near their old house, driven Poppy to school and then had a blitz on the bedroom. Although they'd only moved in a few weeks ago, she had this urge to get everything looking normal, as soon as possible. She'd worked solidly until it was time to go and collect Poppy, who was eleven, made her tea for her, had a toasted cheese sandwich herself and then had a long talk with Jack when he got in. He'd had an argument with his course tutor because he wanted to give up film studies. He thought the films that they were being asked to study were pathetic. After half an hour discussing it, he'd stomped up to his room to go onto Facebook for a bit and take his mind off it. Poppy was already upstairs doing her homework on the little table in her bedroom.

By the time Keith got home, all Eileen wanted was to have a hot bath and fall into bed. She heard his key in the door and then the sound of his keys being flung on the hall table. Familiar sounds from the old house, carried over into this one, as if the move had never happened.

'Hello Darling, how are you doing?' said Keith as he came into the kitchen and gave her a kiss.

'Oh, ok,' she said 'how was your day?'

'Not too bad. Although I can't get used to this bloody open plan set up. By the time I'd made three phone calls I felt as if my head was going to explode.'

One of the reasons they'd moved to the new house had been because Keith had been promoted and transferred to a new branch of his advertising agency, which had meant a much longer journey into work for him. The new house was much closer, he was getting more money and now had eight people working under him, but they were all working with him in the same large modern office. In the old branch, he'd only had four people on his team but at least he'd had his own office - small and grotty though it was. He wasn't at all sure how much he liked the new setup.

Despite the strain of the day, he felt better now that he was home. He loved the house and couldn't really believe that they were finally in it after all the hassles of selling the old one and getting through the offer, survey and mortgage razamatazz for this one. He was looking forward to going over to Michael and Penny's tonight. The road they had lived in before hadn't been particularly friendly. Everyone kept to themselves. It had been alright because he and Eileen got on well and made each other laugh and the children's lives always filled the house up with their various dramas. But he had the feeling that everything here was going to be very different.

'Well, I'm just going to have a quick shower before we go out,' he said, and went upstairs.

A few minutes later Poppy came into the kitchen wearing a red leotard and pink tights. Her fair hair was tied up in a high bunch which she'd twiddled into a bun. 'Please can you come and see the gym display that I've worked out Mummy?' she said, 'it's not very long and it's really good.'

'Well, if it's quick,' said Eileen, 'I've got to get myself ready to go over the road for a drink with Penny and Michael in a minute.'

'Can't I come?'

'No it's too late and you haven't been invited,' Eileen said, giving her a kiss.

As she followed Poppy upstairs, Eileen was trying to decide what to wear. She didn't want to look all dressed up. On the other hand, she was feeling such a mess anyway, that if she didn't make any effort at all, she'd just sink into the background and be unable to make any contribution to the evening at all. She decided during the gym display that she'd wear the blue dress that she'd got in a 'Monsoon' sale. She'd had it for years but she felt comfortable in it. She got Poppy into bed as quickly as she could.

'Goodnight Darling,' she said, 'Jack will be here after we've gone out, if you want anything.'

'If I'm really good Mummy, please, please, please can I have a mobile phone? All my friends have got one'.

'We'll see,' said Eileen, giving her a hug, 'I'll talk to Daddy - maybe we can get you one in the summer holidays before your new school.'

'Oh, thank you Mummy. I love you so much,' she gave Eileen a big noisy kiss, which made them both laugh.



As he was having his shower, Keith was trying to work out what he should do about Rosie. She had worked on his team in the last office but he hadn't been able to organise her transferral with him. She was twenty-three and he'd found himself increasingly attracted to her. He could feel that she was interested in him and she was always prepared to work extra hard on any project that he was pushing to the fore. About two months after she had joined the Agency, he'd asked her if she'd like to go for a meal after work to talk about a particular promotion the team had been working on and the relationship took off from there. Now, it was not going to be so easy. He felt that it was time to let the whole thing ease off. It was too complex to try and keep a relationship going with a girl who lived the other side of London. But Rosie was unhappy. She kept phoning the office and he was worried that she'd do something silly and mess everything up. The moment that she'd started trying to strengthen the ties after his move, he found himself wanting more and more to end the whole thing. Half of her attraction had been her encouragement and inspiration in the office. It would be much better for her to get involved with someone nearer her own age - although he'd been very flattered that she should have found him attractive physically. Forty had come as a bit of a shock to him. Although he had kept his figure and his hair, he sometimes caught sight of himself in a badly lit mirror and thought he looked about fifty. It was something to do with the lines on his face and the way his jaw line had lost its sharpness. There was also a certain drawn look that hit his face after a particularly heavy day. Rosie, though, had said he looked vulnerable when he was tired - he was going to miss her.

Next door, Eileen finished her make-up, got changed, and decided to have a drink to get into the right mood for the evening. She went downstairs, poured herself a glass of Pinot, and went into the sitting room. Jack was on the sofa with his laptop and various books and sheets of printed paper all over the floor.

'I'm going to write my English essay down here Mum. The light's all wrong in my room. If you could let me have a bit of extra money for the stuff I'll need, I'll try and fix it up over the weekend. I need some more plugs and leads and I'd really like to fix up a spot in the corner.'

'Yes, all right, if you think you can do it.'

'Of course I can,' he said and gave her a smile.

'What's your essay about?'

'Oh, I can choose from this list of titles taken from past 'A' level papers. Some of them don't make any sense to me at all. I think I'm going to do one on 'Breaking the Shell.'

'What does that mean?' said Poppy, who had come downstairs in her nightie. 'Do you mean like breaking a snail's shell or something? I think that's disgusting and really mean.'

'Look, I won't be able to write it at all if you keep coming down,' said Jack, 'it doesn't have to be the literal meaning. It can be about people. I mean sometimes people can feel that they have a sort of shell round them.'

‘You mean like walnuts?’ said Poppy.

They had a big walnut tree in the new garden and Poppy had been collecting a whole bowl of them.

‘What?’ said Jack.

‘You can sometimes see one that is so rotten that you don’t pick it up. But most of them look the same until you break the shell, then some of them are really nice and some of them are all dried up and it’s really disappointing.’

Jack laughed, ‘I think you’d better write the essay for me,’ he said.

‘And I think you’d better get back to bed,’ said Eileen to Poppy, ‘what did you come down for anyway?’

‘I came down to see if you’d gone – you didn’t say goodbye to me.’

‘Well, we’ll say goodbye now,’ said Keith, who had just come downstairs, ‘it’s time we went anyway’

‘Shan’t be long I hope,’ said Eileen. Keith shot her a glance. He knew this mood of old and hoped it wasn’t going to spoil the evening.

‘Come on, you look lovely and it’ll be fun.’ He took her hand and led her through the hall and out of the front door.



After they’d gone, Jack made Poppy some hot orange and took her back up to bed.

‘Read for ten minutes and then put the light out,’ he said, ‘you’ll be really tired for school in the morning, otherwise.’

At least Poppy had only this term left at her old school, he thought, as he pulled her door to. Next September she’d be starting at a grammar school quite near the new house, while he still had another whole eighteen months of travelling for over an hour to college every day. Damn the move. It had completely messed everything up as far as he was concerned. He quite liked the new house but it didn’t matter much to him, really. As soon as he finished college he was going to get a job and rent a flat with Mike. Mind you, Mike sometimes got on his nerves, with his endless obsession with motor bikes. Maybe he’d be better off on his own somewhere. He felt the need to make the break from home some way or another but he couldn’t do anything until he’d finished college. He really wanted to get his ‘A’ levels. He wanted to get them for himself and for Mum and Dad. They cared about him and he got on ok with them.

Just as he was on his way down to the kitchen to make himself some coffee, his phone rang. He went into the sitting-room and picked it up off the sofa. It was Kate.

‘Hi, Kate,’

‘Um, I know we said we’d give ourselves a break from seeing each other but I’m feeling really miserable. I hope you don’t mind me ringing but Mum and Dad are out and I’m on my own.’

‘Of course I don’t mind.’

‘Can you come over? I’d really like to see you.’

Jack could hear that she’d been crying and that always upset him, even when it wasn’t his fault. Kate was his first serious girlfriend. He’d been out with a few girls over the last two years but none of them had meant much to him, not in the way that Kate did. The trouble was that she was only fifteen and he felt a great sense of responsibility to her. In lots of ways, the way she looked and the way she behaved most of the time, she was incredibly mature but then sometimes she’d react to a situation and he’d think, ‘God, she’s only four years older than Poppy’ and wonder what on earth he was doing getting so deeply involved with her. He tried to think of the best way of handling tonight’s situation.

‘I can’t come over tonight, Kate. I’m looking after Poppy while Mum and Dad are out. But I tell you what, I’ll phone you every hour, on the hour, to see how you are, how’s that?’

‘All right,’ said Kate, in a small voice.

‘And I love you.’

‘I love you too.’

‘Look I’ve got to go now because I’ve got to write a whole essay and it’s got to be in by tomorrow.’

‘Don’t go.’

‘I’ve got to. I’ll phone you later, ok? Bye.’

As he made some coffee, he tried to get his thoughts back together again. It was almost impossible now that he’d started thinking about Kate again. It hadn’t really worked not seeing her for a week. They’d decided to try it because they kept having arguments about the fact that he had to leave her early to get back to the new house. She wanted him to miss the last bus and stay the night in their spare room but he hadn’t wanted to. He felt embarrassed by what her parents might think of him and also he needed to set off to college from home in the mornings, to get his books and his mind together. It had all been fine when they had lived just round the corner from Kate – the bloody move again! He decided to fix a definite day to see her in the week and to arrange to spend Sundays with her when he could. Saturdays he usually did something with Mike. This Saturday, Mike, who was the same age as him and really cool, wanted him to go to a motor bike auction. He wanted to buy a cheap one, do it up and sell it at a profit. Jack wasn’t that interested in bikes but he

and Mike always had such a laugh together that it didn't matter too much what they were doing. They'd known each other since they were about eight and most of the really good times he'd enjoyed had Mike somewhere involved in them. The last term at school they'd begun to get in each other's way a bit but now that they were at different sixth form colleges, when they did see each other it was like the old times.

So far, he hadn't really got to know anyone in Princeton Road. He had noticed that there was an incredibly pretty girl who lived about four houses down and she'd smiled at him as she was coming out of her gate when he was passing her house. But he'd also noticed her walking down the road holding hands with a dark haired boy ... and anyway there was Kate.