

From Sadie's Year

Chapter Nine

August

Caitlin loved a party, but it was soon obvious that her mood was sombre. As she piped swirls onto the cupcakes, she stopped to stare out of the window so often that I looked too, to see what was there. She shook her head, her voice flat as she told me it was nothing. The banter, which went on as Diz flitted in and out, drew no response from her, and then she snapped at him, 'For God's sake, do you have to stand right there?'

He looked over at me, lifted his shoulders for a second and left the kitchen. Julie asked the girls if they would like to help Daddy in the garden and I was left alone with Caitlin.

'Are you all right?' I said, but she didn't answer. I left the food and went to her, touching her arm. 'Come on, it's me. What's up?'

She tore a sheet of kitchen roll and blew her nose. 'I think Diz has been messaging Portia.'

'He wouldn't dare ... would he?'

'She posted photos from the Seychelles and wished him happy birthday. She was draped across a sunbed in the tiniest bikini. He says he ignored her, but I don't know.'

'She goading him, that's all.' I would have hugged her, but her hands were tight under her armpits and the melancholy felt like a barrier. 'You're still checking up on him then?'

'Not much now, but he was acting weirdly the other day, so I looked

at his Facebook again.'

'And was there a message *to* Portia?'

'No, but he could have deleted it.'

'He should have blocked her months ago, stupid idiot,' I said. 'Look, Diz is back with *you* and Sophie and Anna now. Nothing else matters.'

She was thinking about it, so I stayed quiet and waited. All of a sudden, she shook her head, grabbed my face and planted a kiss on my cheek. 'You're right. It's the girls that matter. I have to trust him and make this work.'

After a shower and change of clothes, Caitlin seemed more relaxed and by the time the guests arrived, she was back laughing at Diz's jokes. Later, as the music blasted across the gardens, I followed him to the kitchen, where he was sorting out more cans. No one was around, but we could be interrupted at any time, so I had to be blunt.

'Have you been messaging Portia?'

'No,' he said. 'Why?' He *sounded* surprised, but I was immune now to his smooth talk.

'Caitlin thinks you have.'

'She sent me some photos on Facebook, that's all. I didn't reply.'

'Block her, you twat,' I said. 'Even better, close your account.' He turned away from the beer and looked into my eyes. My return glare was deliberately hostile, but his eyes crinkled with humour. I clenched my fists, allowed an exasperated 'Aagh' to escape, then swung round and left the room.

After our talk, Diz paid more attention to his wife and, as she brought out the salads, French bread, butter and cheeses, he grabbed her by the waist and dropped a kiss on her cheek. She looked beautiful in a dark linen shirt with white jeans, her hair a shiny cascade over her shoulders, whereas he was in the same cut-offs and T-shirt that he had worn all afternoon. He's punching so far above his weight, I thought.

Julie saw me looking and whispered, 'That's not jealousy in your eyes, I hope?'

I thought of Alex in New York. Pictured him at his meetings, dark suit, ice-white shirt and gold cufflinks, and laughed. 'That's a definite no from me. I just hope they're going to be okay.'

'Well it's not your problem,' she said, and we lifted our wine glasses and clinked them together.

After we had eaten, the music was turned up, and even Ricky Martin's 'Livin' La Vida Loca' didn't halt the energetic patio display of dancing. Sophie and Anna, cute in flounced pink and lilac Disney Princess dresses, jiggled up and down as Diz jived with Caitlin, exaggerating his moves and making funny faces at them. Then it was time for the cake and a loud rendition of 'Happy Birthday', followed by applause as the candles were blown out, relit for Sophie and Anna and extinguished once more.

'I'm going to skip the drool-covered cake,' murmured Julie. 'It's a cupcake and more wine for me.'

The evening stayed warm and dozens of candles in jars turned the dusky garden into a fairyland, so it was gone eleven before the last guest staggered off and we could clear up. Julie, who was staying the night with me, offered to collect glasses, but when I saw her swig dregs, I made her sit in the armchair with a glass of water. We bagged the rubbish and filled the dishwasher and then I carried a tray of coffee into the lounge.

'Thanks for all your help,' said Caitlin. She leaned against Diz on the sofa.

'It's been fun,' I said.

'Better than lasht year.' Julie slouched in the armchair, hugging her coffee mug, which rested on her stomach. 'I know all about it.'

Caitlin's smile was so innocent, I could hardly bear to look. 'What have you been telling her?' she said to me.

'Nothing,' I said. Despite the warm coffee, my hands and feet were cold and I glowered at Julie. 'She's drunk. Take no notice.'

'It was really hot last year too,' said Caitlin. 'Do you remember, Diz? I forgot to put the raspberry ripple back in the freezer, and then we ran out of ice. Oh, and Anna put your mobile in the sink when I was doing the washing up.' I caught Diz's eye and a few moments of awkward silence followed. Caitlin seemed relaxed though. She stood up and smiled at us. 'Any more coffee?'

'Better not,' I said. 'I think Julie should be in bed.' Caitlin went into the kitchen, and Diz followed her.

'Julie,' I hissed. 'What the fuck are you playing at, talking about last year?'

'Don't worry, Shadie, she has no idea.'

'C'mon, we're going home before you say anything else.'

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Two days later, as Fiona Bruce read a late news bulletin on the royal baby, my mobile vibrated across the coffee table. I ignored it and nibbled my third chocolate digestive, but the caller was persistent and I caved in. It was Diz. ‘Can you come over? Caitlin’s crying and I don’t know what to do.’

He opened the front door before I had a chance to knock, and from inside the house came muffled sobs.

‘What happened?’ I hissed at him.

‘I don’t know. I got back from the pub ten minutes ago – I’m not drunk, it was a quick one while the footie was on. When I came in, she was curled up in the chair, like this.’ He spoke quietly and his head nodded towards the lounge. ‘She won’t speak to me, just pushes me away.’

‘What have you been up to?’

‘Nothing. Honestly. I blocked Portia like you told me to.’

‘Go and check the girls,’ I said calmly as the familiar crisis response kicked in. ‘Stay up there for a bit. I’ll talk to her.’

I entered the lounge. Caitlin had her back to the door but her head was bent over, and her back heaved as she cried – I had never heard her so distressed, not even when Diz left. In the time it took to cross the room, a chain of possible reasons flashed through my head: a cake had gone wrong; she had miscarried; there was a lump in her breast; her mother had died. I picked up the box of tissues from the sideboard, sat on the arm of the chair and put my hand on her shoulder.

‘What’s happened, love?’ I adopted the same tone that I had used with stressed employees, but it didn’t work. She flinched, and shook my hand off her shoulder with such an intensity, I retreated to the sofa to give her some space. ‘Diz is upstairs. Come on, you can tell me. I’m your friend.’

Caitlin slowly turned her head. Her face was red and tears were running down her cheeks. ‘Piss off.’

She had never sworn at me before. My heart began to race and I wiped my clammy hands on my trousers. ‘You’re frightening me,’ I said. ‘Have you had some bad news?’

Caitlin leapt up and rushed out. I followed and stood inside the kitchen door as she lifted a mug off the draining board and filled it from

the tap. She looked out of the window as she gulped the water down, then slowly turned round, arms crossed. The sobbing had ceased and her words were clipped. 'How long did it go on?'

'What?' I said. 'I have no idea what you're talking about.' But I knew exactly what she meant.

She jabbed her finger towards me. 'You,' she said. 'And Diz. I've seen the text messages.'

I had only sent two, one after the trip to Bournemouth and the other when he was drunk. Had this man never heard of the delete button?

'They were innocent, honestly.' Fuck, I thought, fuck, fuck, fuck.

She snorted and tossed her head. 'Let's see, what did you write? "I'm glad we talked and sorted it out" and "Just friends now, remember". You fancied him from the beginning. All that time, pretending to be a mate, when what you really wanted was my husband.'

'It's not true. Ask Diz. I told him to leave me alone, that's all.' My voice sounded squeaky but I had no spare saliva to lubricate my throat.

'So it was his fault? Chasing *you*, was he? As if.' She slowly crossed the room and I flinched as she approached. 'You're a bitter dried-up old hag and you should be ashamed of yourself.'

Her words stung but I wasn't thinking rationally. In my panic, I thought I could persuade her to calm down and convince her there was nothing between Diz and me. 'Okay,' I said, holding my hands up in surrender. 'When you were separated last year, I admit – and we were both really drunk – we did, um, have a bit of a fumble. When I sobered up, I realised it had been a terrible mistake and I had stepped over the line. Nothing was worth putting you and me at risk ... and we were both so drunk. I promise it was only the once.'

I trailed off and waited. Caitlin's stare was icy, then she broke the silence with a curt, 'When?'

'The barbecue. I went home to get some ice, and Diz followed.' She stood her ground, mute, as I carried on digging. 'I didn't betray *you*, not really; he was with Portia then.'

'He was still my husband and you thought it was okay to shag him, while I was next door with our guests.'

'I'm so sorry, Caitlin. It didn't mean anything. Diz could hardly

remember the next day.' I felt helpless in the face of her scorn and no matter how hard I swallowed, the hurt in my throat got worse.

'So you discussed it together, and agreed to keep your dirty little secret from me?'

My close friend, whom I loved dearly, oozed such intense pain, I couldn't even look at her. I studied a squashed cupcake case, just visible under the edge of the fridge, but my skittering thoughts were beyond control. I heard quiet steps on the stairs, then I sensed Diz in the doorway behind me. We stood together in silence, watching. Caitlin backed across the kitchen until she hit the edge of the sink, and picked up the empty mug she had put down moments earlier. My ears tuned into the measured ticking of the clock on the wall to my right and then she pulled her arm back and yelled, 'You fucking bastards.'

I was paralysed with fear and two things happened next. Diz grabbed my shoulders and jerked me back, and the mug smashed into the wall, just missing the clock and covering me with shards of china. I felt hemmed in by thickened air that dulled every sound.

'Get out of my house, and don't come back.' She crossed the room to confront my cowering body. 'EVER.' With her neck thrust forward and an ugly twist to her mouth, she shouted so hard, I felt droplets of her spit hit my face.

I was shaking all over and clasped my hands together, like a child in prayer. 'Please Caitlin.'

Sounds of crying came from upstairs. Diz's hands were still on my shoulders and I felt his thumb slowly stroke the nape of my neck. The warmth of his touch shut me up. He pulled me back into the hall and made me turn towards the door. The pressure from his fingers briefly increased before he pushed me away. 'Best if you go, Sadie.'

I left, feeling more wretched than I could ever remember feeling.