

The Real Katie Lavender

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Chapter One

At the age of thirty, Katie Lavender believed she was better equipped than most when it came to receiving bad news. She had coped with the death of her mother a year ago, and with her father's death three years before that, and as a result she was convinced there was little anyone could do or say that could shock her.

Which was why, when she was summoned that hot June Friday morning to the executive producer's office and offered a redundancy package of derisive generosity, and politely informed that there would be no need for her to show up for work next week, she had merely nodded her consent and closed the door after her.

During her walk of shame back to her desk she was acutely aware that nobody in the open-plan office area was looking at her. Never had she seen such industrious activity as her colleagues studiously avoided catching her eye. For the past week Stella Media Productions had been rife with rumours that numbers would have to be cut, and it looked like Katie had been the first to be given the chop. Look on the bright side, she told herself; better to be a trailblazer than a mindless follower.

Her mobile was ringing when she got to her desk. 'A job offer already,' she said cheerfully as Daz raised his head from behind his computer and glanced over at her. He gave her a sickly half-hearted smile of what she supposed was comradely support.

The voice in her ear belonged to a man. 'Is that Miss Lavender? Miss Katie Lavender?'

‘It is,’ she said.

‘My name is Howard Clifford, of Tyler, Robinson and Clifford. I’m sorry I wasn’t around yesterday to take your call when you telephoned, and I hope this isn’t an inappropriate moment to speak with you, but I shall be out of the office for most of next week and I didn’t want to miss you again.’

She recalled the solicitor’s letter that was in her bag and which had arrived in the post yesterday morning before she’d set off for work. The letter had puzzled her for most of the day, especially as she had never heard of Tyler, Robinson and Clifford. It had been very clear: she was to make contact with a Mr Howard Clifford at her earliest convenience so that an appointment could be made for her to visit him in his office in Fulham. ‘That’s all right,’ she said. ‘What is it you want to talk to me about?’

‘I’d rather not say on the telephone. It would be much better for you to come to my office. I don’t suppose you’re free today, are you?’

‘It’s my lunch break in an hour’s time. And since I’ve just been made redundant, I don’t see why I can’t take an extended break.’ Daz’s head bobbed up from behind his computer again, then disappeared just as quickly.

‘I’m sorry to hear that, Miss Lavender,’ Howard Clifford said. His voice sounded unexpectedly kind. Then he was all business again. ‘I’ll see you at one o’clock, then. You have the address, don’t you?’

With thunder rumbling overhead, and a strike in full swing on the underground, Katie hailed a cab on the corner of Portland Street and took out her mobile to ring her mother.

No sooner had she got the phone in her hand than she caught her breath and her heart squeezed. A year had passed and yet she could still forget that Mum was dead. That she could never talk to her again. Never again could she share a moment like this with her. She felt the hot prickle of tears at the backs of her eyes and the all too familiar panicky tightness

forming in her throat, the feeling that she couldn't breathe. She put a hand to her mouth and concentrated on breathing. Slow and steady. Slow and steady.

When she was sure she wasn't going to cry and embarrass herself in front of the cab driver, she wondered what people would think if they knew that she still had her mother's contact details on her phone. Would they think it was a bit weird? A bit macabre? She had thought she might remove them when the first anniversary of Mum's death had passed – a symbolic act to prove she had moved on and was coping well – but she hadn't been able to do it. She simply couldn't part with that link to her mother. And the only reason she didn't still have her father's contact details was because she'd lost the mobile she'd had at the time and when she'd replaced it, she had forced herself not to add his name to the address book. She had felt so guilty doing that.

She took a long and steady breath and phoned her closest friend, Tess.

'*Redundant!*' Tess shrieked down the line. 'That's outrageous! How dare they? How bloody dare they? What did Ian say?'

'I haven't spoken to him yet. You're the first I've told.'

The fact that she hadn't told Ian before Tess spoke volumes, but if her friend was thinking what Katie suspected she was thinking, she had the decency not to say anything. Just lately Tess had made a couple of comments about Ian that suggested she thought he wasn't right for Katie – the remarks had coincided with Katie thinking much the same.

'Do you want to meet for lunch?' Tess asked.

'I can't, I'm on my way to meet a solicitor.'

'What for? You're not thinking of suing for wrongful redundancy or something, are you?'

Katie explained about the letter.

'How mysterious,' Tess said. 'You don't suppose it's some unfinished business with your mum's will, do you?'

'I wouldn't have thought so. Mum's solicitor was the same

as Dad's in Guildford, and anyway everything was sorted out some months ago.'

'Well, call me later and tell me all. And don't worry about getting another job; with your experience you'll soon be fixed up.'

Katie ended the call and stared out of the side window of the cab. Would she be fixed up soon? As grateful as she was for her friend's optimism, she knew the job market wasn't exactly overflowing with opportunities for people like her right now.

She had been at Stella Media for two and a half years. Following several years of gofer-style jobs, she had joined the company as a production secretary and climbed the media ladder all the way to the dizzy heights of production coordinator. Her days mostly revolved around reminding everybody else what, when and how they should be doing something. It was difficult to pinpoint precisely where it had all gone wrong, but gone wrong it had.

When she had been at school, she had dreamt of being a human-rights lawyer. She had imagined herself defending the weak and the poor, of changing the world, of making a difference. Then when her A levels hadn't panned out as well as she'd needed to study law, she had hit upon the idea of changing the world through the medium of television; she would change the way people thought and behaved by becoming an award-winning documentary-maker. She would be involved in groundbreaking projects that were dark and gritty and life-affirming and full of integrity. With a degree in media studies, she embarked upon her crusade with all the zeal of a newly converted missionary, only eventually to wind up working for a production company that churned out television programmes that pulled in good ratings but totally shamed her. As popular as some of the programmes had been, they were hardly the award-winning programmes she wanted to be associated with. Stella Media's big success stories were *My Ugly Best Friend* and *My Fat Best Friend* – the premise being

that so-called best friends nominated those closest to them to undergo drastic cosmetic surgery or to be starved within an inch of their miserable lives. *Too Big for Your Boots* had also done relatively good business – a quiz show that revolved around participants being humiliated and cut down to size with cruel glee. It was essentially car-crash telly with everyone on a journey or living the dream. One more bloody journey, one more bloody dream and Katie would take a stick to the lot of them.

Things had not turned out the way she had planned, she thought tiredly as she stared through the window at the gloomy, thundery sky. Especially now she had been made redundant. Apparently Stella Media, with the well of creative ideas having run dry, would somehow manage without a production coordinator for the foreseeable future. Frankly Katie wouldn't trust any of them to blink without a reminder in their diaries.

She could probably get temporary work as a production assistant as a short-term measure, but she wasn't so sure she could bring herself to do it, because now that she had allowed herself to think the unthinkable, she realized she was bored with wiping programme-makers' bottoms. Where was the sense of fulfilment and satisfaction in that?

Tyler, Robinson and Clifford was wedged in between an interior-design shop with a glittering chandelier in the window and an antiquarian bookshop.

Katie had pictured Howard Clifford with short iron-grey hair and a pinstripe suit, and for extra effect a red silk handkerchief in his breast pocket, but he was nothing of the sort. She guessed he was in his mid-forties, his hair was a sandy-blond colour and there wasn't a pinstripe or silk handkerchief in sight. His suit was a dark shade of blue; its jacket was hanging lopsidedly on the back of his chair, a tie poking out of a pocket, a Marks and Spencer label just visible. With his shirt open at the neck and his sleeves rolled up to his elbows,

he was as informal as his office was chaotic, with files, folders, law books and papers covering every available surface. There was a cricket bat propped against a filing cabinet and a lone well-worn trainer next to it. On the windowsill behind the desk was a framed photograph of two young grinning children peering out of a Wendy house; they both had the same sandy-blond hair as he had. At odds with all this was his voice, which was the same as it had been on the phone, extremely courteous and very proper.

‘Please, Miss Lavender, sit down. May I offer you a cup of tea or coffee?’

As tempting as the offer was, she didn’t want anything to delay the purpose of her visit. ‘No thank you,’ she politely declined.

‘Then to business,’ he said briskly, sidestepping a three-foot-high tower of files and going round to his side of the desk. He sat down and reached for an envelope next to a computer that was decorated with a collection of yellow Post-it notes. ‘I’ve been instructed to give this letter to you to read,’ he said. ‘The original instructions were given to this firm thirty years ago and the matter became my responsibility ten years ago when I joined the firm. Accordingly I’ve been informed that I must leave you alone whilst you read the letter.’

Genuinely mystified and not a little alarmed, Katie watched him leave the room. When the door was closed, she opened the envelope and took out four sheets of cream notepaper. She recognized her mother’s expressive handwriting at once; the flamboyant flourishes of the pen strokes that had been Fay Lavender’s character all over. Sadness clutched at Katie’s heart. She took a deep steadying breath and began reading.

My dearest Katie,

This is the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do, but I know that it is absolutely the right thing to do.

If my instructions have been followed properly you will be reading this a year after my death. The reason for

this is that I hope that you'll be over it and will be strong enough now to take the shock of what I'm about to tell you.

There's no way to dress this up other than to come right out with it. The truth is, your father, who was the best father you could ever have had, and who loved and cherished you, was not your biological father. Your biological father and I made a pact the moment I knew I was pregnant with you that he would have nothing to do with me ever again or interfere in any way with your upbringing. In return, he made me promise to carry out just one wish on his behalf; it was something I was in no position to deny him. But I shall leave that to Howard Clifford to explain to you, or whoever else has been entrusted with the task.

Let me say straight away that your father knew about the affair, as brief and as reckless as it was, and he somehow found it in his heart to forgive me. He said he did so because he loved me. I just hope you can find it in your heart to forgive your father and me for our deception.

If you do think less of me for what I did, and I wouldn't blame you if you did, I hope you will never think less of your father. He was such a good man – a wonderful husband and an adoring father. I made a promise to him that you would never know the truth whilst he was still alive, and I held firm to that promise.

You're probably wondering why I feel it's important now for you to know the truth after all these years. My justification is simple: the only reason you'll be reading this letter is because your father and I are no longer around, and I hate the thought of you being alone in the world and not having anyone – by that I mean family – to look out for you. I want you to meet your biological father – in the hope that he's still alive when you read this – along with any other children he may have had. You

always did want to have a brother or a sister; remember how you used to write to Father Christmas to bring you a baby sister? Sadly your father and I could not make that wish come true for you. Much to your father's disappointment, it turned out he couldn't actually have children, maybe that's why he treasured you the way he did.

Please, my darling girl, forgive me for any pain and distress you feel as a consequence of reading this letter.

With all my love,

Mum.

PS What happens next is up to you, Katie. I have given very clear instructions to Howard Clifford, who will be dealing with this matter, and he will help you all he can.

When she had finished reading, Katie sat very still and stared unseeingly ahead of her.

A knock at the door made her start. Behind her Howard Clifford came in; he was carrying a tray of tea things. In her stunned state, she focused all her concentration on the flowery teapot, the matching small milk jug with the chip in the rim, the sugar bowl and the two cups and saucers. Anything but think of what she'd just read.

'I thought you might have changed your mind about something to drink,' he said.

She nodded, unable to speak

'Milk?'

She nodded again.

'Sugar?'

She shook her head.

She put her mother's letter down in front of her on the cluttered desk and with trembling hands she took the proffered cup and saucer. She suddenly shivered, as though a rush of cold air had entered the room. She watched the solicitor swivel his chair and open a filing cabinet behind him. After

a few seconds of rustling he pulled out a packet of chocolate fingers. 'My weakness,' he said, passing her the packet.

She shook her head and took a long wobbly intake of breath. And to think she had believed herself impervious to shock. Finally able to speak, she said, 'I take it you know the exact contents of my mother's letter?'

'Yes. Drink your tea and then I'll tell you the rest.'

'The rest?'

'Your tea,' he said firmly.

Dazed, she did as he said.

When he seemed to be satisfied with how much she'd drunk, he passed her the packet of chocolate fingers again. This time she took one, and while she nibbled on the biscuit, he sat back in his chair, his elbows resting on the arms.

'When you were born, your biological father set up a trust fund for you. That fund can now be released and accessed by you.'

'What kind of trust fund?'

'The kind that represents a considerable amount of money.'

She swallowed. 'Can you define *considerable*?'

He smiled, leant forward, slipped on a pair of glasses and opened a file to his right. He turned a couple of pages, paused, then said, 'As of yesterday, that fund was worth seven hundred and fifty-eight thousand pounds and sixteen pence exactly.'