

CHAPTER ONE

The Cottage of New Beginnings (Prologue)

Annie Armstrong had loved Edinburgh since those first days at university and never imagined she would be leaving her favourite city under these bewildering new circumstances. She looked around her flat, for once uncaring of the view of the park from the curved bay window in the sitting room, the tops of the lime trees outside green and laden with leaves.

She'd always appreciated being able to see the wide-open space from her third floor, sometimes hearing families playing at the weekends and glimpsing boats bobbing along the canal beyond the park boundaries.

The Cottage Of New Beginnings (Prologue)

She hadn't minded the noise of children shrieking before, when the promise of her own had still been a possibility and something they had both wanted.

The flat's period features, reflected in the high ceilings, ornate cornices and generous sash windows, allowing in the best of the south west light, had been one of the reasons she'd bought it, thanks to some help from her parents, when she'd started her first job.

Annie was grateful for the efficiency of the rainwater shower and modern kitchen, designed to give a nod to the building's Georgian heritage, trying not to compare them to the basic facilities she knew to expect in her new home. The kitchen too looked bare now, cleaned and readied for someone else, all those happy evenings here over supper with friends consigned to the past, their conversations committed to memories, words now whispers long gone.

Her furniture was already on its way, at least everything that she was keeping from here. She had sent every shared belonging to a charity shop, everything gone that Iain hadn't claimed as his own. In the end there hadn't been much for him to take.

She'd packed up some old vinyl, the last

The Cottage Of New Beginnings (Prologue)

of his clothes, textbooks from his days studying that had somehow found their way here. She wanted no reminders in her new home, no funny or silly presents they'd exchanged, or furniture chosen for the future when love had still been a part of their life together.

Iain's time here in the flat had been more of an interlude, a stopping point in between travelling for his career as a software consultant than a home they'd truly shared. Searching for such a place together had been fun, exciting, as they'd scoured the city for that perfect house and yet they hadn't ever found it.

The two bedrooms were also empty now, the second one more so because it had suggested their hope for the future when they had painted the walls pale lemon and decided where they'd put a cot, should one ever be needed.

A future lost now to his words and the new distance in his eyes, a distance she wasn't used to seeing until he'd returned after those seemingly ordinary weekends away to help take care of his father. Annie had known at once that something was wrong after the last one, just days before

The Cottage Of New Beginnings (Prologue)

their wedding, his words then imprinted in her mind, hers gasped out between shock and hurt, his choice irrevocably changing her future along with his.

'I'm sorry, Annie. I've spent the past month trying to find a way to do the right thing, but I can't go through with the wedding, not feeling the way I do.'

'So you never loved me, not really.' Her voice had dulled with the realisation. 'I was never enough, not as I am.'

'Of course I loved you.' A pause, the silence telling her so much more. Loved, not love, not anymore. 'But it's over, and I'm so sorry.'

He'd gone the same night, throwing more belongings into a bag after a pointless promise to help with the mountain of cancellations, the rapid dismantling of a day suddenly required. The reception and church were first, money lost along with a cake none of the guests would ever taste.

Then there were the emails, the rushed apologies to those planning to travel to be with them on the day, the embarrassment over expenses already incurred as everyone tried to guess at the real reason silenced between the few lines offered as explanation.

The Cottage Of New Beginnings (Prologue)

How to tell them something, without saying everything?

Annie found out later that he had still taken the honeymoon on a secluded Greek island that he'd arranged, the news bringing a new wave of hurt she had hoped was slipping into the past with each day since he had left. And beside her through those first days, her parents, shocked and furious, and the friends who were hers, bringing love and a willingness to watch over her.

She forced the memories away as she headed to the front door, trying to imagine leaving them here, refusing to drag them into her new life, a life she hadn't planned, hadn't wanted but was here anyway, everything changed. She'd only just thrown away the flowers from her last day at school, and the image in her mind of the faces of her beloved year 4 class as they'd hugged one another goodbye on the last day of term was enough to bring tears hovering once again.

Annie thought instead about the journey ahead, and the house waiting for her at the end. It helped to remember the cottage as though it were the view before her eyes now, not this empty shell that had been her home, for a time at least.

The Cottage Of New Beginnings (Prologue)

She thought of her cool bedroom there in summer, the heat of a fire in winter, the glorious landscape soaring to the sky beyond the windows. She pictured the abundant garden and shelves in the pantry lined with produce pickled and preserved for darkened days, when the taste of raspberries and peas eaten straight from the plants were merely memories of the season before. She remembered her godmother who had loved her, the warmth of the welcome every time she arrived, swallowing down the lump in her throat.

There would be no welcome this time, no ready fire burning in the grate, and no Molly to tell her she needed feeding up with a fresh batch of scones and some proper Yorkshire air to bring colour to her face. But through the giving of a gift Molly's love was still reaching into Annie's future, a gift which was about to change her life in a way she had not anticipated.

Annie glanced around the flat, a shred of hope filling her heart for the first time in months as she locked the door and slipped the key into an envelope. She was going home, to the new life waiting, where everything was at once the same and

The Cottage Of New Beginnings (Prologue)

altogether different. She was going to
Willow Cottage.

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