

*A  
Forget-Me-Not  
Summer* 

## About the author

Sophie Claire writes emotional stories set in England and in sunny Provence, where she spent her summers as a child. She has a French mother and a Scottish father, but was born in Africa and grew up in Manchester, England, where she still lives with her husband and two sons.

Previously, she worked in marketing and proofreading academic papers, but writing is what she always considered her ‘real job’ and now she’s delighted to spend her days dreaming up heartwarming contemporary romance stories set in beautiful places.

You can find out more at [www.sophieclaire.co.uk](http://www.sophieclaire.co.uk) and on Twitter @sclairewriter.

Also by Sophie Claire

*The Christmas Holiday*

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*A  
Forget-Me-Not  
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HODDER

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To Ian, Mum and Dad, and Maureen and Robert,  
for your encouragement and support



## Prologue



*London, three years ago*

‘Is there anyone we can call for you?’  
Natasha blinked. The nurse smiled kindly. Her eyes were the rich blue of hyacinths, filled with concern and pity.

‘Your husband maybe?’ The nurse looked at the ring on her left hand.

‘I left him a message. He’s abroad.’

‘A family member?’

She shook her head.

‘You’re going to need a D and C. Dilation and curettage. It’s a minor operation, but necessary. Do you understand, Natasha?’

She nodded. The baby was gone. Her heart folded up on itself and she squeezed her eyes shut against the pain.

Afterwards, she lay staring at the white ceiling. The fluorescent lights tinged everything violet. Losing the baby still felt too enormous, too violent to think about so she turned her mind to Luc instead. She had to make a plan.

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What would happen when he came? Would he come at all? His work was so important, after all, she thought bitterly. She knew she ranked very low in his life and he'd only married her for the baby. She held up her left hand. The platinum ring was a silver blur that swam and swayed. When he'd proposed she'd hoped it would be the start of something new, that he'd put his freedom-loving days behind him, and they'd work to become a family. She'd hoped they'd both share the same goal, and the baby would bring them together. She'd hoped so hard.

The nurse appeared. 'Did you have a name for the baby?' she asked gently.

Natasha nodded. She hadn't discussed it with Luc – they were barely talking – but it was certain in her mind. 'Hope. Her name was Hope.'

Now Hope had died there was nothing left, no reason for her to stay. The pain was crushing, intense.

The sound of quick, heavy footsteps in the corridor made them both look up. There were raised voices, then Luc appeared, breathless. She was surprised.

'I got here as fast as I could,' he said.

Her heartbeat picked up at the sight of him. His dark hair, his treacle eyes. She wondered if she'd ever stop loving him. *He doesn't love you, though.*

He stayed with her as she drifted off, welcoming the anaesthetic of sleep. He was still there when she woke and the nurses told her she could be discharged. He took her back to his penthouse, and she didn't have the energy to argue.

Back at his flat, he looked worried, couldn't do enough



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for her. It was as if he was speaking to her through a funnel: his words were muffled and distant. ‘Are you hungry?’ he asked. ‘What can I get you?’

Too little, too late, she thought. He wasn’t the man he’d been the last few weeks. Since she’d told him about the baby, resentment had filled this big flat, pressing against the glass walls.

He left the room. She heard the front door shut, and a memory resurfaced of when she’d left her great-aunt’s house at sixteen. She’d made a promise to herself then that she’d never allow herself to be in that situation again: unwanted, resented. A plan was assembling in her mind.

It didn’t take long to pack her clothes, toothbrush, and the tiny framed photograph of her parents. She was waiting by the door, ready to leave, when he came back from the shops.

‘What are you doing?’ He stared at her.

He had a pint of milk in his hand. She looked at it. ‘I’m going home.’

She thanked her lucky stars that she’d kept the lease for her bedsit these last two months. Perhaps a part of her had always known it would end this way.

‘But you’ve only just come out of hospital.’

‘I’m going,’ she repeated firmly.

‘Why?’

Her head was fuzzy: the room tilted left, then right. She put out her hand and touched the wall to steady herself. He doesn’t love you, she reminded herself silently.

‘You’re not strong enough—’ he began.

‘Because it’s over. The pregnancy was a mistake. We

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only married because of the baby, and now . . .' She couldn't stay where she wasn't wanted. Self-preservation kicked in and she lifted her head, looked him in the eye. 'Now we can both get on with our lives.'

He didn't argue. He didn't say anything at all. His silence sliced through her, killing any doubts she'd still carried.

The intercom buzzed. Her taxi had arrived. She bent to pick up her case. Tears welled, salty and hot. She wished she wasn't so weak. She wished she didn't love him so much, so fiercely and completely.

'I'll take that,' he said, nodding at her suitcase.

Their hands collided. He snatched the case away from her and she mumbled something about divorce papers, then left.

He didn't try to stop her. Far from it. He saw her to the taxi, lifted her luggage into the boot, then stood back, hands in his pockets, his mouth a flat line, and watched as the taxi drove away.

He didn't love her, he never had. And that was why she had to go.

## Chapter One



*Present day*

When he came in, Natasha was slicing the thorns off a marshmallow-pink rose. The door chimed and she glanced up, ready to smile, then froze. The flower in her hand was forgotten and she stared. There, in her shop, was Luc.

Her heart thumped. The shop flooded with cold air, as if it were a winter morning, not a bright June afternoon. His tall figure and broad shoulders filled the door and his dark eyes fixed on her but gave nothing away. She swallowed, feeling a sharp twist in her chest, and glanced at the back room. But, of course, Debbie had already gone home, so she was alone.

‘Natasha,’ he said, stepping forward and closing the door. ‘Good to see you.’

The sound of his voice was as unsettling as an earthquake. Deep. Sure of himself.

‘Luc,’ she said. She couldn’t disguise her shock. It had been – how long? – three years since she’d last seen him. ‘Why are you here?’

He didn’t answer immediately but glanced around her

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tiny shop, taking in his surroundings. She followed his gaze from the sunflowers to the gerberas and, for a moment, she hoped this might be an accident. That by some bizarre coincidence he'd arrived in her tiny village and walked in to buy a bouquet. But then he turned back to her and his eyes fixed on her with such fierce determination that she knew it was no accident. Her fingers gripped the rose a little tighter.

'You could at least pretend to look pleased to see me,' he said.

He was right, she thought. She might feel like she'd just been plunged back in time to a dark place of violent emotions, but she didn't want him to know how much he was affecting her. Not when, in the past, he'd been so cool with her.

Pretend, she told herself. Act as if you're totally indifferent to him.

'I'm just – just surprised, that's all. I wasn't expecting you. You should have called.' As she spoke, she noticed that he'd changed. The details were subtle: small lines around his eyes, a few greys at his temples. He was still good-looking, though, she noted grudgingly, and effortlessly stylish, even in a simple cream T-shirt and jeans. Suddenly she felt self-conscious. No doubt he would disapprove of her new quirky style: he'd think her outfit was eccentric and too bright, not sophisticated like his. She fought the urge to hide her fingernails, painted pale blue with tiny daisies, telling herself it didn't matter what he thought. She might have tried to please him in the past, but those days were over.

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‘There wasn’t time,’ he said, and looked at the flower in her hand, but there was an uncharacteristically distant expression in his eyes. ‘It was quicker to come straight here.’

Natasha frowned. Really? How much time would it have taken to call her from the train or the car or however he’d arrived? ‘Don’t tell me – you urgently need a bunch of flowers?’

He shook his head and the corner of his mouth tilted. It was almost a smile and impossibly sexy. She was certain that no woman could look at him without feeling a little weak in the legs.

‘No. Not flowers. I need you.’

She put the rose down. What did he mean? And why did her mind instantly fill with heated images? Memories of him and her. Naked.

She struggled to think straight. ‘Me? What on earth would you need me for?’

‘I need your help.’

As he held her gaze steadily, she realised he was being serious and a spike of emotion shot through her, something between fear and anger. ‘Luc, I’m your ex-wife. We’re not usually top of the list for being keen to help.’

‘I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t necessary. Besides, I have faith in you to help, ex-wife or not.’

Did he now? She eyed him suspiciously. Did he mean she was a pushover? But then she noticed he was pale, and now she wondered if the lines around his eyes were signs of ageing or something else – strain possibly, or tiredness. Though she tried to prevent it, she felt a tug of concern. ‘What’s wrong, Luc? What’s happened?’

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She saw pain in his eyes.

‘You’re not on the run from the police, are you?’ she joked, then wished she hadn’t said anything. She was just nervous, rattled by his unexpected appearance, by the desperation now etched into his handsome features.

‘Is there somewhere we could talk?’ he asked.

She glanced at the clock. ‘I suppose I could close a little early . . .’ Then she threw him a stern warning look. ‘But whatever you’ve got to say, you’ll have to say it here.’

‘OK.’

He was so quick to accept that she knew something was seriously wrong and anxiety needled her. He was her ex-husband but that didn’t prevent her from feeling sympathy for him. But she was wary too.

She locked the shop door, flipped the sign to ‘Closed’, and dropped the roses she’d been trimming into a bucket of water. Then she returned to stand behind the counter. She felt safer with a bit of space between them. It seemed incredible that, after three years apart, he still had the power to set her on edge.

‘So, what’s the problem?’ she asked, trying to sound detached and efficient, though her hands were unsteady as she swept up the thorns and leaves scattered across the counter.

‘My father is ill,’ he said. ‘Very ill, in fact.’

She stopped tidying and looked up. ‘Oh, Luc, I’m sorry.’ She’d never met his parents but her heart went out to him.

‘He collapsed, it’s his heart, and the next few weeks – days – are critical.’

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She nodded cautiously, unclear how this had anything to do with her or how she could help.

Luc ran his tongue across his lips. 'I've just been to visit. All the family are there . . .' He swallowed again, then met her gaze. Steadily. '. . . but he was asking for you.'

'Me?' She laughed, a high-pitched sound. 'Why me? I've never even met him.' Her cheeks coloured and she turned to deposit the cuttings in a bin behind the counter, then briskly dusted off her hands.

'Exactly.' He picked up a leaf she'd missed and absently rolled it between his fingers. 'He was unhappy when he learned that we got married without inviting anyone. Now he's asking that we spend some time with him. In France.'

'We? I don't understand.'

'You and me,' he said.

She frowned. 'There is no "you and me" any more. Anyway, why on earth would he want me to—'

'Because he believes we're still married.'

There was a long pause. In the street outside, a car rumbled past. Natasha blinked, not sure she'd heard properly, but the words settled around her, like a handful of rose petals fluttering to the ground. *He believes we're still married.*

After three years? Why? She'd assumed his family didn't know about her: Luc certainly hadn't told them about his marriage at the time. He'd behaved as if he were ashamed of it. Of her.

Confusion made her head spin, and she felt a sharp point of irritation too. Let's face it, what did any of this have to do with her?

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‘Why on earth would he believe that, Luc?’

He ducked his head. When he’d appeared in her shop, she’d thought Luc didn’t seem quite himself, but this was new: the man who was never anything but a hundred per cent certain of himself now looked sheepish.

He said quietly, ‘I haven’t told him about the divorce.’

There was a long pause. ‘Haven’t told him?’ she repeated incredulously.

He shook his head.

Luc wasn’t a man to hide from the truth. He was bold and strong, with a core of steel. ‘Why not?’

His shoulders went back, his chin up, and there was hardness in his eyes, which warned her this was not safe territory. ‘It’s complicated. Now isn’t the time to go into it.’

Fine. Two could play at that game, she thought, raising barriers of her own. Because she needed them. She hung up her apron and ran her palms over her dress, smoothing the rosebud-patterned cotton skirt. She adjusted the small red scarf around her neck and touched her hairband. Everything was in place, yet she felt ruffled. Irrational though it might be, seeing him made her feel vulnerable, as she had been when they were married, and scared that the pain of that dark time might return.

‘Well, it sounds like it’s time to have an honest conversation with your father,’ she said briskly, then turned and lifted her jacket off the hook behind the door, hoping he’d take the hint and leave, vanish back out of her life as suddenly as he’d appeared.

‘Natasha . . .’ he said, but she walked past him, keys jangling in her hand, and held the door open for him.



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She shook her head. ‘No way. I’m not getting involved in this.’

Reluctantly, he moved past her and stopped in the street outside. With his skin the colour of caramel and his glossy dark hair, he was as conspicuous in the English country village as an exotic flower. ‘I wouldn’t ask you if I had any alternative.’

‘I’m sure you wouldn’t. There’s a reason why we got divorced.’ She locked the door.

‘It’s just two weeks.’

‘No!’ she said. Then, more calmly, ‘I don’t owe you anything, Luc.’

‘I know you don’t. That’s why I’m asking – appealing to you.’

She could see the worry in his eyes, and guilt stabbed at her: he’d come here clearly counting on her help. Then her friend drove past them and waved. It was Suzie, on her way home from the village primary school. Seeing her was a reminder of all Natasha held dear. She’d built a life for herself here and she was happy. She thought of her shop and all the friends she’d made. She was part of this community now. She belonged. As she waved back, she contrasted that with the turmoil she’d lived through when she was married to Luc, and her instinct for self-preservation kicked in.

‘No,’ she said firmly, and began to walk quickly, taking a left off the high street – it would be quieter on the back roads. Suzie’s eyes had widened with curiosity at the sight of Luc, and Natasha didn’t want anyone else to see her with him. ‘It would be a lie. I won’t do it.’

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‘My father is seriously ill, and this is his wish – what am I supposed to tell him?’

‘The truth?’

It wasn’t far to her flat, just a couple of hundred yards, but today it seemed like miles. Her sandals tapped along the pavement, and it irritated her that he kept up effortlessly with his long strides.

‘That our marriage lasted three months and we applied for a divorce as soon as was legally possible?’ His tone was biting. Vicious. ‘The truth would kill him. He’s hanging on to life by a thread.’

She tried to ignore the guilt she knew he’d intended her to feel. ‘Then stall. Play for time. Tell him . . . I’m travelling.’

‘How do you think I’ve explained your absence until now?’ He sighed and raked the hair back from his eyes. ‘We don’t know how long he has left. He wants to meet you.’

She stopped beside a red letterbox and planted her hands on her hips. ‘Why?’

‘He wants to know who I married. He wants to see for himself that I’m happy.’

She snorted. ‘Well, that’s asking the impossible! Even if I came with you to France, we couldn’t pretend to be a happily married couple.’

‘We could.’ His tone was resolute.

And a shiver touched her spine. What Luc wanted, he always got. Like a bulldozer, once he was on course, he was difficult to block.

She set off again, her stomach churning. For heaven’s

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sake, shouldn't their divorce have made her immune to him?

He blew out a long breath. 'Listen, if there's something you want – anything – I'll pay for it. In return for your time.'

She flinched and glared at him. 'You always thought money motivated me, didn't you? Well, you were wrong, Luc. Then and now. I have everything I need.'

There was only one thing that might make things even more perfect, but she wasn't about to tell her ex what it was. It was nothing to do with him, her private dream. Her fingers automatically reached inside her pocket, checking for her phone as she thought of the call she was expecting.

'Then you're lucky,' he said.

They reached her flat and she stopped. 'Yes, I am. Or maybe I don't want much. Not the things money can buy, anyway.'

She marched up the steps to her door. She was settled now, but it hadn't always been like that. After their brief marriage, it had taken her months to get her life back on track. He had no right to come barging in, demanding favours of her. She owed him nothing. Nothing at all.

She opened the door and faced him one last time. 'I'm not doing it, Luc.'

'Natasha—'

She waved away his protest. 'I'm very sorry about your father, and for what you're going through right now, but I can't help you.'

She went in, tempted to say goodbye, then push the

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door firmly shut on him and the tornado of emotions that was spinning through her – but he held the door open.

‘Wait,’ he said. ‘Aren’t you going to invite me in?’

She couldn’t believe he’d even ask. And the thought of his tall figure filling her tiny flat, of being alone with him in such a private place, made her skin tingle. It went against the grain to be so rude, but to let him in would be too . . . intimate. ‘No.’

‘I’ve come all this way – and we haven’t seen each other in a long time. Let me buy you dinner, at least.’

‘So we can catch up?’ she asked drily. ‘Reminisce on old times?’

‘So we can catch up, yes.’

She realised how bitter she’d sounded and regretted it. After all, she was over him, wasn’t she? She looked at her watch. He *had* driven a long way to get there, and it would be rude to send him packing without so much as a cup of tea.

‘We could go to the pub,’ she said. ‘The Dog and Partridge is just down the road. They do good food.’ She’d hoped they wouldn’t be seen, but perhaps being surrounded by other people would calm her nerves and the buzz she’d been feeling since he’d walked into the shop.

He nodded. ‘Sounds good.’

‘But don’t think this is another chance to persuade me,’ she warned, as they set off again. ‘I won’t change my mind.’

‘I just want to eat and spend a little time with you,’ he said quietly.

Thankfully, the Dog and Partridge was busy and she

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was reassured to see friendly faces all around. Gary the landlord greeted her, and when he cast Luc a curious look, Natasha introduced him. 'This is Luc. He's . . .' she hesitated ' . . . an old friend.'

'Friend?' Luc shot her a fierce look. 'We were married.'

Her cheeks burned as Gary, wide-eyed, turned to her and said, 'I didn't know you'd been married. You dark horse.'

'Well, we all make mistakes,' she said, darting Luc a sideways glance. But his expression remained grim. This wasn't the time to make jokes, not when he was clearly worried sick about his father.

They got their drinks and ordered food, and Luc produced his wallet. Natasha shook her head.

'I'm perfectly capable of buying my own drink.' She pulled out her purse. After their wedding, he'd said, *I suppose you'll want your own credit card now you're my wife.* From the moment they'd been married he'd behaved as if she were a parasite.

'No,' said Luc. 'I offered to buy you dinner.'

'Tell you what. We'll each buy our own.'

His nose wrinkled. 'And have to split the bill in half? I don't think so.'

Her chin went up. 'Then I'll leave now. I pay my own way, Luc. I don't want anything from you.'

His phone rang and he scrabbled to answer it. 'Excuse me,' he said, his accent suddenly pronounced. 'This might be important.'

He walked away, his phone to his ear, and Natasha handed a note to Gary, who was still a little wide-eyed

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from watching them. ‘He really presses your buttons, doesn’t he? I’ve never seen you like this before, Natasha.’

She knew Luc didn’t bring out the best in her. But, then, how many ex-husbands did? ‘He’s only here because he wants my help,’ she said. Then added, ‘But he’s not going to get it.’

She carried their drinks to a small table beside the window and sat down, then checked her phone. There were no missed calls, but she was still expecting one so she left it on the table. The pub was noisy and she couldn’t be sure she’d hear it if it rang. A few moments later, Luc joined her.

‘Everything all right?’ she asked, taking a sip of her lemonade.

‘That was my sister. She’s at the hospital – there’s been no change.’

He lifted the pint of beer to his lips and his throat worked as he swallowed. His eyes were clouded as he gazed out of the window, his mind evidently elsewhere.

Luc thought of his father as he’d last seen him that morning, lying in the hospital bed, pale and shrunken beneath the thin white sheet. The life had been sucked out of him, and it seemed as if only the tubes attached to his wrists were keeping him going. The doctors were worried. They’d done all they could. Now Luc could only hope that his father’s fighting spirit would kick in. There was no sign of it yet.

Strange how things changed so quickly. He and his

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father hadn't spoken properly in years – not counting their brief conversation last year, when Luc should have put him straight and told him about the divorce. Now the rift that had kept them apart seemed petty and trivial in comparison with his father's suffering. The threat of death had sharpened Luc's focus. Things that had seemed important in the past no longer were, and others had been magnified.

Especially his father's wish. Luc didn't understand why it was important to Jean-Pierre to see his three children all happily married, but he was prepared to go to any lengths to give the old man something to live for. It was the only thing left that he could do, now that he'd made sure his father was receiving the best care and the most advanced treatment. Of course, he wasn't happy at having to ask his ex-wife for help but Jean-Pierre had been blunt: 'I want her here, at my bedside. And you're going to arrange it.'

He couldn't go home without her. The fear of doing so, of disappointing his father – losing him – brought a film of sweat to his brow. He pressed a finger to the bridge of his nose.

If he didn't return with Natasha, how would it look to his family? As if he hadn't tried. As if Natasha was heartless. As if she didn't exist.

He'd never felt the need to conceal the truth in any other area of his life, but with his father . . .

Regret and shame tightened his chest. He knew he'd made mistakes and now he was trapped in this knot of misunderstanding and distorted truth. But there wasn't time to dwell on how it had come to this. The urgency

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of the situation meant he had to stay focused on the immediate problem.

Luc took another sip of beer, and eyed Natasha warily, his eyes drawn to her curves, her small waist, in a way that discomfited him. Her white-blond head was dipped and her slim shoulders bent as she checked her phone yet again. Ever since they'd sat down, she'd seemed distracted. He needed her cooperation, but she was completely disinterested. He'd hoped she would listen, that she'd appreciate the gravity of the situation, have some compassion. But her hostility shouldn't have come as a surprise. Memories fired at him, ugly and bitter, of when she'd left him. Simply packed her case and gone, then refused to answer his calls or messages.

She was the only person who could help right now, but her mind was clearly on something else.

Something or someone?

'Is there someone else in your life, Natasha?' he asked brusquely. He'd known this was a risk. His hand pressed hard against his glass. 'A boyfriend? Partner?'

Her blue eyes flashed, as if he'd crossed a barrier he'd had no right to penetrate. He stilled, waiting for her answer. Acutely aware of her. She was so familiar that the last three years might never have happened. Yet so much about her had changed. Her hair, which had been long, was now cut in a neat bob. Her pale skin glowed brighter against the vivid red and green of her fitted dress. But the most marked difference was in her air of confidence.

She was bright, she was attractive. The chances of her being single were slim.



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Very slim.

Then she lifted her chin. 'No,' she said, meeting his gaze squarely. 'Not at the moment.'

He almost smiled. With relief? If she was single, that was one less obstacle to surmount in persuading her to come with him to France. Yet relief didn't explain the soaring sensation in his chest.

He brushed aside the thought as inconsequential. All that mattered now was his father's health, and getting Natasha to return with him to France. He gazed out of the window at the picturesque village, with its tidy streets and friendly faces.

Persuasion was getting him nowhere. He'd try a different tactic. He thought of his business: in the construction industry he frequently encountered problems. People were reluctant to sell their patch of land, or there were environmental constraints. He was well used to working round hurdles and getting results. He just needed to lay aside thoughts of his family and approach this with a clear head.

There were two ways he could play it – appeal to her sense of compassion, which hadn't worked or buy her. Offer her compensation that would make it worth her while. She'd said she didn't want for anything, but there must be something.

There was always something.

Natasha took advantage of the lull to sneak a closer look at her ex, drinking in his familiar features. Those long

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lashes, the strong line of his jaw. She wondered if he was in a relationship, but she was certain she knew the answer: undoubtedly there would have been dozens of women since her. He had been trapped into marriage, as he would have seen it, which would have made him revert to type. She could easily imagine he'd celebrated his freedom by enjoying a stream of short-lived, mindless affairs, which she didn't want to hear about. She didn't care what he did now. After this meal he would walk back out of her life.

Yet, try as she might to keep her distance, the shadows beneath his eyes were getting under her skin.

'How long has your father been ill?' she asked gently.

He turned to her. 'Not long. It came completely out of the blue. One minute he was fit and strong, the next in hospital fighting for his life.'

His voice was thin with pain.

'That must have been a shock.'

'It was. These things make you rethink everything. What's important, what isn't . . . ?'

'They do,' she agreed, and glanced at her phone, remembering the call she was expecting. She hoped it would be good news. The estate agent had assured her everything was hopeful.

'Your company was everything to you,' she said bitterly. 'Is it still?' He'd made it clear when they'd begun dating that his work came first: it took him all over the world, and he wasn't looking for a serious relationship to tether him.

That was why her accidental pregnancy hadn't gone down well.

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He straightened in his seat. ‘Right now, helping my father is my priority. Nothing else matters.’

She raised a brow, intrigued and, though she didn’t want to be, impressed by his new attitude. Hearing him say that, she could relate to him more. Families, relationships – they were important. If he’d been able to see that before, maybe their marriage would have had a chance . . .

The waitress brought their food, traditional steak pies and vegetables, and she noticed that Luc, who had always had a good appetite, picked at his. Natasha tucked into her own; she’d had such a busy day and hadn’t had time to stop for lunch.

Just then her phone lit up and began to ring, the estate agent’s number flashing.

‘Excuse me,’ she said to Luc, and snatched it up.

‘Bad news, I’m afraid,’ the estate agent told her. ‘The owners have rejected your offer. Another interested buyer’s put in a higher bid.’

Her heart sank, and she pressed the phone tighter to her ear. ‘A higher bid? I thought there’d been hardly any interest.’

‘A local builder viewed the property yesterday. It was always a risk with a piece of land like that. It’s a good size and in a fantastic location. They could easily fit two, even three new houses on the plot and, with it being by the road, access wouldn’t be a problem.’

She sucked in air. ‘You mean they’ll knock down the cottage?’

Across the table, Luc glanced at her. She ignored him. This was too important for anything else to distract her.

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‘Er – yes. That’s likely.’

Something curled up inside her. As if the estate agent was trampling on her childhood memories, on her mother’s dearest wishes. ‘They can’t do that,’ she said, knowing that of course they could. ‘That cottage is old – and it’s beautiful.’

Her words were met with silence. And, of course, the cottage wasn’t beautiful. But it had been once.

Then the agent asked, in her sing-song voice, ‘So would you like to raise your offer?’

‘I can’t,’ she confessed. Her throat felt raw. ‘That was the maximum I could afford.’

‘I see. Well, if anything changes, we’ll let you know,’ the estate agent said, but it was clear from her tone that that was unlikely to happen.

Natasha put away her phone and tried hard to swallow her disappointment, to keep her composure in front of Luc.

‘Something wrong?’ he asked.

‘Nothing,’ she said, and looked at her half-eaten food. Her appetite had vanished, along with the dream she’d been nurturing. She’d stupidly – naively – thought she had it in the bag, that all her years of working and saving hard had paid off and that the cottage would be her reward, that she would finally be able to make good her promise. To lose it all now to someone with no personal interest in the place, who regarded it merely as a patch of soil on which to build . . .

She pictured the slate roof, the clotted-cream walls smashed to the ground, and felt a squeeze of pain coupled with guilt. She’d promised her mother . . .

## A Forget-Me-Not Summer

‘It doesn’t seem like nothing. You’re upset, Natasha.’

When she’d first met Luc she’d loved the way he said her name with all the French stresses and pronunciation. But then she’d become pregnant. After that he hadn’t spoken her name in the same way. He’d barely spoken to her at all. She certainly wasn’t about to confide in him now.

‘I just got some bad news, that’s all,’ she said briskly, and nodded at his untouched food. ‘Have you finished? Only I think we’ve both got other things on our minds. Perhaps we could catch up another time. What do you think?’

It was pointless sitting here with her ex-husband. They didn’t really have anything to talk about, and her mood had nose-dived.

He gave a tight nod. ‘OK.’

They turned left out of the pub and walked back past the old stone church and along the only main road in and out of the village. There was no way of avoiding the house and, as they walked past it, Natasha couldn’t help looking at the ‘For Sale’ sign she supposed would soon read ‘Sold’. A knot formed in her chest and she blinked back tears. She was silly, getting all sentimental about it. It was just a cottage, after all, and she’d still have her memories. But she’d come so close to making it hers that losing it now was painful. It had been her home. She could hear her mother as she’d pleaded with Aunt Thelma: *Keep the cottage. Don’t tear Natasha away from her home. Her father worked so hard on that place. He rebuilt the house and planted those trees. It meant so much to him – to us. His ashes are scattered there – he’s part of the place.*

*Sophie Claire*

Aunt Thelma had been tight-lipped. *We'll see*, she'd said. And Natasha had naively taken that to mean yes.

Then Natasha's mother had turned to her: *I love you so much. And your father did, too*. She was seven, old enough to remember having lost her father and to know she was about to feel the bite of grief all over again.

She hadn't been old enough, though, to grasp that adults didn't always live up to expectations. *I know, Mum. I'll look after Poppy Cottage*.

'Is this the place you were hoping to buy?' Luc asked, and stopped outside it.

She spun round to him. 'How did you know?'

'I learned enough from your side of the conversation to understand you'd had your offer refused on a house, and it's a small village, there aren't many places for sale.' The corner of his mouth lifted. 'And the way you're glaring at it, with smoke coming out of your ears, is a bit of a giveaway.'

'Yes,' she said quietly. 'This is it.'

'Is it empty?' he asked, his hand on the gate.

'Yes, but . . .'

He'd already disappeared round the side of the cottage.

What was he playing at? Natasha sighed. She thought about following him, but what was the point when she couldn't afford it? Instead, she folded her arms and waited for him to return.

When he did, she asked him impatiently, 'What are you doing?'

'Just looking.'

## A Forget-Me-Not Summer

‘Why?’ she said tersely. Quite frankly, she’d had enough. It had been a long day.

‘Construction is my field. I’m interested.’ He stepped back and squinted up at the roof. The tiles were mostly twisted and loose, and the chimney was smothered in ivy. ‘It’s very run-down,’ he said, grimacing.

‘It’s a complete wreck.’ The place had stood empty for years before the owners had finally put it on the market.

He came back towards her, his gaze still on the house. ‘Why would you want to buy a place like that?’ he asked, clearly unimpressed.

What was the point in trying to explain it to him? A man who had a family but never saw them, hadn’t even told them about his divorce. He’d never understand.

‘I thought it had potential,’ she said, running her gaze over the grubby walls, the rotten window-frames. Remembering. ‘With some work it could be . . . special.’

But Fate had decided it wasn’t to be. She had to accept that, even if it was hard to swallow.

‘Poppy Cottage,’ he said, reading the sign beside the door. Then he turned and watched her closely. ‘Is it true that you can’t afford to make a higher offer or were you just saying that?’

‘It’s true.’ Had her offer been accepted, she would have had no money left to make the necessary repairs. She would have had to do her best to improve the house herself, and save up for the structural work. She pushed her hands into her pockets and walked away. When she realised Luc wasn’t with her, she turned and looked back: he was still standing outside the cottage, talking into his

*Sophie Claire*

phone. Presuming it was his family again, she carried on. A few minutes later he caught up with her. They walked back to her home in silence, brooding.

When they arrived, she said wearily, 'I'm not going to invite you in, Luc. We've said all there is to say.'

His jaw looked as solid as wood. 'I'm disappointed. I thought you would at least consider my request. As I said, I'll make it worth your while.'

'I don't want to get involved in a lie.' She took a deep breath, then decided to be brave and tell him honestly. 'And I don't want to get involved with you again, Luc. It was too painful last time.'

Somewhere in the distance a blackbird called, its song high-pitched and disconcertingly cheerful.

'It was.'

She blinked, surprised by his quiet admission. He'd found it painful too? He'd been so hard-nosed about – about everything that it came as a shock to hear him say that. Yet the look in his eyes suggested he was sincere.

'I lost a baby, too,' he said quietly.

She couldn't hold off the invasive memories of the hospital's white walls and bright lights. Her throat constricted. There had been bandages and padding, but nothing had lessened the pain. 'Yes, well – I don't want to go there again . . .'

His phone rang, and he lifted it to his ear immediately. After a few moments, he smiled. 'Great news. I'll get the paperwork sent through urgently and I expect to have the keys as soon as it's finalised. Tell me the address again.'



## A Forget-Me-Not Summer

Natasha watched, vaguely irritated by the interruption, as he pulled out a notebook and jotted a few words.

But as she saw what he was writing, understanding dawned and a chill crept over her.

The call ended and he snapped his phone shut. She could tell from the look in his eyes that she wasn't going to like what he said before he'd even uttered a word.

This was the Luc she had known before. All hint of emotion was gone and his features were as hard as bronze. Instinctively, she took half a step back.

'I've just bought your cottage,' he said coolly.

'Bought it? What do you mean?'

'I made an offer. A very high offer that the other guy can't match. They accepted it.'

'No . . .' she began. 'How—'

'Come with me to France,' he cut in. 'And it's yours.'

Her throat closed. He'd deliberately bought the cottage so he could hold her to ransom with it.

Why had she agreed to go for a drink with him? She should have shut her front door in his face instead of being civil to him. *He* hadn't behaved in a civil way. In less than two hours he'd managed to pinpoint the one thing that mattered most to her, then use the knowledge to his advantage. She should have seen it coming: there was a reason why he was such a successful businessman.

'You can't do that.'

'I just did.'

He held her gaze, but she couldn't tell if he was ashamed of what he'd done or triumphant. He should be ashamed. It was plain wrong.

*Sophie Claire*

Her nails were digging into her palms. ‘How could you, Luc?’ This was so typical: he wanted something, he got it.

‘How could I not? You couldn’t afford the place yourself. Now you can own it.’

Because he’d snapped his fingers and bought it. It was a reminder that he was wealthy and she was just an ordinary girl. Their backgrounds were so different, they might as well have been raised on different planets.

‘You make it sound like you’ve done me a favour!’

‘I have. Without me you were out of the picture. A higher offer, remember? The house was going to be demolished.’

The fact that he was right made her even angrier.

‘How much did you pay?’ Part of her didn’t want to hear the answer. It must have been a huge amount to have eliminated the other bidder.

‘Irrelevant,’ Luc said, in that cutting, ultra-decisive manner of his. It made her bristle. ‘All that matters is that the cottage will be yours if you agree to come with me.’