

Chapter One

Hilary
The Flour Mill

The first time I walked around the flour mill at Huntingbridge in Gloucestershire turned out to be a life-changing moment. Reminiscent of the first time I met my business partner, Ben Adams. The initial thought that struck me on both occasions was “Great, not perfect, but I can work with this.” It was enough to clinch the deal for me.

You see, I thought I had a “perfect” life once a long time ago. I married Josh, the man of my dreams, only to find out one failed marriage and a broken heart later, that everything could change in an instant. What you saw depended upon where you were standing when you admired it. If you were on the outside looking in on someone else’s life, it was only natural to form an opinion based on the façade you saw. What I eventually discovered was that even when you were on the inside looking out, it was easy to be fooled into thinking everything was fine. On that fateful day many years ago, what I hadn't appreciated was that what we had was in fact a love triangle and knowing that would have given me a whole new perspective.

Everyone around us believed Josh and I had an enviable life, because we looked like the perfect couple. For two years and four months I thought so too. Then I found out Josh was cheating on me, and had been for quite a while before I eventually discovered the truth. The other woman, who had also fallen under the irresistible spell of my attentive husband, obviously had a completely different viewpoint from where she was

standing. What was so poignantly sad and particularly cruel was that even after their affair I continued to remain oblivious to the fact that my life was a sham. Josh continued to be the kindest, most thoughtful, and loving man that I had fallen in love with—and that, above all else, hurt the most. How could he deceive with such blatant disregard to anyone else’s feelings? Had he ever *really* loved me? Or did he only love himself?

When I first met Josh I opened my heart to him in a way that left me unprepared for what was to come. When the truth surfaced, I was devastated. My heart was broken into so many little pieces I couldn’t understand how I could still be alive, as if the damage couldn’t be purely emotional. However, I learned that the heart was simply a muscle—it continued to beat and function if it was physiologically healthy. My heart was broken, but it continued to beat as if nothing had happened. I knew that once I picked myself up off the floor and glued the pieces back together, the scars would always be there no matter what I did. His betrayal had changed a little part of me forever. I had lost the innocence and naivety that accompanies one’s first love, and with it went the ability to unconditionally trust any man with my heart, ever again.

Sad to say, by the time I had hit twenty-five I found myself divorced and seriously *off men* for good. I turned to my career as a lifeline to give me purpose and re-energize me. I decided to go back to college to get a degree in Restaurant Management. I did every job imaginable, from sweeping floors and washing up to waiting tables, until eventually I was in charge of organizing wedding buffets and grand dinners. Being free and single allowed me to move around the country, to chase the opportunities I needed to gain experience and grow. My mother once asked me if I was running away. At the time I simply shrugged my shoulders and said “maybe,” but I wasn’t

sure if that was really true. If it was, what exactly was I running away from? Love? Life? Myself?

The years flew by in a blur of activity and my thirty-ninth year turned out to be a significant turning point for me. I was working for two guys who had opened a trendy restaurant in London called Slate. I'd been running the place for three years and I knew that it was time to move on to my next challenge. Off the back of the success of their London restaurant they had opened another in Brighton and wanted me to go to Manchester to open number three. I'd had other offers—everyone knows everyone in this business—but I found myself hesitating and I honestly couldn't explain why. What was I waiting for?

It turned out that fate had different plans for my future, and I found myself unwittingly in the right place at precisely the right time. The deadline for my decision was looming when Ben unexpectedly crossed my path. It was a midweek birthday bash for a party of fourteen—they all worked in the trade and several of them were chefs. My two bosses were among the partygoers and they had begun to stress over things that were already nicely under control. I understood the fact that some of the people around the table were not just their peers, but also their competitors, and that every little detail would be scrutinized. So I handled them with sensitivity, knowing it was all about the planning, which happened to be my particular strength. From the amuse-bouche, right through to the beautifully handmade petit fours accompanying coffee, each course was perfectly executed and served with panache.

When the party eventually broke up, one of the guests walked over to me. I thought he was going to chat about the food or something, but instead he stood in front of me looking curiously awkward. He pulled a business card out of his pocket and handed it to me, going very red in the face.

“Er...great night,” he said. “Could you give me a ring sometime maybe?” I took the card from his hand and looked up at him, rather surprised. I noticed his eyes were grey, with little streaks of hazel and I saw that his hesitation was really embarrassment.

“About business, yes. Well, great...” he muttered and then hurried away. I watched him as he walked out through the restaurant. He was expensively dressed, but in a very casual way, and he was packing a few extra pounds around the middle. At around five foot eight and with short sandy-colored hair, he had a boyish look that probably made him seem younger than his actual years. I knew for a fact that most of the crowd that night was in their thirties. Another thing that stood out about him was that he didn’t find small talk easy. So many guys were over-confident and it was rather nice to meet someone who was naturally shy and unassuming for a change. There was something else that I couldn’t put my finger on—I remembered thinking he looked vaguely familiar.

It was rare for someone to surprise me and I had to admit I was curious to know more. Ben wasn’t my type, but then I’d given up looking for Mr. Right a long time ago. Even though there was a definite social side to my work and I loved meeting new people, I was a professional first and foremost. I didn’t mix business with pleasure. Over the years I had dated on occasion, but seldom met anyone who kept my interest and who could cope with my unsociable working hours. The simple truth was, since Josh, I hadn’t met anyone who could make me feel they were worth putting before my career. I loved that sense of total independence and freedom, free to do whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted. I glanced down at the card in my hand and saw that he’d written his name and his mobile number. On the reverse, I saw it was a business card for Guy’s Restaurant in

Mayfair, and then everything clicked into place. He was Guy Marshall's head chef, so I'd probably seen him around. I wondered why Guy hadn't contacted me himself, as we knew each other quite well.

When I rang Ben, he was a lot less awkward over the phone. It turned out that it was his own business proposition he wanted to discuss, which had thrown me. We arranged to meet up for coffee and that was the start of our business relationship. Ben was what I considered to be a typical loner. He loved his domain, his kitchen, and enjoyed—or should I say thrived upon—his own company. He was a talented chef, very creative, and fortunately hadn't developed that over-the-top ego that so often goes with the title. He lived and breathed for the inspiring combinations he put together and presented faultlessly on the plate. Food was his passion and little else counted for much—it was his *raison d'être*.

Ben had hit a plateau in his career and ironically I was in much the same position at that time. He needed someone with strong management experience—financial and front-of-house skills—and told me he'd been looking for the right partner for quite a while. I was flattered he was talking to *me* about his vision, and I had to admit to myself I was very interested. I could see why he needed me—he didn't have much business sense and that was obvious when he was willing to give me a fifty-percent share for less than a fifty-percent investment. He was selling his smart London pad to fund the new restaurant and was hoping to find something in rural Gloucestershire. When he asked if I was interested, I told him that he could count me in on the condition that we both put up an equal stake, and then we shook hands. The next day I put my house on the market and that was the start of our journey to realize a shared dream.

It was amazing what could be achieved when two workaholics became business partners. It took us five months to find the right place, but the moment we walked into the flour mill, we both knew we'd found it. It wasn't huge as far as mills go—it was an easily manageable amount of space. The long, rectangular building consisted of a cellar and two floors sitting sideways onto a country lane. The original entrance faced the roadside, but that had been blocked off many years prior. A grand new entrance had been created in the center of the front elevation of the building, which looked out across a small footbridge spanning the stream. A small flight of impressive stone steps led up to beautifully simple, over-sized wooden doors heralding the new entrance. Although the proportions were probably a little over the top, the simplicity of the design meant it didn't look out of place against the aging stone walls, which had been painstakingly repointed.

It had captivated me from that first moment, as Ben and I stood outside admiring the front of the building. The stream that originally fed the waterwheel was only a trickle now and disappeared under the tarmac below our feet. It flowed on beneath the floor on the north side of the building. The wheel itself was located outside, behind the kitchen, although it no longer worked. The stream reappeared in the far corner and ran on down through the garden as far as the eye could see. It lent a gentle bubbling sound to the air, which would have once been a loud rushing torrent when the watercourse was unobstructed.

The previous owners—Casey and John, an American couple—had run a successful bistro restaurant there for many years. People came from far and wide to sample the generous steaks, and the small bar had been very popular. Most of the inhabitants from the local hamlet of Huntingbridge would gather there in the evenings. When we first looked around, the mill was

undergoing a complete renovation and was a work in progress. The building was barely livable when Casey and John had first moved in. At that point, they could only afford to do some cosmetic work to the main restaurant, bar, and kitchen areas. As the years rolled on they realized they would have to close for a significant period to get urgent work carried out. It was while this work was being done that Casey and John were called back to the States. John's father had been killed in a car accident and as the only son he was expected to go home and run his family's small chain of restaurants. Ben and I met with them twice, but it was obviously a huge wrench for them and they were going to miss their life in England. However, Casey was very honest about the fact that the renovation works had cost them a lot more than they had originally intended. Reading between the lines, I thought they would have run out of funds before all of the work was completed. Although they had to let go of their dream, in an ironic twist of fate, it might have been for the best.

Large areas of the old flour mill had been re-plastered and it had been completely re-wired and re-plumbed. The majority of the spacious and well-fitted kitchen had been installed, plus the restaurant and bar areas were almost complete. However, the second floor was an open space still waiting for the carpenters to erect the stud walls and define the final floor plan. Casey and John's design reflected their family requirements as a couple with two boys in their early teens, whereas Ben and I were business partners. We spent several weeks talking to the architect and the local planning office to revise the plans to fit the way we wanted to use the space. It wasn't easy, because even though the main accommodation area looked like a blank canvas, certain features had been preserved and naturally the Listed Buildings Officer didn't want the identity of the place obliterated. We had to work around windows that weren't in the

most convenient of places and pipework we inherited based on the earlier layout, but eventually everything fell into place.

The second floor was originally called the sack floor, where the grain had been lifted in via an external hoist at the top of the mill. The sacks were then emptied into bins and the grain fell through into hoppers feeding the millstones, which were situated in the cellar. We divided up the second floor space to create two very large en-suite bedrooms with walk-in dressing rooms, located at each end of the building. It meant we both had private accommodations and space in which to live comfortably away from the business.

In the middle area of this floor we created an open-plan living area that became, for us, the heart of the mill. It was here that the huge wooden doors, through which the sacks of grain would have been hauled, remained as a lovely feature and a part of the history. The wooden doors were permanently fixed shut now, although the old hoist still hung from the exterior and the large metal hook swung freely in the breeze. It was to become one of the familiar sounds of the mill—that rusty squeak as the hook swayed from side to side, adding to the creaks and groans of shifting wood that could be heard in the still of the night.

All of the original beams had been sandblasted when the walls were stripped back, but the only original part of the internal workings that had survived was the large wooden slipper, a long chute that fed grain into the grindstones, which were long-gone. It stood in what was now the entrance hallway on the first floor, flanked by the restaurant and bar on one side and the kitchen on the other.

To the rear of the mill were several outbuildings and a long garden, bordered on the right-hand side by the stream, which snaked on down into the dense woodlands. There were a large number of fruit trees and lawn areas which hadn't fared

very well over the years. However, with a bit of work, we knew it would be relatively easy to tidy up. It would also be quite straightforward to create a large patio area beyond the rear access to the bar, which would be ideal in summer.

What made Ben and I fall in love with the mill though was the setting. It was in a small hamlet of only a dozen homes. From the original mill owner's detached house, to the granary, the stables, and the workers' cottages, it was its own little community. You could envisage local farmers hauling their carts, heavily laden with sacks of grain for milling and taking away their ground meal or flour after paying a percentage called the Miller's toll. Bread was an important part of the staple diet in those days and the mill owners were respected people, often prominent in local affairs and relatively wealthy. Despite all of the changes over the years, the hamlet still retained a special feel of its own. This was partly down to the location, but also due to the proximity of the little cluster of buildings. The nearest shopping center was a good forty-minute drive away and only one long, single-track country lane led into and out of the hamlet. Quite simply, it wasn't somewhere you could stumble across—it was a place you headed toward with a map very firmly grasped in your hand.

A railway track ran along behind the granary and the stables, both buildings having been converted into cottage homes a long time ago. It served as a reminder of the days when grain had arrived by train and the sacks of flour had been transported wider afield. The railway line was now obsolete and partially over-grown, a haven for wildlife and ramblers. Both Ben and I shared the same thought that first day we visited the mill. We would be leaving behind the familiar stress that comes with city living and would have to learn to fit into a country lifestyle, where nature itself was the taskmaster. Realizing Ben's dream

that as many ingredients as possible should be sourced from local farms was going to be a reality, as the mill sat in the middle of rich Gloucestershire farmland. The location was a little more remote than we had intended, but we felt a definite connection. We were meant to be there and felt confident the customers would find their way to our new restaurant.

Casey told us a little about the history of the mill and about the resident lady ghost. She asked us whether we found that off-putting. Both Ben and I laughed as she looked back and forth at us quite seriously.

“Have you ever seen it?” I asked.

“No,” she said shaking her head, “but there are people who say they have.”

“Well I don’t believe in all that stuff, but if this ghost is included in the price, then that’s fine by me,” Ben said. I was surprised to hear him comment. He was usually a man of so very few words, especially when you actually wanted him to say something.

As we left the estate agent that day and walked back to the car, Ben looked at me and for the first time I saw a level of excitement in him that completely overcame his inherent shyness.

“Hi five?” he asked, hand held aloft and as I raised mine in triumph – the deal was struck.

The Restaurant @ The Mill was born. It might not have been perfect, but as I’d learned from past experience, perfect wasn’t always the best option.

Chapter Two

Hilary
The Challenge

The sun streamed in through the window, and as I walked over to check my hair in the mirror, I realized how much I'd changed in the seven years we'd been here. As I leaned in a little closer, I noticed what were once quite fine lines around my eyes were now much deeper, but if I stood back, I was comfortable with the image that smiled back at me. Gone was the tall, thin, and often uptight businesswoman dressed in expensive labels, always chic in black, and never a hair out of place. I smiled as I recalled one particular photo of myself, which I now called the *Old Me*. The *New Me* was rounder, with less make-up, and my long auburn hair now had threads of grey running through it, so that when twisted and pulled up, it almost looked highlighted. Everything about *me* was softer than it used to be.

I could hear Ben move around in the kitchen below, the sound of metal on metal as he placed pans on top of the cooker. Then suddenly, the merest hint of buttery onions and garlic

wafted up through the building and caught my nose. It's another day in our little paradise, and as I shook out the duvet and plumped up the pillows on our bed, I thought about how far we'd come.

The first two years were so hard. Aside from the physical work we had to do to cut the cost of finishing the renovation works and overhauling the garden, building up the business itself consumed a great deal of time. We knew that people would come once they heard the new restaurant was open, but in the early months, word of mouth alone didn't give us the numbers we needed to make ends meet. We only had a very modest advertising budget and needed to make every penny count. It wasn't easy when there was always so much else to be done at the same time, but bit-by-bit word traveled further and further afield. We stayed relatively small with a maximum capacity of twenty-four covers. With careful booking of the arrival times, it continued to work well for us, and we were open for business each evening Wednesday through to Sunday. Tuesday was open bar night for drinks only, and Friday and Saturday evenings we also allowed non-diners in to keep the locals happy. Alex Morris, a retired wine merchant who lived in the former mill owner's house, more than ably took care of the bar for us. Sadie, who also lived in Huntingbridge, assisted Ben with food preparation and was an excellent waitress. With two of the local college lads to help out with the waiting and washing up when we were fully booked, we made a tight little team. Everyone was flexible because that was the only way to make it all work. It was a happy atmosphere though, and we always had a list of potential new recruits, as the lads tended to move on every other year once their exams were over.

Asking Alex if he was interested in manning the bar side of things was Ben's inspired idea. When we first opened we

hadn't intended to cater for casual bar trade at all, but it soon became obvious that the locals missed their former meeting place. Ben and I weren't sure what to do about that. We didn't want to alienate anyone, however, our focus had to be firmly concentrated on fine dining. Alex was one of the few people actually able to draw conversation out of Ben, and it was Ben who found out that Alex was a former wine merchant and recognized connoisseur. Of course Ben asked me to approach Alex with our proposition that he join our little team and take control of stocking the wine cellar and running the bar. Alex was genuinely delighted to take up the offer and really enjoyed his retirement job. So the Bar @ The Mill was successfully launched, and although we decided not to branch out and do bar food, it had done a lot to increase the number of bookings in the restaurant.

It was some time during our second year of operation that Alex put his own proposition to us. He said he'd been thinking of setting up a monthly wine-tasting club and was looking for a suitable venue. He would supply the wines, but he was keen that it should be accompanied by finger food that was on par with, and complemented, the wines on offer. This meant that each month the menu would have to be varied, dependent upon the qualities and flavors of the wines featured. Ben was instantly caught up in Alex's vision of educating people's palates and the *Wine by Candlelight* club was formed. I had to admit it was a good idea with potential to attract locals and also, we hoped, people from further afield. The first meeting was held in the restaurant and we were all taken aback when thirty-four people turned up. All were happy to dig deep into their pockets to sample the exquisite wines Alex had obtained for them, as well as the spectacular array of tempting bite-size morsels Ben had lovingly prepared.

Both Ben and I were invited to join the enthusiastic gathering and the conversation inevitably turned to the flour mill, the renovation work, and history of the building. For the first time we found someone who actually knew something about the alleged ghost, although hearing the complete story by candlelight was eerily atmospheric, in a laughably clichéd way. However, Mary Spencer – who lived in the granary adjacent to the mill – was such a delight that no one had the heart to stop her. In her early seventies, she was at the center of everything that went on locally and loved her history.

“Oh my dears!” she declared, “It’s such a sad tale! You have to know what happened – it’s only right and proper because Sarah will always live here too.”

I glanced around to see if anyone looked at all uncomfortable, but surprisingly everyone seemed enthralled.

“Michael Carningdale inherited the flour mill as a wedding present in the late 1800’s. His father owned several mills in the south of England and each of his three sons became mill owners in their own right at the point at which they wed. It was a handsome gift, which guaranteed a good living for them and their future families. Michael’s wife, Sarah Lemington, was reputed to be a great beauty and theirs was a true love match. In those days that wasn’t always the case for people with means. Often it was more about family alliances and maintaining wealth and position in society.

“I believe Alex has a photograph of Michael and Sarah that was discovered in the attic when he moved into the mill owner’s house. How many times the house has changed hands since Michael and Sarah’s time, I don’t know, but I do know that it has always been regarded as a happy place.”

“So why is Sarah’s spirit alleged to have been seen in the mill itself?” I recognized the guy who asked the question. He ran

a stud farm on the other side of the railway line. Ben and I had often waved out to him while we were out running and he always acknowledged us, so it was rather nice to see him here.

“Ah,” said Mary sadly. “They had only been married a few months when Sarah made her usual daily trip to bring Michael his lunch basket. The story goes that he was in the cellar and as Sarah made her descent, the heel of her shoe caught in her petticoats and she fell the full length of the stone steps. She died in Michael’s arms and he vowed he would never re-marry. Huntingbridge Mill, as it was called then, went on to become one of the most prosperous flour mills in the area under Michael’s ownership. He lived a very long life and died in his early nineties, which in that day and age was incredible. He was a lonely man who never recovered from the tragedy of losing his beloved wife.” The room had fallen silent as people thought about Mary’s words.

“Sarah isn’t a sad ghost, is she, Mary?” Alex jumped in.

“No, not at all. It is believed that she remains here because it’s where she feels closest to Michael. In 1973, a psychic came to the mill and identified Sarah after several stories of the haunting came to light. The psychic made contact and said that Sarah wasn’t aware she had died – she believed that Michael was still working at the mill. She was simply here to visit him, as she used to do every day.”

“What a lovely story. Thank you, Mary,” Alex said. He was trying to draw the subject to a close—I thought it had suddenly occurred to him that we might not have known about our resident ghost. As the wine flowed and chatter continued, someone came up with the idea of holding future club meetings in the cellar, to honor Sarah. Before Alex or I could think of a valid reason why that wasn’t such a good idea, we were all traipsing after Ben to inspect the cellar. It was a large space that

we'd fitted out with racking for the wines. It was cool and dry, with the wonderful exposed oak beams and a mix of natural stone and white painted walls. Ben had wanted to re-create the atmosphere of a French wine cellar he'd once visited and had spent hours on the Internet sourcing old materials. It wasn't purely decorative—the traditional racking was fully functional and the old barrels added an aroma of oak, brandy, and sherry that was incredibly heady. We used them as tables when we decanted or restocked the wines. It had certainly never occurred to us to open this space up for general use. Everyone was delighted and surprised by this unseen area of the Mill and after a quick poll of hands, all agreed that the candlelit events would be held there in future.

“To Sarah,” said Alex, raising his glass and shrugging his shoulders as he looked across at Ben and me.

Ben thought it was a brilliant idea, although I wasn't so sure. I hadn't seen or heard anything tangibly spooky up to that point and I didn't think Ben had either. What worried me was whether all of this would disturb Sarah, and I had to admit that possibility concerned me slightly. However, from a business point of view, the more people talked about the Mill and the more interest there was, the more secure our future would be.

What turned out to be the most surprising and totally unexpected thing to come out of our new venture was marrying Ben four years ago. I didn't think either of us had been looking for a relationship as such. A part of me worried that we only worked as a couple because of the business and what we shared here. We spent so much time together that I supposed it was inevitable that we became good friends, although the passion was a shock. One moment we were talking and the next we were making out like two hormonal teenagers. It was very late one evening after we'd finished tidying up the kitchen and

restaurant, and then made our way upstairs. We'd stood at the top of the stairs to say goodnight, as we had done hundreds of times before, when something clicked. We sought out each other's lips as we stumbled clumsily in the direction of Ben's bedroom and our business partnership entered a new phase. Afterwards I felt embarrassed and I remembered lying in bed in the dark, next to a silent Ben, thinking maybe he was simply pretending to be asleep. I needn't have worried, because after a few seconds he put his arms around me and whispered, "I've been waiting to do that for so long—I hope you don't mind," to which I had instantly burst out laughing. He started laughing too, and suddenly it all seemed like the most natural thing to have happened between us. To lay there that night and experience the noises of the Mill, with the comfort of his body wrapped around mine, made me conscious of how edgy I'd been before. A creak, groan, or moan didn't sound as intimidating when you had another living, breathing person next to you.

What made that development particularly surprising was that Ben's shyness had proved to be a real problem at first. I'd found him so difficult to talk to at times, and once we moved in there were a lot of awkward silences, even when we found ourselves working side by side for hours on end. The months we were working on the garden were the worst. I had started to wonder what I'd gotten myself into—stuck in this isolated place with very few people around for company. Gradually, though, Ben started to relax a little, but only with me.

Even now, the customers rarely got to see him. His kitchen was like his cave—his retreat from the rest of the world. Everything was pristine and laid out very precisely. Ben had a place for every pot, pan, and piece of equipment which we had all learned to respect when we were washing up and putting things away. There was a large notice board for menus and

weekly orders from the various farms in the vicinity, and for the first couple of years, it was utterly devoid of any color. Then one day I walked in and was shocked to see, pinned in the top right-hand corner, a picture of a boat. I was so surprised I did a double-take and looked straight at Ben with a puzzled look on my face. He went red and immediately turned away, and I knew instantly this wasn't something he was going to talk about. Over time that one picture became two, then three, and now half of the notice board was a virtual *sea* of boats, all blue skies and settings reminiscent of tropical islands. I swore if you closed your eyes you could hear the seagulls overhead and feel the sun beating down on you.

So you'd think that after our small wedding ceremony in the little registry office in Bristol, and having recently celebrated our fourth wedding anniversary, I'd understand by now what the boats represented. The thing was, I hadn't a clue. I'd tried asking in a casual, roundabout way, but Ben wouldn't be drawn on the subject. Sadie thought it reminded Ben of holidays he'd had in the past and one of the lads, Tom, thought he'd probably had a remote-control boat in his youth. Because Ben was so professional and focused, people found it difficult to strike up a conversation with him about the small, personal things. Often it was agonizingly one-sided and you could end up wishing you hadn't bothered. Of course when he was with me we talked quite easily, although even I tended to stick to work-related issues—it was seldom about the past or personal things from our childhoods. If Ben didn't want to talk, you sensed that immediately. It was as if he switched off and there was no way of reaching him.

So why did a few pictures worry me so much? It was a symptom—and where there was a symptom, there was an underlying cause. It woke me at night. As I lay next to Ben,

watching his chest rise and fall, I wondered what made him hold things back. Why did he feel he couldn't share his innermost thoughts with me? That was when the little scars buried deep inside of me would start to tug and I'd fear I was going to be hurt all over again. If I was honest with myself, I knew that I continued to hold a little bit of myself back, too. Just in case. You see, I was waiting for that day when whatever Ben couldn't share with me bubbled to the surface.

In the early months of our partnership, I thought he was gay and that was his guilty secret. Not that I had any real evidence of that, of course, but he never went out on dates—in fairness, neither did I—and he never talked about girlfriends. After most of the work was finished on the Mill, he bought a load of exercise equipment and spent hours up in his room training. His cuddly build gradually turned into a slim-line version of Ben, solid muscles and lean, toned abs. He couldn't understand why I fell about laughing when he eventually told me it was his way of fending off the frustration of being around me all the time, but not being *with* me. If only he could open up like that about the past, then I could do the same and let him in on my own deepest worries and fears.

Ben exercised every day and we often went running together. We ran in silence and had a number of different routes. We often stopped to talk to the locals along the way who were always eager to pass on the latest gossip. Ben would never join in, but waited politely, running on the spot until we set off once again. He'd give his signature little salute goodbye. He was a patient guy, gentle and kind, but his core was hidden and he preferred to be solitary. That was the bit that you had no choice but to respect—you can't touch what you can't see.

Ben's voice shook me from my reverie and I glanced at the clock, surprised to see it was already five o'clock. I heard

Sadie call out “Hello” followed by the click of the entrance door shutting behind her. I made my way downstairs, ready for another busy evening.

Chapter Three

Hilary
The Wedding

Ben had never actually said the words *I love you*. His proposal was sort of romantic, in its own way—he made cupcakes and each had a letter on it spelling out P-L-E-A-S-E M-A-R-R-Y M-E. It was nearly midnight—it had been a busy Saturday night’s service, and I had walked back into the kitchen after locking up. There they were, and there he was, arms crossed and standing in the middle of the kitchen awaiting my reaction. His body language clearly said *please don’t reject me*. When I walked up to him, his kiss said everything else I wanted to know. I already knew my answer was going to be *yes*, even though the sad truth was that I’d never said the words *I love you* to Ben either. That was the bit that I continued to hold back, along with the details of the breakdown of my first marriage, so I guessed we had this mutual understanding. As the old saying went, “It takes one to know one,” and we recognized in each other that tell-tale little fracture, damage that time hadn’t healed for whatever reason.

All of my friends were people I'd either worked with or worked for over the years. They were scattered all around the country, which was a reflection of the pattern of my working life. On my side, most of the guests at our fairly small wedding were friends. Of course my mother and sister were there—my father died when I was six. On Ben's side, his mother, Claire, flew over from Cyprus with her sister, but his father and two brothers were unable to make it. I thought he would've been upset about that, but he didn't say anything at the time and no one really talked about it. Ben only invited four friends—one of them was Pete, a chef who trained under him in London. I thought Ben might have been nervous, but he didn't show it. When the Registrar said "you can now kiss your bride," he certainly didn't hold back. There was an almighty roar from the small gathering around us and we felt surrounded by the warmth of their good wishes.

Ben had never asked about my first husband and I'd never talked about him. Wedding number one had been a fairytale wedding—lavish, a huge frothy white dress, four-tiered cake, and one hundred and fifty guests. So I felt guilty because, although this was the second time for me, it was the first time for Ben. I had wondered if that played on his mind at all. If it did, he never mentioned it. Our wedding day turned out to be everything we had hoped for and more. Everyone had a good time and it reflected both of our personalities, reinforcing how well we worked together as a team. The attention to detail personalized it in a way that would have been lost at a larger affair. The food was worthy of the highest Michelin star restaurant.

My only concern as we made our vows to each other was that we both knew there were things we should have talked through, emotions we had purposely avoided. Was it possible

for a marriage to succeed when you can't be one hundred percent honest with each other? When there were things you knew you should say, but didn't dare because it would be like opening a can of worms. I was scared that Ben wouldn't like the side of me he hadn't seen. And what about the things I felt I couldn't ask him? Why wasn't he upset that his father and brothers hadn't been there to celebrate our special day? Was he really shy or had he chosen to hide away in the sanctuary of his kitchen for another reason? I was aware that there was a lot I didn't know about Ben, but suddenly it wasn't important anymore, because we needed each other and somehow it all seemed so right.

