

‘Mr and Mrs Bentley?’

The woman’s voice was regulation soft and soothing. I looked up. She had a sympathetic face too. And comforting strands of grey running through her long brown hair.

‘Yes,’ I said, standing up.

‘I’m Polly. Please do come through.’ She gestured towards the open door.

I glanced across at Chris. To a neutral observer his face gave nothing away. But I knew him better than that. Could see the fear in his eyes. Smell it on him, even.

‘It’ll be OK,’ I whispered as I walked past him.

He nodded. Almost imperceptibly.

We went through into a large, airy room with sash windows and beige curtains which were frayed at the edges. Two Ikea-type chairs were positioned facing the windows,

an occasional table in between with a strategically placed box of tissues, a jug of water and two glasses.

Polly shut the door behind us and offered her hand and a thin smile. Not thin in a bad way. Just suitably thin for someone who has never met you before and is about to splice you open and perform open-heart surgery.

‘Pleased to meet you both,’ she said as we shook hands in turn. ‘Do take a seat and we can get started.’

I sat down on the chair furthest away. Chris took the other one. He crossed and uncrossed his legs, fiddled with the strap on his watch. The one I’d given him for his fortieth birthday.

Polly launched into the formalities. She spoke calmly and clearly, explaining that this was an initial assessment and we’d then be matched with a counsellor to suit our needs. It was textbook stuff. But I refrained from telling her so.

‘Now, let me just have a quick look through these forms,’ she said, nodding intermittently as she did so.

‘So, you’re a photographer,’ she said to Chris. ‘What sort of pictures do you take?’

‘Good ones, hopefully,’ he replied, managing a hint of a smile. ‘Landscapes when I can, family portraits and other stuff to pay the mortgage.’

‘And you have one son from a previous relationship. How old is he?’

Chris looked down at his feet. I saw him swallow hard. No words were forthcoming.

‘Sixteen,’ I said. ‘Josh is sixteen.’

Polly nodded. 'And does he live with you?'

We both hesitated this time. I didn't even dare to look across at Chris.

'Yes,' I said eventually. 'Although not at the moment.'

Polly nodded again and wrote something down. Perhaps sensing that it wouldn't be wise to probe any further at this stage.

'And you've got a daughter together. How old is she?'

'Nine,' I replied. 'Her name's Matilda.'

Polly smiled and nodded. I wanted to say that she was named after the Roald Dahl character. That Chris always called her 'Tilda' but I never did. I didn't say anything, though. In case Chris thought I was getting at him.

Polly turned to my form. It was only a matter of time before she found out now. I waited, watching her face for the sign. To be fair, she didn't even flinch.

'Ah, Alison, I see you're a counsellor yourself. What sort of areas do you cover?'

I hesitated. Aware how utterly ridiculous it was going to sound. I thought of what Matilda always said when people asked what her mother did. She called me a 'marriage mender'. Said I kept people's mummies and daddies together when they were arguing a lot. My stomach tightened as I wondered what on earth she would think if she could see her marriage-mender mummy right now.

'Relationships,' I said to Polly, trying to keep my voice as low and even as possible. 'I'm a relationship counsellor.'

The silence hung heavily in the air. Chris put his head in his hands.

I smiled weakly. 'It is rather ridiculous, isn't it?'

'Not at all,' said Polly. 'I'm divorced. I'd say that's more ridiculous.' She smiled at me.

I smiled back, grateful for her efforts to put me at ease.

'As I'm sure you're aware,' she continued, 'I do need to have some understanding of the situation and why you're here, in order to place you with an appropriate counsellor. For example, I need to know if there are any sexual problems in your relationship?'

Chris smiled slightly and shook his head. He was thinking of that eighties sitcom – *Dear John*, was it? – the one where the counsellor kept asking if he had any sexual problems.

'No,' I said.

On one level that was a lie. Not having sex for more months than I cared to remember was quite obviously a sexual problem. But it was a symptom of the problem, not the cause. Which meant I could get away with it.

'Fine. And how would you describe the issues which have led you to seek counselling?' asked Polly.

She looked at Chris as she said it but he simply continued fiddling with his watch strap. I shifted in my seat, aware he wasn't doing himself any favours. That if it had been me in Polly's chair, I wouldn't exactly be warming to him. I understood he wasn't being deliberately obstructive. That he was simply unable to engage fully in the process when he was so riddled with hurt.

'We've had some family issues,' I said. 'There's been a lot of change. We've been under a great deal of strain.'

Again, I avoided mentioning her name. I didn't want Polly to think badly of Chris. And she would do if I mentioned another woman. You couldn't help it, even if you were trained not to show it.

'I see,' said Polly. 'And how has the strain affected you both? Has it interfered with communication?'

'Yes,' I replied. 'We haven't really been talking properly.'

'Would you say that's fair, Chris?' Polly asked.

Chris looked up. I worried for a second that he was going to stand up and simply walk out of the room. He looked at me. The first time he'd looked at me properly since we'd arrived.

He ran his fingers through his dark curls. Sighed deeply. 'Yeah,' he replied. 'I would.'

'Good,' said Polly. 'And is either of you able to identify how long ago these problems started? When your relationship started to deteriorate?'

It was my turn to look at my feet. To swallow hard. I heard Chris's voice cut through the silence.

'Saturday, September the 29th, last year,' he said.

Polly raised her eyebrows slightly and turned to look at me.

'Yes,' I said. 'It was.'