

SING FOR LIFE BY WENDY PERRIAM, CHAPTER 10

‘Colin!’ she called, as she opened the front door, hoping there’d be no response. If he shouted a reply, it meant he wasn’t resting, as she’d urged, but maybe prowling around, in danger of a fall.

No answer. Her sigh of relief, however, was cut short as she proceeded into the hall, all but gagging on the reek of diarrhoea. And, to her horror, she saw she’d actually trodden into a squelch of the brown stinking stuff, which was pooling into the carpet she’d shampooed only yesterday, so lovingly and thoroughly, ready for Megan’s visit. Indeed, after her marathon efforts, the whole house had smelled clean and fresh (with a little help from a jasmine room-spray), yet now it was like stepping into a sewer.

Picking her way between the fetid brown deposits, she went straight to seek out Colin, passing the open dining-room-door on the way. Glancing in a moment, she stood transfixed in shock. The new white lace tablecloth, bought in Megan’s honour, was now awash in a lake of red wine, the best wine-glasses and side-plates she’d arranged so tastefully had been smashed into cruel-edged shards. Worse, the luxurious flower-arrangement – orchids, roses, Madonna lilies – sent by Alex yesterday – was lying toppled on its side and dripping yellowish water on the floor. Several flower-stems had snapped off, blooms decapitated, loose petals strewn everywhere.

She surveyed the wreckage, torn between rage and disbelief. Surely Colin had neither the strength nor the motivation to wreak such havoc. She had left him in bed, wearing his usual thick pad and incontinence-pants, and promising to stay put till she returned. So how come the diarrhoea in the hall? How come the assault on her elegantly laid table, and on the bouquet in particular?

She gripped the door-frame, a hundred questions churning in her mind: had he grown suspicious at some level, become increasingly uneasy when first Beryl and then Megan turned up to look after him? Had he somehow intuited that she’d been out with another man?

No, that was plain ridiculous. He would simply assume she’d bought the flowers herself – if he gave the matter any thought at all. The card that came with them, thrillingly inscribed, ‘Thank you, lovely Veronica, for your enchanting company’, was now well-concealed beneath a pile of sheets in the linen-chest – although in fact she intended keeping it

for ever. In any case, there was nothing really wrong about accompanying Alex to the opera – well, apart from that one passionate kiss. But to imagine her husband knew about the kiss and was now hell-bent on revenge was totally improbable.

She continued on upstairs to his bedroom, found him still in bed - naked, poo-stained, yet fast asleep. Peter was curled in the crook of his arm and the very sight of their intimacy ratcheted up her anger yet another notch. Her husband had started sleeping in another room, as early as the second year of their marriage, choosing Peter – the *real* Peter, still very much alive then – as his nightly companion, in preference to her. By then, she'd come to understand his psychology - dumb animals were less threatening, in that they wouldn't make emotional demands on him, as a wife was bound to do – nonetheless, it had hurt her deeply to be left to sleep alone when still a newish bride.

She shifted her gaze from Peter to the sheer mess and chaos of the room: all the more infuriating after the effort she'd expended on yesterday's spring-clean, when she had hoovered up myriads of tiny black flakes from the soles of his ancient slippers, which had been coming loose and flaking off for weeks. She had then chucked the offending slippers in the bin and replaced them with the new pair she'd bought him ages ago, but which he stubbornly refused to wear. So, it was obvious he'd retrieved them, against her strict instructions, undone all her efforts to make the house welcoming and shipshape for the first friend she'd invited in literally years.

As she listened to his smugly calm and regular breathing, she, in contrast, seemed to split apart with stress, and, all at once, she darted back to the dining-room and let out a shriek of unadulterated fury, in face of the senseless destruction. She ought to be sorry for Colin – afflicted with diarrhoea, losing his mind and his memory, maybe wrestling with suspicions he could neither identify nor articulate – but, far from feeling pity, she was choking with a frenzied rage, as if a dam had burst and the forty years of resentful acrimony that constituted her marriage had come pouring out in a black, stinking torrent.

'Fuck you, Colin!' she yelled, blindly grabbing at pieces of smashed china, limp and fading flower-corpses, wine-soaked linen napkins, all littered on the floor. 'I wish I'd never met you,' she shrieked, hurling back the detritus she'd collected, in a red-mist paroxysm of wrath. 'I gave up my life for you and Tom,' she hissed, speaking to the walls, the floor, as if they could bear witness to a truth she didn't know she knew, and astonished at the words

issuing from her mouth – words never consciously formulated, that seemed to be erupting from some dark, long-denied region of her mind. ‘Tom I don’t regret,’ she shouted. ‘He’s dead now and I miss him. It’s *you* who made my life so bloody difficult.’ Her heart was beating so furiously it felt as if it were breaking into bits, like the smashed crockery, the dismembered flowers. Her throat hurt from shouting, her guts were churning in queasy spasms, her head pounding with such pain and rage she felt in danger of a stroke. ‘You never lifted a finger for Tom,’ she accused the toppled vase, as if holding it responsible. ‘Yet he was *your* bloody son, not mine.’

No, this *couldn't* be her. She never swore, never used four-letter words, had never before complained in all those forty years, let alone lost control. Nonetheless, it *was* her – a new, terrifying, rebellious her, continuing to shout poison-darts of invective, the words catching in her throat and seeming almost to draw blood.

‘Fine for you!’ she stormed at the tense, tight-lipped Colin staring from their wedding-photo, pewter-framed on the mantelpiece. ‘You could escape whenever you chose, swan around with your business-friends, but *I* was tied to your son, your house, the regime you imposed.’ In the photo, she looked so touchingly young and hopeful, as if daring to believe that things could and would work out, yet how wrong she’d been back then, not realizing she was trapped and had been since her wedding-day. And, as she paced round and round the dining-room, she did indeed feel like a caged beast, with no chance of breaking free, or breathing the wilder, purer air of the jungle or the rain-forest.

‘Shut up!’ she snapped at her mobile, its sudden intrusive shrill enraging her still more. Why bother to answer the sodding thing, when it was probably the geriatric clinic with details of Colin’s brain-scan, or Social Services offering him yet another assessment? But, once the date came round, he’d refuse to have the scan, as he had refused the previous ones, and, as for the Social Services, he invariably dismissed them as ‘do-gooders’ and ‘busybodies’. Just the thought of his pig-headed rejection of all services or investigations that might actually ease his situation – not to mention hers – made her start sobbing in despair, as it dawned on her that, if Colin lingered on, the present wretched impasse might continue for another decade. The prospect was all the more intolerable now she’d been given a glimpse, through Alex, of a different sort of life, one with affection and romance, togetherness, companionship, one that made the sheer waste and deprivation of her actual life hit home with desperate force.

Collapsing onto a chair, she remained leaning over the table, as if its mutilated state symbolized her own existence, and only the scratchy hoarseness of her throat sent her blundering out to the kitchen to fetch a glass of water. New outrage met her eyes there: both fridge and freezer had been left open and water was trickling on to the vinyl floor-tiles she'd polished to a shine only hours ago. And the starter and the pudding she'd made for Megan first thing this morning, and left pristine in the fridge, had both been raided and despoiled. The avocado mousse was all but finished up, the lemon posset streaked with green, where Colin had used the same spoon as for the starter. It was totally inexplicable, in that he never normally helped himself from the fridge but always left *her* to bring his food, and, in any case, he detested avocado. Besides, he had told her when he woke that he wasn't the slightest bit hungry on account of his tummy-ache, although only now did she realize that he must have been going down with the gastroenteritis bug that had caused his violent diarrhoea. Why and when his appetite had mysteriously returned, or why he'd eaten *Megan's* food, instead of the snacks she'd left beside his bed, she was never likely to know, since she and Colin could never communicate or engage in rational dialogue.

All the frustration of living with someone with memory-loss seemed to come to a seething boil in her head, as she recalled the frequent occasions when he clean forgot what had happened only hours or minutes earlier. In fact, it struck her, all at once, that her recent outburst – so precipitate, so vehement, so totally unprecedented – had been simply wasted breath. Colin, peacefully slumbering upstairs, had failed to hear a single word. And, even if he had heard, he would never admit he'd been at fault, but deny all accusations, since whatever he had done this morning would have long since been consigned to oblivion.

She was determined to go and wake him, though, however fruitless any attempt to tell him how upset she was, or how unlikely any coherent conversation. But, as she began striding towards the staircase, the sudden peal of the doorbell stopped her in her tracks. If it was the postman, he could go to hell; if Beryl, the woman could go straight back home and stay there. She wrenched open the front door, tears streaming down her face, her hair dishevelled, the smart clothes she'd put on for Sebastian now plashed with red wine and dirty flower-water, yet not caring who might see her.

'Veronica,' Megan exclaimed. 'What on earth's the matter? I heard you shouting from halfway down the street!'

Veronica froze in shock. Why in God's name had her friend arrived at lunchtime, rather than for supper? How much had she heard from 'halfway down the street': the 'fuckings', the abuse, the intemperate accusations?

'What's *happened?*' Megan asked again, stepping into the hall and off-loading into Veronica's arms the bunch of flowers she'd been clutching to her chest. 'The only reason I'm here at this hour is that I picked these from the garden and thought I'd drop them in early, to save you the hassle of having to find a vase and arrange them at the last minute. I've been trying to phone you, to say I was passing your house anyway, so would it be OK if I popped in for a second, but you didn't pick up.'

Veronica was too ashamed to speak. Instead of the gracious welcome she'd planned, Megan had been confronted with a screaming harridan, utterly at odds with the serene, upbeat persona Veronica tried to present at choir. She could hardly bear the humiliation of knowing Megan had seen her in such an uncontrollable state, had heard the dark and terrible things she had never voiced to anyone. Would their friendship even survive?

'You're *shaking*, love. You'd better come and sit down.'

She let Megan take her arm and lead her into the sitting-room. Only then did she notice that the new throw she'd bought to cover the shabby sofa was now stained with wine and diarrhoea and had been tossed on to the floor. Just the sight of it was enough to add a racking misery to her existing mortification, and she sank down on to the now uncamouflaged sofa, again weeping bitterly.

Megan sat beside her, rock-solid and supportive, one arm around her shoulders, the other hand held tight and comfortingly in hers, until haltingly and gradually the sobs subsided into uneven breathless gasps.

'I'm so *sorry*, Megan,' she stammered, once able to speak, and so desperate to explain now, the words emerged in a garbled rush. 'I wanted everything to be nice for you, but now it's all wrecked and the whole place smells like a shithouse. And I can't bear to think you heard me screaming like that and saying God knows what. And, as for our supper, that's all ruined too. Colin's already eaten the first course and the pudding, and if I don't get down to the cooking soon, there won't even be a main course.'

‘Hush, love. The food doesn’t matter, as I’ve told you umpteen times. If this is Colin’s doing, then we need to get the place to rights. But I insist you sit and rest, and let *me* take over, OK? Just show me where you keep your cleaning stuff, and I’ll have everything spick and span in a jiffy. It’ll do me good to work off some of the flab!’

Megan ignored her protests, ordered her back to the sofa, brought her a cup of strong, sweet tea, then got to work on the hall with the shampooer and the disinfectant and an impressive show of energy.

For a shaming minute, Veronica merely sat and watched, barely able to believe that, far from losing Megan’s friendship, here was someone so genuinely supportive she didn’t balk at clearing up diarrhoea, and could negate her own afternoon plans, to come to the immediate rescue. Yet, mixed with her gratitude were a thousand accusing guilts: guilt towards Megan, of course, and towards Colin for wishing him dead, even guilt on Tom’s behalf, for allowing herself to resent his pitiful condition, if only for a moment. And also guilt for sitting useless now, while Megan slaved cheerfully away. Making a supreme effort, she rose, still trembling, to her feet, only to be rebuked by Megan, who insisted she stay put. And she was, indeed, so exhausted by her outburst, she appeared to have lost her usual willpower and resolve, and simply allowed her friend to overrule her, gratefully aware that she had managed to find everything without even needing to ask: cups and saucers, teabags, sugar, brooms and floor-cloths, carpet-shampoo, pine disinfectant, a sturdy green-glass vase.

Finally, Megan popped in one last time, with a second cup of tea and a tasteful arrangement of her garden-flowers. ‘Where shall I put these?’ she asked, inhaling the scent of the floppy-headed rambler-roses.

Suddenly realizing how precious that scent was – more so even than the smell of Alex’s long-stemmed hothouse roses -Veronica knew she must get a grip on herself and salvage what was left of the day. Megan had seen her at her unutterable worst, so she had to make amends and afford her friend at least some dregs of basic hospitality. ‘Let’s take them into the dining-room,’ she said, forcing herself to sound more engaged and upbeat, ‘and I’ll give you lunch instead of supper – if you’re sure you have time to stay, that is?’

‘All the time in the world. I’d planned nothing for this afternoon except catching up on emails, which I’m only too happy to postpone!’

‘The only problem is there *isn't* any lunch! The main course I'd planned will take ages to cook, so I'll have to cobble together some sort of stopgap meal instead.’

‘Look, I came to see *you*, as I've told you all along, not to award your kitchen its fourth Michelin star!’

‘OK. Let me just check on Colin. I'm amazed he hasn't woken up with all the noise.’ As she made her way up to his bedroom, she wondered for a second if he *was* dead. Surely otherwise, he'd have come barging down to see what was going on, peevisly vociferous at being so rudely disturbed.

Yet, to her astonishment, he was still deeply asleep and still breathing calmly like a placid child. Could this be the self-same man as had caused all the wanton destruction? Perhaps she'd overreacted, blamed him for things beyond his control, forgotten to make her usual allowances for the difficulties he couldn't help.

She returned to Megan, trying to put her confusion into words. ‘I just can't understand what was going through his mind to make him behave like that. It's as if he somehow *knows* about Alex and decided to pay me out.’

‘How could he possibly know, Veronica? I'm the only person you told about it, and the evening I was with him, we barely exchanged a word. I kept checking on him, of course, but, every time I went in, he was completely engrossed in the telly and, even when I got him into bed, he made no fuss at all and didn't even ask what I was doing there. In fact, he seemed a total, docile, little pussy-cat!’

Veronica gave a sudden hooting laugh. The notion of Colin as a pussy-cat strained credulity too far.

‘That's better, love! The way you looked earlier on, I thought you'd never smile in your life again! Now what I suggest is that we get some bread and cheese, or something really simple, and sit and eat it in style in the dining-room, and you can tell me what on earth's been going on – not just with Colin but with Alex.’

They finally settled for beans on toast, with some of Colin's ice-cream for pudding – hardly the elaborate fare she'd planned, but, as Megan said, who cared? And at least they had flowers on the table, and Megan had found some paper serviettes: unseasonable Christmassy

ones, adorned with jolly Santa Clauses, but they somehow added to the sheer relief Veronica felt at patching up her shattered plans and being safely with her friend, notwithstanding all the screaming horror of the last two hours. The circumstances might have altered, the meal might be a scratch one, but this amazing woman was so genuine, so caring, it seemed to more than compensate for everything.