

PARIS HONEYMOON

Tessa stood in front of the metal shutters, which were covered in graffiti and tattered flyers. 'It's closed down.'

'Are you sure it's on this corner?' her husband said. 'I remember it being further up the hill.'

Tessa pointed to the faded sign above the restaurant. 'No look, *Claude et Jules*. They must have gone out of business.'

She blinked back tears. Ridiculous to be so upset, but she'd been looking forward to having a meal with Ed in the same tiny back street restaurant where the sentimental *patron* had toasted them as newly weds thirty years ago. The other customers had lifted their glasses with cries of '*L'amour!*' and Tessa and Ed had laughed and shared a shy kiss to whoops of delight. It had been the perfect end to their honeymoon in Paris.

Now they were back in the city on a second honeymoon, but nothing was the same. Tessa had booked their old hotel on the square on the Butte de Montmartre where they had tumbled into bed night after night after drinking too much wine at the pavement cafes and bars. Tessa had been thrilled with bohemian Montmartre then, but now it seemed tatty, the noisy bars filled with hen and stag parties. When she'd made the hotel booking, she'd remembered the views over Paris and the pigeons that cooed their love songs on their windowsill. She was dismayed when she saw the room, so poky and dingy. They were used to greater comfort these days. Tessa had tried to hide her disappointment and snapped at Ed when he'd complained about the lumpy pillows and the dribbling shower.

‘For goodness sake, can’t you just relax and enjoy yourself for once?’

It was unfair of her, she knew, but he’d been getting on her nerves since he’d taken early retirement last year, just as their youngest, Charlie, had gone off to university. The house seemed so quiet with just the two of them and she missed the hubbub of their three children, their voices in the kitchen where everyone gathered. But as the days passed, she began to enjoy the quiet, getting up early to sit on her own with a coffee and look out over the garden. Without the endless grind of laundry, shopping and cooking meals for five hungry people, for the first time in decades she had time to think about what she wanted and dream about the future.

Clearing out the Charlie’s room in the spring, she’d found a cupboard full of her old art materials, the paints dried hard in their tubes and the brushes stiff and unusable. A lifetime ago, Tessa had wanted to be an artist and had started to put her portfolio together for Art College. Temping in the City to make ends meet while she attended life-drawing classes, she’d met Ed, and love, marriage and children had followed in a dizzying whirl. Then one day she’d woken up and she was fifty, no longer needed as a mother, and living in an empty house with a grumpy husband who barely talked to her anymore.

She looked at Ed now, as he scowled at his streetmap of Paris. Where was the young, carefree man who had swept her off her feet all those years ago? He seemed content to spend his days reading the paper with the sports channel on full blare in the background, lifting his head only to ask her the same maddening question every day: ‘What’s for dinner?’ She’d been so busy with the children she hadn’t noticed him getting older. But so had she: when

Tessa looked in the mirror she wondered what had happened to that young art student who used to tie an emerald green scarf around her curls and wear hoop earrings and kohl eyeliner. She barely recognised the middle-aged woman who stared back at her, with her softened jowls and dark circles under her eyes.

Tessa had thought a second honeymoon in Paris would bring some of the magic back into their comfortable but well-worn marriage. Now they were here, nothing was going the way it should. Instead of the glorious June sunshine lighting up the golden statues that lined the bridges over the Seine, there were dirty little squalls filled cold gusts of sharp rain that forced them to hurry through the streets, heads bent.

Ed and Tessa squabbled on the first night, tired and hungry after a delayed flight. She wanted to go out and sit in a pavement café and talk under the Vincent van Gogh night sky, but Ed said they'd better have an early night. Tessa tossed and turned as he snored beside her on the sagging mattress, while Paris twinkled outside their window and began to fantasise about leaving her husband. She would be free; she could do anything she liked. She'd always wanted to go to China, walk along the Great Wall, visit the Forbidden City, take a riverboat along the Yangtze and sketch the cormorant fishermen. If they sold the house she could have her own place, a little cottage in an artists' colony in Cornwall. She'd always wanted to live by the sea. It wasn't too late; life was still full of possibilities. Tessa had spent thirty years looking after everyone else and ignoring her own ambitions: it was time to look after herself.

In the morning felt slightly ashamed of herself. She loved her husband, didn't she? They had just been tired from the journey, and Paris would make everything better. But it didn't. Over breakfast, Ed complained about the coffee – it was true, it was filthy – and the stale croissants. He pulled out a guidebook and started to meticulously plan their day: an exhausting and dispiriting itinerary that took in climbing the Sacre Coeur in the morning and Napoleon's tomb in the afternoon.

'I'd like to visit an art gallery,' she'd said faintly.

'Too many queues.' He shut the guidebook and called for the bill, as if that were the end of the matter.

After they climbed the stairs to the Sacre Coeur and dutifully admired the cathedral's magnificent stained glass, Tessa tried to rescue her hopes for the honeymoon.

'I know, let's find that sweet little restaurant. You remember, where the host told everyone it was our honeymoon.'

But the restaurant was closed. Instead of the cosy meal of *confit de canard* washed down with rough red wine from the owner's vineyard, they had shared a reheated frozen pizza at a tourist trap. Afterwards, Ed insisted on going on foot to Napoleon's tomb to walk off their lunch. She trudged after him as he marched on ahead without looking back. It started to drizzle again and they huddled together on a bridge under a hastily bought cheap broly and watched the Seine roil past, muddy and bilious. Another romantic moment gone.

Tessa tried to muster a sliver of love for the man she had married. They would be going home soon, back to the empty house, back to sports

blaring from the TV and 'What's for dinner?' The summer stretched before her. Charlie was going to Greece with friends, and the girls, Anna and Emily, had their own lives, too busy with careers to think of settling down and having babies. Tessa envied her daughters their freedom, the way they expected to live how they chose. She wondered briefly what her life would have been like if she hadn't had her children, but she couldn't imagine a world without them and pushed the thought away.

The drizzle turned into sheets of rain and they ran for cover to the nearest Metro, splashing through dirty puddles. Underground, Tessa traced the coloured map on the wall with her finger.

'Look, the Rodin Museum is only a few stops from here, and I've always wanted to see The Kiss.'

Before Ed could argue, she bought tickets and pushed her way through the turnstile. On the train, she looked at her husband as if were a stranger and wondered what was going through his mind. After thirty years of marriage she felt as if she didn't know him at all. When they talked these days it was about the children or the upkeep of the house, whether it was time to get the car serviced. Their family had kept them together all these years, but it wasn't enough anymore. When they got to the museum, she would tell Ed she was leaving him.

Tessa wanted to see Rodin's Gates of Hell first. She left Ed inside the house that had been the sculptor's home and studio, and went out to the garden to see them. The rain had stopped and the sun had broken through the clouds. She stood in front of the monumental doors and at the writhing tortured figures that seemed to reach towards her.

'It's his masterpiece. His most famous pieces, The Kiss, the Thinker, they all came out of this work.' Tessa turned to see an elderly man leaning on a walking stick. He was wearing a beret and had a long white beard. His suit was spattered with clay.

'Rodin became obsessed with the Gates of Hell, worked on it long after the commission was dropped,' he said in heavily accented English. He pointed with his cane at the doors. 'These poor lost souls, they are consumed with frustration; made to pay for all eternity for trying to follow their desires.'

'But that's so sad. And so unfair,' Tessa said. She couldn't help tracing one of the figures, a woman with her arms outstretched, her mouth open and weeping. She saw Ed coming out of the house into the garden and let her hand drop.

'Goodbye, and thank you,' she said and smiled. The old man touched his beret. Tessa watched him walk slowly up to the house, leaning heavily on his cane. The steps must have been slippery from the rain because the walking stick slid sideways and he fell heavily and banged his head. Tessa cried out, but before she could move, Ed was at the old man's side, talking in reassuring tones.

'Don't move, you're all right, I've got you,' he said. 'That's a nasty cut on your head but it looks worse than it is.' He took off his jacket and bundled it up and gently placed it under the old man's head, and sat with him, holding his hand while one of the staff phoned for an ambulance. Tessa sat on the step below, and watched Ed press a clean handkerchief to the old man's head. His tenderness brought back memories of the man who had held each of her babies in the moments after they were born, who had stroked her hair

after the miscarriage, who had known there were no words to comfort her, who had sat with her by their son's hospital bed during the mysterious fever that ravaged Charlie's little body for three terrifying nights, who had held her hand as a consultant told her the lump she'd found was cancer, and helped her believe the doctor when he told her she was going to be all right.

When the paramedics had gently lifted the old man onto a stretcher and taken him away, Tessa took Ed's hand and led him into the house. They stood in front of The Kiss, at the entwined lovers lost in the embrace, and she realised that she and Ed had never lost that feeling, only misplaced it. They'd been too busy raising their children, but now they had time for each other. Tessa tightened her grip on Ed's hand. She had been so close to losing him, to throwing away a lifetime of shared happiness and sorrow. She looked up at him and saw he had tears in his eyes. He kissed her then, as tenderly as he had that day in the honeymoon restaurant thirty years ago.

He cleared his throat. 'I've got something to tell you.'

Tessa held her breath. Maybe he had been having second thoughts about their marriage, too. Maybe she wasn't the only one who hadn't been happy.

'I've booked us into the Georges V, hang the expense, but you deserve it. It's about time we had a bit of fun, we can afford it now the children are more or less of our hands.' He smiled at her, his eyes full of the mischief she remembered. 'And can we forget about sightseeing? Let's find another little restaurant, somewhere better.'

She nodded and he put his arm around her and they walked out into the sunshine of a perfect Paris day.

'I've been thinking,' she said. 'What do you say to a trip to China?'