

## EIGHT

Nigel phones again. He is all lightheartedness and good humour, full of witticisms about finding skeletons in closets and elephants in the room, but Beth knows he is really checking up on her to see that things are moving in the right direction house-wise. And, she suspects, to make sure the contract with this clutter buster woman is still intact.

‘You must be starting to see a bit of a difference by now surely, Sis. If this woman, what’s her name ...? Martha ...? if she’s worth her salt you must have got rid of plenty of stuff by now. Right?’

He wants her to give him some details – a little progress report – to reassure him that things are moving ahead. Nigel can be so pushy. ‘Um ... I could phone a real estate agent for you if you like, just get them round to have a look at the place, talk to you about what they think we’ll get for it, maybe set an auction date, that sort of thing. There’s a mob up on the main road supposed to be good. What do you think?’

He is irritating her with this pressuring that he is doing. It is much too soon to be talking about real estate agents. What would they think if they came around to do an evaluation of the house now with everything still everywhere and clutter all over the place?

‘Just be patient, Nigel. I told you we’d be set to go by the end of October and you’ll just have to wait until then I’m afraid. There’s still an awful lot of work to be done.’

Off her own bat Beth has cleared the bathroom cupboard of old toothbrushes, depleted tubes of toothpaste and out-of-date medications. Empty dental floss dispensers have themselves been dispensed with. The number of tubes of sun cream has been reduced to two, and three perished hot water bottles are no more. The hot rollers and

their few remaining pins have been binned together with a hairdryer that has not worked for years and an eyelash curler dating back to the Neolithic period. For the first time in quite a long time, she can close the bathroom door, should she wish to, because the defunct bathroom scales which have been obstructing the doorway are now history and the pile of towels has been put where towels should more rightfully be, instead of in the way on the floor.

There were no hard decisions to be made, no value judgments. What sentiment could possibly be involved, after all, when disposing of an exhausted toothbrush, a barren dental floss dispenser, a superannuated hair dryer?

The laundry has also had a makeover. Gone are all the boxes of coagulated soap powder. In the bin are four of the five buckets, two old irons that constituted a danger to health, an ironing board and thirty-seven metal coat hangers discovered cowering behind the washing machine and inside the dryer. She surprises herself by emptying several piles of crumpled washing straight into the Vinnies bag on the assumption that if she has not missed these items while they are waiting to be folded and ironed, then she does not need them in her life. This last act feels positively revolutionary.

In the kitchen, clear space has appeared on the bench for the first time in many years. Crockery and cutlery are in their rightful places in drawers and cupboards. Bags and bags bursting with supernumerary bits and pieces have been sent on their way, off to another life or to no life at all.

But she does not tell Nigel about these achievements. It will only encourage him and he will expect more than she might be able to deliver. Neither does she tell him of her conversation with Tom, the talk of ruthlessness and of freakish neatness, nor of the darkness that she saw that day in his eyes.

He raises the subject of Paul and the grandchildren again. She knows where this is heading. Suddenly she wants to get rid of him off the phone, like someone from a charity selling raffle tickets. She makes an excuse about a student arriving and hangs up.

She is anticipating Martha's visit this morning with some dread. Was she supposed to have done something? Bought anything? Prepared

herself in some way? When the clutter buster arrives she is not ready, not composed in the least. Although she had been expecting it, the woman's cheery 'Hello-o, anyone home?' at the front door startles her. There she is, standing there, and she is smiling in a mysterious way that makes Beth feel nervous.

Standing a metre or so back from her, juggling ridiculous armfuls of colourful boxes, is Tom. The cheerful grin has gone from his face and he is standing in a force field of fury.

The boxes are in colours of pink, orange and yellow with contrasting ribbons and ties. 'These are for putting things in,' says Martha, beaming. 'I'm sure you'll find them useful.'

She explains that if you have a pretty receptacle, you are more likely to use it for storing things that you would otherwise leave lying around. 'If you *must* keep stuff, then at least try to make it nice to look at.' To her it is blindingly obvious that a row of pretty boxes, each marked to indicate what is in them, is the perfect storage solution for a person like Beth.

'I've got boxes like these in my house,' she says cheerily, 'haven't I, Tom.' Tom, still juggling the boxes, scowls darkly and says nothing.

'You can use them for all sorts of things – and they come in other colours, and different sizes, too.' She is very pleased with the thought that she is helping Beth by passing on this wisdom. It is part of her strategy for educating her client in the fundamental rules for henceforth keeping a tidy and minimalist house.

'Now, what would you like to put in them?'

Beth feels a tightening at the back of her throat. She has not agreed to have these silly things at all and already she is being asked what she will put in them. She looks at Tom, who is looking at his mother as though he would like to lift her up and place her in her entirety into one of the eager green garbage bags. She feels sure the two of them have had words on the way in the car.

'I don't know,' she says snappily, avoiding contact with Martha's eyes. 'I'll think about it later.' Perhaps if she leaves them in a corner and doesn't think about them, they will just disappear. Perhaps they will be mistakenly picked up and deposited in a garbage bag. She can always hope.

Without warning Tom lets go of the boxes and they clatter onto the floor, landing higgledy-piggledy in a colourful pile, lids tumbling about. 'Careful, Tom.' Martha can't help herself. 'Mind you don't damage them.' Tom's lips form a tight straight line. He leaves the boxes scattered on the floor and stomps across to the window, picks up something from the table and examines it fiercely.

Martha collects up the boxes with a little sigh, ignoring her son. She is quite carried away with her box idea and she is certainly not going to allow whatever is going on by the window to slow her progress.

'You could put your sewing things in one, perhaps. Do you have a sewing box?' Beth does not have a sewing box. She hates sewing and has never wished to own such a thing. Martha drives on. 'Your CDs, now that's a good idea.' Beth's CDs are perfectly alright as they are, in a pile. They are not in need of their own pretty box. 'Or what about all those funny little knick-knacks on the mantelpiece? We could just pop them away in here, like this, you see?' She picks up a yellow box from the pile and, choosing a small green alabaster frog from the collection, begins to demonstrate how this could be done.

The funny little knick-knacks Martha is referring to are the little creatures that Beth has collected over the years, mementoes brought back from holiday destinations, gifts from special people, gewgaws that have caught her eye at jumble sales. The green alabaster frog was bought at a market during the trip to Hong Kong; two small bronze cranes were given to her by a grateful student for helping her pass an exam; a black pewter donkey wearing a sombrero is one that she found in an old wares shop in the mountains and simply had to have. They are precious, these funny little knick-knacks. Doesn't this woman understand that?

'We could put all of them into a box and you can store them somewhere out of the way,' she says daringly. 'Or perhaps now's the time to take the bull by the horns and drop them straight into Vinnies corner. Strike while the iron's hot. What do you think?'

Put away somewhere, out of sight? The Vinnies corner? It is too awful to contemplate. Beth looks sideways at Tom, volcanic at the window. 'Box,' she says through teeth that clench around the word. It is hard not to shout. In future when this clutter buster woman wants

to throw something out that should not be thrown out, she will go for the box option. Having introduced the concept of the pretty storage box, Martha will find it difficult to argue against using it. It is a small victory.

The clutter buster is full, today, of solutions for keeping a tidier, more ordered home. They are inventive and they are many. The two-tier shoe storage unit. The bill organiser arranged according to due date. Then there are the vertical chrome shelf dividers (without these, however carefully you stack clothes on a shelf, they will fall into a jumbled mess): the photo storage cabinet that allows you to display a favourite photograph on the front of each of the drawers; and the multi-functional side table with six adjustable shelves.

And of course there are the sensible items that most people already have (but Beth does not) like the clothes peg bag (instead of tossing pegs any old where such as into the garden or the washing machine), the revolving desk organiser (better than losing biro's under the desk or finding them caught inside the workings of the printer), the stackable vacuum storage boxes.

Martha loves these solutions. Each one is a little nugget of sense and practicality. Her eyes are ablaze with conviction and possibility.

Beth understands that Martha is trying to help, that she is only doing her job. This is why the clutter buster is here, after all, what she is being employed to do. She knows she should be able to control herself, knows that losing your temper when you are fast approaching sixty is childish. She has usually been able to keep her temper. Even with Nigel, who has irritated her many times to the point of distraction, she has managed to restrain herself from letting fly at him. With her students, even that fool Mark, she has been able to hold herself together when under extreme provocation. But this time it's hard, really hard. It's the boxes, the stupid, frivolous coloured boxes and those stupid, stupid storage suggestions. She doesn't *want* coloured boxes. She doesn't want a two-tiered shoe storage unit. All she ever asked for was ... what was it she had asked for? She no longer knows. Whatever it was, she is sure it could not have been this. She can feel mad blood hurtling through her chest and racing up her neck.

From somewhere near the window there comes the sound of breath

rapidly released, almost a snort, and then the sound of something solid being slammed onto the table. Tom wheels around to face his mother.

‘For *God’s sake* Mum, I told you not to bring those boxes. But you wouldn’t listen to me, would you. Can’t you see Beth’s not interested in boxes? And she’s not interested in bill organisers or photo storage cabinets either. *None of it*. She doesn’t think in terms of boxes, friggin’ storage solutions. No one does. Only you.’

The outburst stops Martha in her tracks. She was not prepared for this. She has been fiddling happily with the ribbon on the yellow box, straightening it and making it look pretty, but now she drops the box onto the floor and her hands go to her hair in an anxious way. She looks up at Tom as though he is someone she does not immediately recognise.

‘Tom,’ she says, ‘don’t be so rude. I was only trying to help.’ She is only ever trying to help. In the past she has found that clients have been glad of her storage suggestions and have found them invaluable. They have often said so. They have been grateful. Gratitude is not what she is after, but a bit of it wouldn’t hurt.

‘But you’re *not* helping. Boxes don’t help. Beth *hates* boxes. Surely even you can see that? *I* hate boxes. You brought them here without asking her. She never said she wanted them.’ Crimson fury rises in his cheeks.

‘*Tom!*’

But Tom has by no means finished. ‘And there’s another thing. She’s not going to throw out everything she owns, all her little treasures, those *funny little knick-knacks* as you call them, just because you say she has to. Some things are precious, you know, Mum. You can’t just get rid of them, put them into one of your pretty boxes and pack them away as though they mean nothing. It’s people’s *lives* you’re throwing out. Don’t you understand that?’

Martha gives a start and casts a sidelong look in the direction of Beth. Then she adjusts her spectacles, smooths her hair, tries to gather together her composure. In a fierce, threatening murmur she says, ‘You’ve got no right to speak to me like that, Tom. It’s not fair of you. And I don’t throw out people’s lives. That’s not what I do. I really don’t know what you mean.’

Tom walks across the room from the window and reaches the place where the coloured boxes still lie higgledy-piggledy on the floor. He lifts a foot purposefully, holds it in the air for a moment and then brings it down, hard, onto the yellow box. There is the sound of crushing and ripping of ribbon and cardboard, and a little intake of breath as Martha's hand flies to cover her mouth. Instinctively she drops to her knees, reaching for the shattered box and nursing it as though it is a bird brought in half dead by the cat.

Beth has been standing mortified on the sidelines, all the mad blood now drained from her face. She feels like a passer-by who has just witnessed a traffic accident. There must be something she can do, some first aid she can render to revive the victims, get them breathing again. She could make tea. Boil water. That is always a sensible thing to do in an emergency.

Martha examines the smashed yellow box and the crumpled mass of ribbon for a moment and then places the wreckage carefully back onto the carpet and stands up. She feels her hair again and with a little clearing cough she turns to Beth. 'Have I upset you, Beth?' This is the way a dignified professional person, which is what she is, would handle this. 'The little boxes that I brought for you, do you want them? I can take them away, of course ... if you don't.'

Beth squirms. She doesn't want the boxes but at the same time she doesn't want to say no. It is a choice between two equally unpalatable alternatives. She has never been good at this kind of thing.

'Yes, take them away,' hisses Tom. 'Just get *rid* of the friggin' things.'

Martha gives him a look, the kind of shrivelling look you would give to a child who won't sit still when you're somewhere important. 'I was asking Beth, Tom, not you.'

Suddenly it seems there is no air in the room. Beth rushes to the window and flings it open. Outside in the garden a magpie swoops on a worm. Inside there is a terrible deafening silence.

It is Martha who speaks first. 'Well,' she says, narrow-eyed and grim. 'It seems the boxes aren't wanted, so in that case I'll take them away then. You'll have to help me get them back into the car, Tom. I can't carry all of them by myself.' The cold winds of Siberia are blowing.

'And I suppose there's no point in me staying here any longer,' she

pauses, glancing at Beth, 'if I'm not wanted.' She gathers up her navy blue handbag and walks stiffly towards the door. Her face is shut down. She won't look at her son.

'But ...' says Beth, and then stops. Perhaps Martha is not wanted, that may be true. But she is certainly needed. She can't possibly go yet. The job she came to do is not done and besides, there is all this awful anger in the air.

'No, Martha, please don't go. Tom didn't mean it. Let's sit down and have a cup of tea, relax, put it behind us.' The words are on the tip of her tongue, ready to tumble humbly off, but it is too late. The clutter buster has disappeared into the cool morning.

She looks at Tom who has not moved from the site of the coloured box debris. It is Tom's fault really, all this. Surely he could have controlled himself. The break-up with Sam must be making him touchy. That's what happens when people break up, they're not rational. But he *is* twenty-four years old after all, he should know better. When do young men grow up, for heaven's sake?

Sullenly he begins collecting up the boxes and heaping them on top of one another. Green lids on red boxes, yellow ribbons on blue, nothing matching. He doesn't care. His arms are full of yellow and green and blue and pink. He is ridiculous, like a juggler in a circus. The sight of him suddenly makes Beth want to laugh.

'You should see yourself.'

It is hard to know what Tom is thinking because he keeps his face pointed at the floor and says nothing. It could be that he is feeling bad about what he has said to his mother. Perhaps he feels he didn't say enough. You wouldn't know. Certainly it is no laughing matter. Fully laden like a rainbow pack horse, he staggers out the door.

Beth is left on her own, by the open window. She looks around her at the half-done job, begun but not completed. What is she going to do now? How is she going to manage all this on her own? What is she going to say to Nigel? It is like being caught in the middle of a tightrope, not knowing whether to turn back to the beginning where everything is known and safe, or to press on.

A few minutes pass and then she hears the sound of footsteps coming back along the path. Her heart leaps. Perhaps Martha has not left

after all. Perhaps she has come back to say that everything is alright, that it was silliness, that they can continue as though harsh words had not been spoken, as though there had been none of this unpleasantness. But these are not a woman's footsteps and it is not Martha who appears at the door. It is Tom.

'I've come for my cap,' he mutters, not looking at her. 'I must have left it on the table.'

She opens the door and lets him in, watches as he goes to the table and picks up the cap. She can tell by the way he is lingering over it, loitering at the table, that there is something he wants to say.

'So what on earth was all that about?' she asks.

Tom looks at her and then looks at the carpet. 'It was those friggin' boxes, they just got to me. She's so fuckin' anal.' He is still angry, but the ground has shifted. 'She never asked you if you wanted them. I knew you wouldn't. She just decided you should have them, no consultation, no nothing. And the thing is, she doesn't have a clue what she's doing, the effect she has on people, she doesn't *get* it.'

Beth touches him gently on the shoulder. 'Take it easy, Tom. That's what your mum's like, you said so yourself. She likes things to be orderly, that's just her. It's not worth getting upset over. Anyway, she was only trying to be helpful. You hurt her feelings.'

He laughs derisively. '*Her* feelings? What about *my* feelings?'

'Your feelings?' Something he said comes back to her. She really has no right to ask him about it. It is between Tom and his mother. It is not her business, but she wants to know. Tentatively she says, 'The thing you said to your mother about throwing out people's lives? I don't understand. What did you mean?'

Tom seems only too happy to tell her. 'That's what she does, Beth. She packs up stuff from the past and throws it out, just like that, as though she can't handle the mess of it.' For a moment he looks away.

What stuff? What is he talking about? Is he going to tell her more?

'She blames it on her own mother, she was a painter or something, her place was a mess. Mum says she's the reason why she can't stand it when things aren't in order.'

'I see.'

‘Her mother abandoned her, left it to her father to bring her up, more or less.’

‘It must have been tough for her.’

‘Yeah, but it’s past history. You can’t go on forever blaming everything on the past, it’s pathetic. I get sick of hearing it. Just get over it, that’s what I reckon.’

‘Sometimes it’s not that easy, Tom.’

‘Getting over things?’ He gives her a hard, long look. It seems he is looking right through her, into her and beyond her. ‘Like with the Zeppelin album the other day. You got all funny when I said I’d like to have it, remember? There’s something about that album, isn’t there? Whatever it is, it’s hard for you to get over it, is that the kind of thing you mean?’

The memory of that day, how close she had felt to losing something.

‘A bit like that,’ she says. It is still too raw.

Tom is silent for a moment. Eventually he says, ‘I guess I shouldn’t have lost my temper with Mum, should I. Not like that. Not in front of you. I don’t know what came over me. Sam used to say not to let her get to me but jeez, it’s hard not to. Living with her’s made it worse. It’s in your face all the time. I don’t know, I reckon you shouldn’t live with your mum over a certain age. It’s not natural ... You think I should apologise to her, don’t you?’

‘Probably.’ She is not going to give him a lecture about how to treat a mother. It is not her job.

He runs his fingers through his hair. On goes the cap, jiggled to and fro, to and fro until he’s got it the way he wants it. ‘I s’pose you’re right. And now I’d better get my arse out of here in a hurry or I’ll be walking home.’ He flashes a wicked grin, the grin she knows so well.

‘By the way, sorry you had to get caught up in our Dean family crap. Pretty ordinary, isn’t it?’

Before she has a chance to reply, he is gone. She hears a door slam and the sound of a car accelerating up the street. She wonders whether that is the last she will ever see of the clutter buster and her heartbreaking son.