

THE RENOVATED HEART

Jean Joachim

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Chapter One

Kit Alexander ordered a Cosmopolitan, sat back, her heart racing in anticipation of tomorrow's departure. After twelve years of marriage, a career in banking and raising an eleven-year-old daughter, Kit was finally going to live her dream of becoming a published author. With their daughter safely enrolled in boarding school, she could accompany her husband on a world tour as the newest band member of Blue Waters band. Tagging along as a band wife, Kit planned to write a book about her experiences.

A tinny version of Johnny's favorite song came up. The familiar sound meant a text message arrived on her phone, causing her to put down her drink.

Are you all packed? Is Johnny there yet? Wishing you an amazing trip, Hugs, Sarah.

Kit typed in,

Yes, no. Our first three cities are Amsterdam, London and Prague. Thanks, lady. Hugs, Kit.

Sipping her Cosmo, Kit looked around La Nuit Française—a posh, intimate French restaurant decorated in turquoise, red and gold, tucked into the west side of Manhattan. Beautiful people dressed in expensive clothing pretending to be someone important filled the restaurant. In addition to paying through the nose for the good food, they were also paying to be seen. *Save me from such pretention.* Wearing a sexy dress in midnight blue silk, her dark cerulean blue eyes shining, her spun gold hair draping well below her shoulders in loose curls, she was the loveliest woman in the room.

A man approach her table, she smiled at her husband, Johnny, as he plopped down in the empty chair across from her.

He ordered a beer plus another Cosmopolitan for Kit.

"You look great, Kit," Johnny said, taking a swig of his beer. His gaze lowered to her neckline then returned to her face.

"A fresh look for a new start...tomorrow I launch a new life. We both do." She picked up the second Cosmo and took a sip.

"We need to talk about tomorrow," Johnny said, looking down at the silverware.

"I'm ready. I've crossed off almost everything from my to-do list."

"You and that damn list. Always lists. Look, the trip...the trip is... Well. The trip is just for me, Kit."

"What do you mean?" Her brow furrowed, her eyes darkened.

"I mean, I'm not taking you with me," he replied, shifting in his seat, avoiding her stare.

"What?" she asked as her breathing became shallow, her chest tightening. Her heartbeat pounded in her ears.

"This is my big break. I've been playing in crummy clubs for ten years, waiting for this chance. I...I want to do it alone," Johnny said, finally able to look at her.

"Johnny, you can't be serious?"

"I am. I filed for divorce, Kit." His hands toyed with his beer glass.

"Divorce?" Tears stung the back of her eyes.

"Yeah. We never see each other. You work days, I work nights. We haven't really been a family for a long time."

“I thought we were working toward something together,” she said, taking a deep breath to force tears back.

“Maybe. But I don’t remember what our goal is anymore. I want to go on my own. You can stay here, watch out for Zoe.”

“You’re leaving me?” Disbelief clouded her eyes as she stared hard at him.

He nodded.

“Can’t we talk about this?” she asked, hoping to change his mind.

“Talking means you talking me out of something. My mind’s made up,” he said, finishing his beer.

“But Johnny, this is my big break, too. I have an agent interested in a book deal. I quit my job, we sublet our apartment...” she couldn’t finish, her mind reeled, a lump grew in her throat, choking her, cutting off her breath.

Kit took a big gulp of her second Cosmo to push down the lump as tears pricked at her eyes.

“Why would you do this...on the night before we leave?” She tried to steady her voice.

“I didn’t want to hurt you, but I don’t want to be married anymore,” Johnny said, his stare rooted to the floor, avoiding her eyes.

“You want other women?” she asked her lip quivering as she fought for control.

“Maybe. Maybe I want to be free to do...whatever.” He tapped his foot under the tiny table.

Johnny reached into his jacket’s breast pocket and took out an envelope.

“Here are the papers. I’m giving you the apartment plus most of our savings. I took out ten thousand dollars for expenses on the trip.”

“What?” she said, looking at him in disbelief, still unable to get her mind around what he said.

“Look, I don’t want to screw you financially. You’ve been earning most of the money so I’m giving you the apartment. Sell the place. I’ll be making good money with the band.”

“I can’t sell our home, it’s been sublet.”

“Well, sell the place in a year then,” he insisted.

Kit tried unsuccessfully to steady her hand as she took the envelope and tucked it away in her purse.

“You’ve got to sign those then send them to Mason, my attorney.”

“Mason? Mason Carter? What about Jack, our attorney?”

“I left him for you.”

“Why didn’t you tell me this before...when...when...”

“I didn’t want you to talk me out of leaving, like you always do. A done deal. I’m leaving tomorrow. You can do what you want, find what you want.” He briefly looked in her eyes.

Kit tried again to blink back the tears, but couldn’t.

“Does Zoe know?”

“I didn’t tell her. You’re better at those things than I am. I’ll come see her in five months, at Christmas.”

She looked at him with disbelief in her eyes. He shattered her world into a million pieces in five minutes.

“I have no job...no place to live...”

“You’ve got a lot of friends, bunk in with one of them. Now you can have whatever life you want, Kit. You’re free.”

“Am I, Johnny? Why don’t I feel free?” she said, unable to stop the pain gathering in her chest, making breathing normally difficult.

“Trust me; this is better for us both. I bet you have a great new life by Christmas. And when I get back, we can hoist a few and laugh about this.”

“Laugh? I doubt I’ll be laughing for some time. How could you leave me flat like this?” Still refusing to believe the facts he laid before her.

“You’re strong...smart. You can take care of yourself. You don’t need me. You never have. In a month...maybe two, you’ll agree with me,” he said, finishing his beer.

Kit gulped the rest of her Cosmo, then felt sick.

“Excuse me,” she said, retreating to the ladies room.

Once inside, she entered an empty stall and dropped to her knees. The woman at the sink left quickly as Kit threw up then burst into tears.

“Some women can’t hold their liquor,” the stranger mumbled before opening the door. Kit waited for the tap on the shoulder or the jarring ring of the alarm clock to wake her from this bad dream. But relief never came. This wasn’t a dream. No waking up...she felt totally lost.

When she finally came out of the ladies room, Johnny had gone. He had strewn some bills on the table to cover their drinks. The waiter returned shortly after.

“Would you like to order now?”

“No. Thank you,” she said, getting up on unsteady legs. Kit grabbed the table, stopping to take a deep breath before walking across the room to the door.

* * * *

When Kit returned to the apartment, to get her suitcase and drop off final instructions for the people subletting her apartment, Johnny’s suitcases were gone. Tomorrow the renters would arrive. She couldn’t bear to spend the night alone in the apartment, so she checked into the Broadway Continental hotel. *Three hundred dollars for one night! So what? I can’t go back there.*

Once in her room, she whipped out her laptop and set it up on the desk facing the window. She stopped for a moment to stare through the glass at the midnight sky. The twinkling stars chilled her, and suddenly the reality of her situation hit home. Alone. Totally alone. A chill ran up her spine causing her to push further thoughts about her predicament out of her mind.

Sarah. Sarah will help me.

Kit sat down at her computer to contact her Facebook friend, Sarah Morgan, also an aspiring writer. Sarah had recommended the boarding school Kit picked for her daughter, Zoe, located in Willow Falls, where Sarah lived.

Sarah,

Johnny dumped me on the eve of our trip! I can’t believe it. He is divorcing me. Now I’m alone, with no job, no place to live...no book to write. All my plans for the future are finished...I have no future.

Kit

A ding from her computer told her she had a reply.

Sarah - You’re kidding. Tell me you’re kidding.

Kit - I wish I was.

Sarah - How horrible! Come to Willow Falls. Stay with me and the kids for a few days until you know what you want to do. You can still write, you just have to find a new topic. You can spend some time with Zoe. The train leaves at 11am tomorrow. Be on it. I’ll pick you up at three. After all, you’re all packed, ready for a trip anyway.

Kit - I’ll be on the train. But I’ll stay at the Willow Falls motel. Can we have

dinner together?

Sarah - Sure. I'll make my little sister's pot roast recipe. It cures anything.

See you tomorrow.

Kit got into bed exhausted, but not too tired to cry herself to sleep.

* * * *

When Kit stepped off the train in Willow Falls, she perceived the small town with new eyes. Her last trip had been to bring Zoe to her new school. Kit had barely noticed the town, being completely preoccupied with getting her daughter comfortably set up in school. She took a deep breath, pulling fresh, clean air into her lungs. *Beats New York City air by a mile.* Kit chuckled at her own observation.

Her smile faded quickly. She found Willow Falls lacking when compared to Paris, London, Rome and other capitals of the world she'd have visited if on the tour with Johnny. Reminding herself the option to take the journey no longer existed made the tiny town become more appealing. *It must be cheap to live here. I can't afford New York anymore.*

She checked into the Willow Falls Motel, within walking distance of the train station. After placing her suitcase on the bed, she left the modern three story edifice behind to stroll through the town.

Kensington State University resided in Willow Falls, population about five thousand. The little town had had a renaissance resulting in many beautifully renovated Victorian houses plus large brick homes with businesses on the first floor, apartments above. These buildings showcased the town's charming history.

An intriguing hundred-year-old, three-story bed and breakfast called Gracie's Mansion commanded attention in the center of town. The inn, situated in a three-story Victorian with burnt orange and gold curtains billowing through open windows in the warm August breeze, had inviting rocking chairs on the porch. Grace Cooper, a former New York City school teacher, the proprietor, perched on the porch sipping a tall, frosty glass of iced tea. Drawn to the warm house over the sterility of the motel, Kit warmed to Grace's friendly greeting.

Right across the street from Gracie's sat Bon Appetit, an excellent French restaurant. She and Johnny had eaten there with Zoe when they arrived to drop her off at school. The cuisine was as good as any they'd had in New York City.

Perhaps Kit would spend some time in Willow Falls. After all, she had no place to live back in New York City. Her city friends had been warm, gracious, sympathetic, but most had little enough space for themselves. "Bunking in" with her friends, as Johnny had suggested, meant sleeping on a couch and disrupting the lives of people she cared about—not an appealing solution.

Sarah picked her up in front of Bon Appetit. Dinner with Sarah, her seven-year-old son Scott and her eleven-year-old daughter, Laura, promised to be a lively one. She marveled at the difference in Sarah's children with Scott being talkative and Laura the quiet one. Kit found herself trying to guess what had happened to Sarah's husband. Sarah had never mentioned him. At dinner the children didn't either. "Callie's pot roast", as the kids called it, tasted out of this world to Kit, soothing her as promised.

The two women stayed up late drinking wine, trying to sort through the mess Kit called her life.

"A make-over would help...nothing wrong with the way you look. Hey, I'd love to have your figure. But a change might make you feel better. Some new clothes, haircut, manicure? Wadda ya say?"

“I can’t afford much. I don’t have a job.”

Kit didn’t feel much like getting made over. *How can you make over a disaster, a failure like me? Any way you dress me, I’m still a woman who’s been dumped.*

“I’m a bargain hunter. I think I have a coupon for a mani-pedi.” Sarah got up and rooted around in a small wicker basket on a table by the door.

“Got it! Special two for one. Let’s go together tomorrow. Then a haircut.”

“Okay, but I have to face Zoe.”

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“Can’t you wait one more day?”

* * * *

Kit looked in the mirror at her newly shaped, bouncy, shoulder-length straight hair. She tossed her head from side to side to watch the way her locks swished. Her head felt lighter. Her nails were perfect with a dark pink polish. The new look included a new t-shirt and skirt set plus new sandals. *Well done, Sarah. I do feel better. I look better too, at least on the outside.* Now, the hard part—telling Zoe, a task she dreaded. Despite Johnny’s shortcomings, Zoe adored him. Kit had no idea how to break the news to Zoe her father had blown apart their family. Since he’d be away until Christmas, maybe Zoe wouldn’t miss him so much anyway. Fat chance. *Typical Johnny move, take off...let me clean up the mess he left behind plus take all the heat.* Another reason he landed on her shit list.

She arranged to visit Zoe the next afternoon after classes. During the day, the women continued their shopping as Kit had little informal clothing. Her days had been spent in a bank, wearing a dark-color conservative suit with a white blouse. Sarah encouraged her to buy some sexier outfits. The new clothes lifted Kit’s spirits a bit.

“Now, perfume!”

“Must we?”

“You need to smell different...for a different guy you know?”

“Guy?” Kit burst out laughing. “I’m a retread, Sarah. Washed up at thirty-three.”

“Uh uh. Positive vibes.”

Sarah dragged her friend to the perfume counter at Franklyn’s, the town department store. After sampling a few different scents, they put their heads together. Kit picked one in a small, elegant bottle that put a smile on her face.

Sarah dropped Kit at Willow Falls Academy where Kit’s daughter had already begun school. After accepting a hug from her new friend, she left the car feeling shaky, uncertain, not typical for her. Seeing Zoe’s puzzled look didn’t boost her flagging confidence.

“Weren’t you guys leaving yesterday? What are you doing here?”

“Can we take a walk?” Kit reached for her daughter’s hand.

They strolled around the beautiful grounds. The soccer fields were thick with lush grass, green and surprisingly cool in the August sun. They walked the entire perimeter, chatting about events at the school. The smell of fresh mown lawn tickled her nose, reminding her she no longer walked in the concrete and steel capital of the world.

“Okay, Mom. So why are you here?” Zoe stopped to face her mother.

“Well...your father made a decision. He decided he wanted to go on the tour alone.”

“Without you?” Her eyebrows rose with the octaves of her voice.

“Yes.” Kit picked a leaf off a tree.

“Why?”

“I don’t know why.” Kit shook her head slightly while her fingers finished stripping the leaf

down to one stalk.

“What do you mean?”

“He’s divorcing me, Zoe,” she confessed.

“Divorcing you?” Her daughter’s lower lip trembled as tears filled her eyes.

“I’m so sorry to tell you.”

“Why?” Zoe asked. Tears overflowed, streaming down her face.

“I wish I knew.” The sting of tears behind Kit’s eyes made her blink but she fought to keep her composure while plucking a tissue from her purse.

“What about me?” Zoe accepted a tissue from her mother.

“A parent never divorces their child. He’s still your father and will still come see you at Christmas, like we planned.” Kit stopped to take a breath to steady her voice.

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“Oh, God. Divorce. Why? Why, Mommy? Why?” Zoe said, throwing herself into her mother’s arms, sobbing.

Kit couldn’t hold back her own tears anymore as she held her daughter tightly, stroking hair wetted with her tears.

“I don’t know, baby. I just don’t know. But we’ll get through this.” She tried to remain calm for Zoe.

As suddenly as Zoe fell into her mother’s arms, she pulled away.

“What did you do to him? What did you say to make him leave us?” Zoe asked, anger flashing in her eyes. Zoe wiped her eyes one more time.

“I didn’t do anything, sweetheart.”

“You did. You must have.”

“I don’t think I did. He didn’t say anything.” Her brow furrowed.

“What did he say?”

“He said he wanted to be free...he didn’t want to be married anymore,” she said, her lip trembling as she stopped to take a breath. Zoe covered her face with her hands and ran off toward the woods. She stopped at a big oak for support, leaning against the sturdy tree, sobbing. Kit caught up to her.

“So I’m going to be staying in the U.S, Zoe.” She put her hand on her daughter’s shoulder.

“Are you going back to New York?” the girl asked, her voice shaking.

“I’ve no place to live there.” Quickly she regretted her admission.

A look of fear swept over Zoe’s face.

“You won’t leave me, will you?” Her eyes teared up.

“Of course not, sweetheart. I’ve been thinking about spending some time here in Willow Falls. Being closer to you’d be good. What do you think?” She forced her lips to curl into a tight smile as she crossed her arms over her chest.

“I think I hate you both. I don’t care where you live,” Zoe spat at her mother, then ran off returning to the school building, alone. When Kit arrived, Zoe had returned to her room and locked the door. Her mother knocked repeatedly but Zoe refused to answer. Pain at leaving her daughter to lick her wounds by herself, stabbed Kit’s heart. Zoe’s silence left her mother no choice but to return to the motel.

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