



1

Perth

It was seven o'clock in the morning and I was cutting oranges for Payton's soccer game when Adrian casually asked if I'd heard of nest parenting.

I paused and searched my memory. It sounded vaguely familiar—like I'd read about the concept online or heard it discussed in one of the many podcasts I listened to. Although I'm almost forty, I pride myself on my memory and, sure enough, I recalled there was a mum who had a kid in the year below at Saxon's school who was nest parenting with her husband. Or rather *ex*-husband!

'Yeah, what about it?' I said, as I bent to get a large container from our Tupperware drawer.

Adrian took a sip of his coffee, then, 'I was thinking we should give it a try.'

And *that* is the exact moment the bottom fell out of my world!



2

I had to have heard wrong or at least misunderstood. Or maybe Adrian had.

How did he even know what nest parenting was? It wasn't like he usually concerned himself with the day-to-day minutiae of our kids' world, never mind other people's. Adrian's world revolved around his podiatry clinic and (currently) cycling.

So, perhaps he thought nest parenting was something else—possibly something like leaving Saxon at home to look after Payton while we had a dirty weekend away down south. It had been a while since we'd had much 'alone' time, and while I didn't really miss frequent sex, my husband was as red-blooded a male as they came. When we'd first got together, we'd had sex *every* day—sometimes two or three times—but that was over twenty years ago when we were young and childfree, before life and responsibility got in our way. And, from the way my other mum friends talked, our ritual bonk on Saturday night was quite normal.

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But before I had the chance to ask him what exactly he was talking about, Payton skipped into the kitchen, proudly wearing her soccer uniform, her socks pulled up to her knees, her long, golden brown hair pulled back in a high ponytail and her usual bright smile lighting her face.

‘You guys ready to go?’ she asked, thankfully oblivious to the dark cloud that had descended upon the room. ‘I don’t want to miss pre-game training. I know summer soccer is only supposed to be for *fun*, but coach says if we work on our team communication and win this game, we have a real chance of getting in the finals this year.’

‘Course we are, kiddo.’ Adrian dumped his mug in the sink and reached out to ruffle her hair. She ducked just in time so as not to spoil her look. She may only be ten and what some of my friends called a tomboy, but she cared immensely about her appearance. Almost as much as she cared about her juggle record.

‘Mum?’ Payton whined. ‘*What* are you doing?’

I blinked, realising that I was frozen, still semi-bent over the Tupperware drawer, my hand tightly gripping the container. Straightening fast, I said, ‘Just organising the oranges,’ but my voice didn’t sound like mine.

My daughter rolled her eyes and gave me a look that only teenage girls should give their mothers. Payton was definitely ten going on nineteen.

As she and Adrian started out of the kitchen towards the front door, my hands shook and my eyes prickled as I placed the oranges into the container and shut the lid. What if my husband *did* know what he was talking about? Was this his less-than-subtle way of telling me he wanted a divorce?

Impossible. I forced the thought out of my head as I grabbed the container off the kitchen counter and followed after them,

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pausing briefly in the hallway to check on Saxon. I opened his bedroom door as quietly as possible.

‘Mum?’ came his sleep-soaked voice from the bed where our dog Charlie was slumbering beside him. I had an urge to curl up with them and slide my fingers through the dog’s comforting black fur.

‘Hey honey, we’re off to Payton’s game. There’s some pancakes in the microwave—’ pancakes I’d made *before* Adrian’s bombshell, ‘—for breakfast.’

‘Thanks,’ he mumbled as he pulled his doona back over his head. ‘Love you.’

‘I love you too.’

Despite the quake in my heart, I smiled as a rush of love for my son filled my whole being. Sax had only started sleeping in over the last couple of months. Before that he was an early riser like Adrian and Payton, but he’d also shot up recently so obviously needed his sleep. Although at almost fifteen he was smack bang in the middle of his teens, we hadn’t had the drama that many of my friends had with their adolescent boys. Sure, he had the occasional morning grump and sometimes talked back, but he worked hard at school and I never had to nag him about practising his guitar.

The horn beeping in our driveway jolted me from my thoughts and snapped me back to reality. With a deep sigh, I retreated from the safety of my son’s room and headed out to the car.

‘What took you so long?’ Payton asked from the back seat where she was doing some kind of skill work with her bright pink soccer ball. I didn’t have the energy to tell her not to. Adrian was driving; if he found it distracting, he could reprimand her. Why did I always have to be the bad cop?

‘I was just saying goodbye to Saxon.’ I snapped my seatbelt in place and sank back into the passenger seat.

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‘Is he going to music practice this arvo?’ Adrian asked as he reversed *my* wagon out of our driveway. His second-hand sports car wasn’t practical when we travelled as a family.

‘I don’t know.’ My tone was terse. Saxon and his band usually hung out every Sunday afternoon—I didn’t see why today would be any different—but I wasn’t in the mood for small talk.

Adrian nodded and turned his attention to the road, while Payton talked about who knows what. Probably something to do with the imminent game or soccer in general. Usually her incessant chatter drove me mad, but today I was grateful for it. It meant Adrian didn’t try to make any further conversation and I didn’t blurt out the question that was on repeat in my head while our daughter was in our presence.

Do you want to leave me?

I racked my mind for signs that should have alerted me to something like this, but nothing seemed to have changed between us in the last few months. Sure, life had been hectic—with the kids and the clinic—but that wasn’t exactly new, and I couldn’t pinpoint anything specific. Finally, we arrived at the oval and I couldn’t escape the car fast enough.

‘Can I get you a drink?’ Adrian asked, nodding towards the coffee van parked nearby. Our daughter had already shot off towards the pitch where her teammates were gathering, their parents setting up folding chairs and no doubt making small talk about their post-game plans.

‘No, thank you.’ I couldn’t bring myself to accept anything from him right now. ‘You can tell me what the hell is going on instead. What exactly do you mean when you say *we* should give nest parenting a try? Do you even know what it is? Is this some kind of joke?’

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‘*Ash*,’ Adrian said in the tone he used whenever he thought I was being unreasonable. ‘This probably isn’t the place to have this conversation.’

I glared at him. ‘You were the one who dropped it on me in the kitchen five minutes before we were due to go out. Just tell me one thing, what do you think nest parenting is?’

I saw his Adam’s apple slowly slide up and down before he said, ‘It’s when a couple separates and instead of moving the kids back and forth between their new places, they stay in the family home and the parents take turns living there with them.’

‘Oh my God.’ My hand rushed to my chest and my legs wobbled. It was a lovely summer morning, but ice flooded through me. ‘You want us to separate?’

Before he could reply, the parents of one of Payton’s teammates chorused, ‘Morning Adrian, morning Ashling.’

Adrian turned and smiled. ‘Hey Tonia, hey Manish.’ But I was frozen.

‘Lovely morning for it, isn’t it?’ Manish replied as they both came up beside us.

Somehow, I managed to paste a smile on my face and blink back my tears. ‘Just peachy,’ I said, before giving Tonia a hug.

The four of us walked to join the other parents on the sidelines and Adrian set up our chairs, as if everything was normal. Payton and her team did vigorous warm-up exercises, the other parents’ conversation buzzed around me, and then the ref blew the whistle to start the game as if this was just another Sunday morning soccer game.

But nothing was normal anymore. Everything had changed.

Adrian wanted us to separate, which was one tiny step from divorce.

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My chest tingled, my heart palpitating so fast I thought I was in danger of cardiac arrest. It was like I'd woken up from my worst nightmare only to discover it was real. There was not enough oxygen in the fresh morning air to fill my lungs.

'You okay, Ash?' At Tonia's question I felt her hand gently touch my arm.

Okay? I almost laughed—I was so far from okay I wasn't sure I'd ever be okay again. Swallowing, I shrugged. 'Of course. Why wouldn't I be?'

'You just seem kinda quiet.'

Usually I cheered along with the rest of the soccer mums and dads, screaming until my throat went hoarse, but we were fifteen minutes into the first half and I'd barely made a noise, unable to tell you who'd kicked goals or even if there had been any.

'I'm just tired,' I lied.

Tonia nodded, placated by my reply, and turned her attention back to the game. Let's face it, what mother of school-aged kids wasn't permanently exhausted?

Although we sat side by side, Adrian and I barely said a word to each other during the rest of the game. Was this how it was going to be in the future? The two of us attending our kids' events separately, or worse, taking turns and only speaking if we had to make arrangements about Saxon and Payton?

Oh God. I felt my battle to withhold my tears failing. How long was left in this blasted game? I needed to escape before I lost it completely, right here in front of a bunch of people who were barely more than strangers.

I shouldn't have asked him. How on earth was I supposed to get through the next hour with *this* hanging over me? And maybe if I hadn't pushed him, he'd have realised the error of his ways before

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we had the chance to talk properly. Now, the S-word was out there, and it couldn't be unsaid.

Somehow, I survived to the end of the game. Payton's team won, so all around us parents and kids were jumping up and down, hugging and thumping each other on the back. I tried to show enthusiasm and if I didn't manage, thankfully no one seemed to notice. Except Adrian. Our eyes met as we started to gather up our things and he mouthed 'sorry' to me.

I looked away. That was the last thing I wanted him to say.



3

I'd had some pretty bad days in my thirty-nine years—the day I found out my parents were getting a divorce, the day my grandma who was the only family member I'd ever felt close to died, the time I got my period and it soaked right through my school uniform and everybody in my maths class laughed, and the day my obstetrician told me she couldn't detect a heartbeat for my first child—but today was up there with all of them.

Today, my son went off to band practice in the afternoon, my daughter went down the road to play with her friend from school and my husband poured me a glass of wine. He came into our bedroom where I'd retreated post-soccer feigning a headache, sat down on the bed and said, 'Since the kids are both out of the house, now's probably a good time to have our chat.'

Our chat? As if I had any ownership or say in any of this. Ignoring the glass of wine, I hugged my knees to my chest and pulled the bedcovers up to my chin. 'You want a divorce?'

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He put my drink down on the bedside table and sighed. 'I want us to take a break. Have a trial separation.'

I shook my head, unable to wrap my head around any of this. Suddenly the final piece of the puzzle landed. The less-frequent-than-usual sex we'd been having the last few months, Adrian's extra-long cycling sessions and new membership at a gym. 'Who is she?'

'What?' He recoiled slightly. 'I'm not having an affair. I'd never do that to you.'

Relief washed through me. If there wasn't another woman, then this was fixable. But also damn confusing. 'Then why?'

'I ... I don't think I'm in love with you.' At the blank look on my face, he added, 'Ash, you can't tell me *you've* been happy with the way things have been these last couple of years?'

Years? This had been going on that long? While I'd been ironing his shirts, polishing his shoes and making his damn lunches, he'd been falling out of love.

'Don't call me Ash,' I snapped. Nicknames were a term of endearment and I felt anything but endearing towards him right now.

But I had to get over my own shock and hurt and think about our children. 'You took marriage vows. You can't just give up on me, on the kids, on us. Let's go to marriage counselling. Make more of an effort to have date nights. Spend time together. Maybe we can go to Bali, just the two of us; I'm sure Hayley would look after the kids.'

Adrian sighed deeply as he shook his head. 'I don't think there's any point. Twenty years is a good innings, considering we got married young, but we've both grown up in that time, changed. I don't want to stay with you simply because we signed a bit of paper when we were kids. Most of my friends have slept with tonnes of women—I've only ever been with you.'

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Nausea whirled in my gut—would he simply erase the last twenty-two years if he could?—but I swallowed it down, not wanting this stranger to see my weakness. ‘You want to fuck other women?’

‘Ash.’ He flinched. ‘Don’t use that kind of language—it doesn’t suit you.’

‘How do you know what suits me? You’ve just been telling me how we’ve grown apart, how we’re different than we once were. Well, do you? Do you want to have sex with other women? Is *that* what this is about?’

After a long pause he nodded but wasn’t man enough to meet my gaze.

His silent admission sucked the breath from my lungs. I threw back the bedcovers and fled into the ensuite, tears already barrelling down my cheeks.

Adrian hurried after me, but I locked the door before he could get in. If I no longer satisfied him, if he wouldn’t even consider counselling, then I was done talking.

‘Ashling, please. You’ll always be important to me, you’re the mother of my children. Wouldn’t you rather this than have me keep pretending and go behind your back?’

Sitting on the toilet seat, I shook my head, my whole body trembling. He was making out like he was a saint for *not* having an affair? That I should be grateful, maybe even give him a medal or something for showing such restraint?

When I didn’t reply, he was quiet for a few moments and I thought maybe he’d gone. Where, I didn’t know. Out of the room? Or out of the house? What exactly would happen now? How was I supposed to deal with this? What would I tell my children?

Adrian only gave me five seconds’ peace—if anyone could call the terrifying questions swirling round my head that—before he knocked on the door. ‘Open up, we need to finish our conversation.’

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‘No,’ I retorted, sounding stronger than I felt. ‘If you don’t want to be married anymore, then you no longer have the right to make decisions about what *we* need.’

‘Fine.’ I could hear the anger and impatience in his voice. Well, too bad—I wasn’t going to make this easy for him. ‘But what about what the kids need? We should discuss what we’re going to tell them, before they get home.’

His mention of my babies hit me hard in the gut. This was the absolute last thing I’d ever wanted for them.

‘You want to tell them *today*?’ I shouted at the door.

‘I don’t see any point in prolonging the agony. We can tell them over dinner and then I’ll go.’

If he really gave a damn about Saxon and Payton, he wouldn’t be doing this. And, if he’d ever truly cared about me, the least he could do was give me a few days to get used to the idea, but he probably couldn’t wait a second longer to get on Tinder. I shuddered at the thought of my husband swiping right (or was it left?) on younger women who had perkier breasts and were far more adventurous in bed than me.

Yanking toilet paper off the roll, I wiped my eyes, unlocked the door and confronted him. ‘Where are you going to go?’