The French Adventure

Say bonjour to a summer of new beginnings...

LUCY COLEMAN
This is great news, but it takes a lot of effort to make myself smile enough to lift my voice.

‘That’s wonderful, Mum. Is the house totally finished now?’

‘Oh, yes. Dad’s done well and it’s been a blessing, as you know, having English builders virtually on our doorstep. The Callaghans have become great friends. Neil and Sarah have been so supportive and their son, Sam, is still working here. He recently began renovating the first of those two dilapidated stone buildings in the orchard that we’re planning on turning into gîtes. It’s all so exciting seeing our dream coming alive.’

‘Things really are moving along nicely and I’m thrilled for you both.’

‘Ah, thanks lovey. Neil obtained the permis de construire for us and we had the mayor, Bastien Deniaud, to dinner to talk about our plans for the gîtes. Many of our bookings came from Bastien’s referrals and we’re turning people down for the peak weeks on a daily basis. How we’re going to cope with all the rooms full, I have no idea, but Sarah has offered to help out.’

It’s lovely to hear her sounding so happy. When they bought Le Manoir d’Orsenne it was in a relatively good condition, just needing general redecoration and a new kitchen. But there was a lot of work to do to turn it into a bed and breakfast business. The biggest problem was the plumbing, which was never designed to accommodate multiple en-suite facilities. On my very first visit I was shocked to hear my father, one of the most patient men I know, swearing under his breath as he struggled with a labyrinth of old pipework. The solution was to install a new system alongside the old one, rather than to try to utilise what was there and overload a system that worked well within limits.

‘When I was there last your guests looked very happy, despite the fact that Dad and Neil were still working on the outside of the property. It must look so lovely now.’ I can’t hide the wistful note in my voice.

There are a few seconds of silence before Mum jumps in.

‘What’s happened, Anna? I can tell something is wrong.’

I clear my throat, uneasily. Crunch time.

‘I handed in my notice and I’m looking for another job.’

The sharp intake of breath is as clear as if Mum is standing in front of me.

‘Oh, Anna. Is this about Karl?’

I nod, then realise she isn’t here in the flesh.

‘Yes. I was offered a promotion but things became complicated. Karl wants us to focus on our careers—’

My words dry up as a feeling of hurt, combined with a sense of abject failure, threatens to overwhelm me. I mustn’t start crying as that wouldn’t be fair on Mum.

‘My poor, darling, girl. Maybe it’s for the best… oh dear. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said that. It’s only that I want to see you happy, lovely girl, because it’s what you deserve.’

I can hear the concern in her voice.

‘What will you do?’

I try my best to sound upbeat. ‘I’m in the process of applying for a job with another agency and it would be a step up – sort of on a par with the promotion I was offered.’
Mum isn’t fooled.
‘Your heart’s not in it, Anna, I can hear it in your voice.’

The seconds roll by as I try to pull myself together and lighten my mood, as Mum continues.

‘Anna, I know you, my love, and whatever has happened between you and Karl has hit you hard. I’m not trying to interfere, but if it really is over then you’re going to need some time to pick yourself back up. You deserve better and you must never forget that, Anna. Why don’t you come and spend a little time here? It’s such a wonderful time of the year and it’s very warm.’

‘Oh, Mum, if only life was that simple. I’ve not long moved into the new house and I simply can’t afford not to work. I guess it was a bit cavalier of me, handing in my notice when I’ve so recently taken on an even bigger mortgage. Bricks and mortar might be a good investment but they’re also a heavy burden.’

I can hear Mum whispering, no doubt her hand is only partially covering the mouthpiece of the phone and she doesn’t realise I can hear them talking. Dad has probably been listening in, concerned by her responses. There’s a rustling sound, then Dad’s voice comes on the line.

‘Hi, Anna. Listen, honey, we have plenty of work over here, whether it’s helping in the house or getting your hands dirty on the renovations. We’d really appreciate some help as it’s hard to find casual workers. You could earn some money, and it would be a blessing to have you here as the pressure is on.’

Aww, my heart feels heavy when I hear the love and concern reflected in his voice. He’s trying to convince me that they need me, rather than it being the other way around.

‘It’s not that simple, Dad. I wish it were.’

‘Then make it simple. Rent the house out for six months. Lizzie is in the lettings business and she’ll sort it out for you. Come out and earn a little money while enjoying a break away from it all. Anything is possible if you put your mind to it, Anna. I’m only cross I didn’t warn you about that Karl Radford.’

‘Geoff!’

Mum’s voice sounds scandalised and I can visualise them jostling over the phone.

‘Don’t listen to your dad, Anna. If things aren’t really over between the two of you and this is just a temporary… blip, then we want you to know we are here for you no matter what happens.’

It all goes silent as, no doubt, Mum gives Dad one of her infamous stares to put him in his place.

‘It’s truly over, Mum. When I made it clear that we were personally involved, Karl told Robert Carson he’d lied in order to protect ME. What sort of man does that? And to add insult to injury, after I left Robert told him my leaving was for the best. Karl’s promotion is still on the table as if everything was my fault!’

‘Oh.’

The line goes ominously quiet and I wonder if Mum is wondering how I could be foolish enough to let it happen to me for a second time. Am I one of those people who are always destined to keep making the same mistakes over, and over, again? I thought I was
protecting myself this time around. But if that’s true then why does it still hurt so much?

Her voice breaks the silence. ‘Selfish people only ever consider their own agenda.’

I’ve never heard my mum say a mean word about anyone before and her words take my breath away. Loving someone means that when they hurt, you hurt. I realise that my gut instincts have been desperately trying to attract my attention since day one with Karl. The only person I can blame for ignoring their rumblings is myself. Time to stop dreaming your way through life, Anna, and get real.

‘I’ll ring Lizzie and see if she can find me a tenant. Maybe a working holiday is precisely what I need. Tell Dad that if he has any walls that need knocking down to wait until I get there and have the sledgehammer ready. I have a lot of anger to let out and smacking a stone wall is going to be therapeutic.’

‘That’s my girl. Life is all about how quickly you can bounce back, not how many times you get knocked down.’

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‘You’re what?’

‘I’m going to rent out the house and go to France. Mum and Dad need some help and you know how I like to get my hands dirty. There’s nothing more relaxing than wielding a paint brush.’ I’m trying my best to put a positive spin on this, even though it feels like total defeat. I never, ever dreamt that I’d end up living back under the same roof as my parents with no clear plan for my future.

‘This sounds like running away to me.’ Lizzie’s words come out in a half whisper and I don’t think she really meant to say what she was thinking out loud. She knows me too well and her thoughts mirror my own.

‘I’m going to be fine, I promise. Maybe I need to concentrate on having some fun and forget about that elusive Mr Right. Besides, the new house is a constant reminder of how silly I’ve been. I’m keeping my fingers crossed the rental income will cover the mortgage. I need to break even to make this work. Can you do your thing and find me the perfect tenant?’

I’m half tempted to make a joke of it and add that if she can find me the perfect man, too, it might save me from getting myself into a mess again. But something has changed in me over the last couple of days and I feel as if a huge burden has been lifted from my shoulders. Okay, so everyone I know is either in a long term relationship, engaged, or married. I need to face the fact that it just isn’t happening for me and I’m twenty-six-years old, single and free as a bird. I’d become a woman obsessed with this… need. I was way too young when I thought I’d found my soulmate. I can now see that I became fixated on this rosy picture of the way I saw my life unfolding in front of me. Karl has been the wake-up call I needed. It’s a big, wide world out there and this is the time in my life when my commitments are few. I’m going to count my blessings and embrace the luxury of pleasing no one but myself!

‘It won’t be a problem. The house was a good investment and the rental market is brisk.
This is just so unlike you, though, Anna. I thought you loved your job and to walk away from it because—’

‘Karl has done me a favour, Lizzie, and this is the right thing to do. In six months’ time, I’ll review my situation and I’ll probably be heading back to the UK for a fresh start. But for now, the thought of spending time helping my parents is rather appealing.’

She gives a light-hearted laugh, mirroring my attempt to be up-beat.

‘Well, I can’t say I’m not the teensiest bit envious at the thought of your little adventure. A beautiful little village in France is going to be the perfect place to re-boot your life. And I’ll find you a great tenant for the house, don’t you worry.’

‘You’re a good friend, Lizzie. I’m going to miss you.’ It’s true, because she’s always been there for me.

‘Oh, you’ll be having way too much fun to think about me and rainy old England. But I expect to be kept up to date with all your news. You know what a Francophile I am and I only wish my parents would suddenly announce they’re selling up and heading in that direction. Devon is wonderful, but France is the dream!’

‘You and Daniel will have to come and visit. Mum says the house is fully booked for the summer but work has begun on the first of the two stone gîtes. I’m going to help out with that as it represents an important part of their future income. Every extra euro they can earn will help to secure their long term financial position. I’ll make sure you are the first to know as soon as it’s ready.’

She sighs.

‘Oh, that would be wonderful. We haven’t booked a holiday yet, so I’ll tell Daniel we’re on standby.’

‘Sounds like a plan to me!’

I have almost three weeks to pack up the contents of my house and put them into storage. More importantly, it will be uninterrupted thinking time now that I don’t have to keep going online to check out job vacancies. It’s time to re-think my life and figure out what I really want to achieve in the future. Sometimes things really do happen for a reason, even if at the outset it doesn’t appear that way. I wasn’t truly happy; I just didn’t know why.
June