



THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

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*Swallowtail
Summer*

A cherished home, a circle of friends
and a summer that will change
everything...

Chapter One

The taxi trundled along at a leisurely speed, as though the driver had all the time in the world to cover the short distance from the station to the riverside village of Linston.

In the passenger seat, his stomach churning with anticipation, Alastair Lucas was on edge, a state of mind that was not helped by the annoying rattle in the door panel beside him. He was tempted to ram his elbow hard against the panel to see if that would silence the noise, but he didn't think the taxi driver would appreciate him doing that.

To ease his anxiety, he focused his attention on looking out of the windscreen, at the sky that was littered with puffy white clouds and the sun that was already shining brightly. Rain must have fallen in the night, making the wet road glisten in the early morning sunlight. The passing scenery was wholly familiar to him, yet he was seeing it through new eyes, comparing it to the rich and varied landscapes that had been home to him since he'd gone away nine months ago.

'Where did you say you wanted me to drop you off?' the driver asked.

'Linston End,' said Alastair, 'it's on Linston Lower Road.'

'That'll be one of those exclusive places along the river, then, lawns right down to the water's edge. Some lovely old houses there. I like those traditional properties, especially the thatched ones. Must be a nightmare to maintain though. Are you visiting?' The man was probably thinking of the large backpack and scruffy holdall in the boot of the car.

'No; I'm coming home.'

'Been away have you? Somewhere nice?'

With no apparent expectation of a reply from Alastair, which was something of a relief to him, the man continued on with his chatter. ‘But I doubt you could find anywhere better than here. As my wife is always telling me, and she’s a local girl through and through, there’s nowhere in the world better than the Norfolk Broads. Okee-smokey, here’s Linston Lower Road, what number are we looking for?’

‘No number,’ said Alastair, suddenly wanting to have this last part of his journey over with. ‘I’ll tell you when to slow down.’

‘Right you are. Bet you’re looking forward to a decent cuppa, aren’t you? Doesn’t matter where you go in the world, there’s nothing like coming home to a nice cup of tea.’

‘It’s just around the bend after the beech hedge and the sign for Grebe House,’ said Alastair, thinking that a nice cup of tea couldn’t be further from his thoughts. The churning in his stomach had increased and his mouth was now dry. ‘You can drop me off at the gate if you like,’ he said, when the driver spotted the sign for Grebe House and slowed the car yet more, then began to turn the steering wheel.

‘No, no, if a job’s worth doing, it’s worth doing properly or not all.’

Alastair’s first glimpse of the thatched house as the car travelled the length of the hedge-lined drive filled him with irrational dread, had him wanting to tell the driver to turn the car around and take him back to the station.

But that would be the coward’s way out. He was home to face his demons and put the past to rest. Pulling himself together, he cast his mind back to when Linston End had been a place of great happiness for him, when it was the only place he wanted to be.

Thirty years ago his great Aunt Cora had left him the house in her will. Her generosity had not come as a surprise; Cora had repeatedly voiced her desire for him to inherit Linston End, knowing that ever since spending most of his childhood holidays with her, he loved it like a close friend.

It was Cora who had taught him to sail, and Cora who had

shared her love of the Broads and its fascinating but threatened wildlife. It was Cora who had insisted, when he became a teenager, that he should bring with him a couple of friends for the summer holidays, not wanting him to be bored of her company.

Dear old Cora, she had given him so much, and now he was about to betray her, or so it felt. Would she be spinning in her grave at the thought of what he was about to put in play? He hoped not. He wanted her to understand that this was important to him, that to be happy he had to take this drastic step.

When the taxi driver had driven away, Alastair stood on the doorstep, his luggage at his feet. He was visited by a memory from a long time ago – the memory of his seven-year-old self arriving for the summer holidays. It was the first time he was to spend the holiday without his parents who, as actors, were starring together in a play touring the country. Normally they tried to avoid this happening, but in this instance there had been no avoiding their being away at the same time and so Cora, a woman not known for her love of children, having none of her own, was approached to take care of Alastair. Initially she had been unwilling, but had capitulated so long as her great nephew would not interfere with her bird watching, or any of her other pursuits and daily routines. His behaviour must have met her high standards, for from then on she invited him to stay every summer, and always without his parents. ‘They’re busy people and need time to themselves,’ she would say.

Alastair pushed the key into the lock of the front door and in a further attempt to distract himself, he recalled the knee-trembling apprehension he had experienced as a boy that day when the taxi driver had dropped him off that first time. Cora had originally intended to collect him from the station herself, but for whatever reason she had changed her mind at the last minute. She had greeted his cautious ring of the doorbell with a pair of binoculars hanging around her neck and the words: ‘Ah, so you’re here, are you? Good. Now then, stow your suitcase over there, go to the lavatory if you must, and then come with me. We haven’t a moment to lose. We’re off to Ranworth Broad

to see some swallowtail butterflies.’ No sooner had he done as he’d been told, than he was being hustled outside and down the sweep of lawn to the boathouse, running at breakneck speed as though their lives depended upon it.

That was how life was with Cora: time was of the essence, not a second was to be lost. Life was to be lived to the fullest; otherwise, as she often said, what was the point? She had been one of the most spontaneous and passionate people he had known and it was how Alastair had wanted to live his own life. It had not always worked out that way, but now he was determined to follow Cora’s advice to the letter.

He opened the door and stepped into the large octagonal hall. The spacious and airy entrance always took visitors by surprise, but then the whole house was a clever blend of quirky and traditional Broadland architecture. Closing the door behind him, his heart – his treacherous heart, forever prone to nostalgic sentiment – gave a small, but unmistakable lurch at the prospect of what he planned to set in motion.

Thousands of miles away, his decision had been an act of much-needed liberation. Now though, as the familiar embrace of the house welcomed him home, and reminded him how good it had been to his wellbeing over the years, that it had always had the power to lift his spirits, even when life had felt more than he could cope with, he experienced a shadow of doubt.

He dumped his luggage at the foot of the stairs and walked through to the kitchen at the back of the house. He stood at the French doors to look out over the lawn and to Linston Mill on the other side of the river. The three-storey mill was privately owned, and one of the most photographed landmarks along this stretch of the River Bure. Artists flocked to it, too.

Originally built as a drainage mill for the surrounding marshland, it had a sense of isolation to it, in that to reach it one had to use a boat from this side of the river. There was the more inconvenient option by which it could be approached, and that was the long way round by road, but that entailed having to leave your car three hundred yards away from the mill and take the footpath that snaked its way through a dense copse of trees.

As a child, and when Cora had deemed him old enough to do it alone without coming to grief, he had often rowed over to visit the owner of the mill, an eccentric old boy who had been Cora's closest friend. Back then Alastair never once considered they might be anything other than friends with a mutual interest in birdwatching, but as an adult he suspected there had been more to it than that.

For the last ten years the mill had been a second home for a couple of architects from London who had modernised it and occasionally let it out to friends. Linston End had been a second home for Alastair also, until two years ago, and shortly before his sixtieth birthday, when he and Orla had taken the step of moving here permanently from London. Something they had always planned to do once he retired from a longstanding career in banking and asset management. Risk assessment had been his particular forte, which was ironic, given the risk he was now about to take at the age of sixty-two.

With that thought, he turned away from the garden and view of the river and mill, and looked at the central island unit where, next to a glass vase filled with flowers, there was a note.

Welcome home!

I've filled the fridge and made you your favourite shepherd's pie – after all that foreign food you've been eating, I thought you'd like something simple and English!

Your bed's made up and I've put all your mail in a cupboard in your study. I reckon it'll take you until Christmas to work your way through it!

*Best wishes,
Sylvia.*

P.S. Neil plans to cut the grass in a couple of days if that suits you. Oh, and he had to get the hedge trimmer fixed, the motor packed up on him.

Sylvia and Neil Finney had worked at Linston End for many years and from what Alastair could see, they had kept the house and garden in good order while he'd been away. Again he felt a stab of guilty betrayal at what he would have to share with them in the coming days. But who knew, maybe they would welcome a change.

But telling Sylvia and Neil of his plans was the least of his concerns. Explaining to his friends would be a far harder sell. He wanted to believe they would be happy for him, but he feared they might well think he was mad, that grief had tipped him over the edge. Just one of the things he had to tell them was bad enough, but the combination of the two – two bombshells – would quite possibly feel like the ultimate disloyalty to them.

He took off his leather jacket, hooked it over the back of a chair, and after filling the coffee machine with water, he retraced his steps out to the hall. He thought briefly about taking his luggage through to the utility room and the washing machine, but instead found himself drifting around the ground floor of the house, as if reacquainting himself with the rooms and their contents. With each step he took, he experienced the haunting sensation that he wasn't alone, that Orla was here, that any minute he would turn and there she would be. *Surprise!*

Nowhere did this sensation hit him more forcibly than when he came to a stop in the conservatory, which he and Orla had built on to the house after Cora's death. Apart from her studio in the garden, where she had spent so much of her time, this had been his wife's favourite room. It had been very much her space rather than his.

Abruptly he turned on his heel and went back to the kitchen.

He poured himself a mug of black coffee, and took out his mobile phone from his jacket pocket.

Who to ring first, Simon or Danny?

Chapter Two

‘He’s back, then?’ remarked Sorrel Wyatt, when Simon came off the phone. She was finishing the job of emptying the dishwasher, paying particular attention to lining up the handles of the mugs in the cupboard, arranging the plates so that the pattern of each one was in the same position as the one beneath it, and placing the cutlery in the drawer in neat organised piles. She hated to open the cutlery drawer and find it in disarray.

‘He flew in at the crack of dawn and is already home,’ said Simon, grinning happily. ‘He says he wants us all to go up for the weekend.’

Poor old Simon, thought Sorrel, these nine long months he’d missed Alastair like a dog misses its owner, and now that his oldest friend was home he was practically wagging his tail and running around in circles ready to go walkies.

Joined at the hip didn’t come close when it came to describing the relationship between Simon and Alastair, and Danny too. They had been friends since being at school together and such was the strength of their friendship Sorrel, Orla and Frankie had accepted that in marrying into this trio of best buddies they had to recognise that the three men more or less came as one, a sort of BOGOF, except in this instance, it was a case of buy one, get two free, plus wives.

Even on their honeymoon, Simon had sneaked away to phone Alastair, despite promising he wouldn’t. That broken promise, as absurd as it had been for Sorrel to expect Simon to keep, had always rankled with her. It had been foolish of her, but it had been a test on her part. A test that Simon had failed.

‘I thought he wasn’t due home for another month,’ she

said, going over to where her husband was leaning against the table, on which the remains of breakfast still lay, along with that morning's partially read newspaper. Her hands moving automatically, Sorrel began tidying things away, and with an irritation that she found difficult to hide.

She would never have thought she would become one of those awful wives who complained of her husband getting under her feet when he retired, or nagged that the bulk of the domestic chores always seemed to fall to her, but she had indeed turned into that very wife.

Retirement for her had come a year before Simon's and, after saying goodbye to her colleagues at the sixth-form college in Cambridge where she had been an administrator, she had had a full twelve months to establish herself at home, stamping her mark on the days by carving out a new routine to follow. She joined the local tennis club and threw herself into 'local good causes', including helping as a volunteer at Chelstead Hall, a local National Trust property. It was the kind of work women of her ilk were destined to do. Simon had not felt any such compulsion when he retired; instead he mooched about the house like a bored teenager. Alastair going off when he did had not helped matters.

'Change of plan apparently. He wants us all there,' Simon repeated, rubbing his hands together, and with what Sorrel imagined unkindly as another wag of his tail.

'Yes,' she said, 'I heard you the first time.'

'I'll give Rachel a ring, shall I? Then Callum.' He was effervescent with eager excitement. That's what came of having so little to do with his time, she thought.

'Why?' The question was disingenuous of her. She knew exactly why.

'Because Alastair wants to see us all; the whole gang. He has something important to tell us.'

Sorrel considered this last statement, taking her time to tease it out. 'Is there something you're not sharing with me?' she asked. Was it possible that this summons to Linston End was more than just a get-together to welcome the conquering hero

home? A man who was home much earlier than planned. ‘He’s not ill, is he?’

Simon gave her a startled look. ‘Why would you think that?’

‘No reason,’ she said, putting away the jars of honey and marmalade in the cupboard, turning the pots so that the labels all faced outward in the same way. She then went over to straighten the tea towels on the chrome rail of the cooker. She’d swear that behind her back Simon deliberately made them lop-sided just to annoy her.

‘You never say anything without a reason,’ he said. ‘What made you think Alastair might be ill?’

‘I don’t know,’ she said, ‘it just popped into my head.’ Her husband was right though; rarely did things pop into her head. She was not a spontaneous woman. Not anymore. Spontaneity, in her experience came with a cost; it led to regret and she’d had quite enough of that. Enough to last two lifetimes over.

God forgive her, but the reason behind her suggestion that Alastair had returned home early because he might be ill – terminally ill – was that if he died it might actually mean that at long last they – *she* – would be free.

It was not the first time such a thought had occurred to her, and as before, the extent of her malice pained her. There was, of course, a much more likely scenario for Alastair’s returning home earlier than planned. ‘Maybe he’s met a woman and wants to tell us all about her?’ she said.

Simon looked scandalised. ‘A woman? He wouldn’t! Not ... not so soon.’

‘There’s no such thing as too soon for a man,’ she said, matter of factly.

Out in the garden, and as she hung the washing on the clothes-line in the bright sunshine, Sorrel hated herself for as good as wishing a man dead, but also for intentionally alarming Simon, for wanting to burst the balloon of his happiness that Alastair was home. It had been unnecessarily vindictive of her.

Jealousy was a cruel and indiscriminate master and countless times over the years she had sworn she would not allow it to get

the better of her, but she was defenceless against such a powerful emotion. In that, she was like a puppet with a superior force than her own pulling on her strings.

Those strings were being pulled now as she observed Simon circling a flowerbed as he chatted on his mobile to Rachel, telling her about Alastair being back and his desire to have them all to stay for the weekend. It was one of Simon's many habits, pacing while speaking on the telephone. He claimed it aided his thought process.

'You are free, aren't you?' Sorrel heard him ask, a note of pleading in his voice. 'You are? That's great! Uncle Alastair will be so chuffed. I know it's a busy time for your brother, but fingers crossed Callum will be able to join us.'

For weeks now Sorrel had been trying to persuade their daughter to come home for a weekend, but without any luck. If she were to be believed, Rachel led an action-packed life with something always going on that took priority over seeing her parents. Was it too much to ask for her to spare the time to visit them in Suffolk? To make it easier, Sorrel had often suggested she and Simon go to London to take Rachel out for lunch, her boyfriend too, and whom they had yet to meet, but invariably the idea would come to nothing; always at the last minute something would come up.

Yet lo and behold, here was Rachel telling her father that she was free this coming weekend. Well, of course she was, this was no ordinary invitation from a boring old parent; this was Alastair and such was his popularity, everybody always did what he asked.

There she went again, thought Sorrel peevishly, pinching the waistband of a pair of Simon's boxer shorts to the line with a peg. Could she not think of anything positive to say about Alastair? He'd been a good friend to them over the years; generous to a fault, especially with the many holidays and long weekends they'd spent at Linston End. No summer would have been complete without their annual pilgrimage to the Broads. As children, Rachel and Callum couldn't wait for the end of term to come so they could pack their things into the car and escape to Linston.

One year, desperate for change – desperate in so many ways – Sorrel had rebelled and insisted they ring the changes and hire a gîte in Brittany. It had been a disaster. They’d arrived to find a house that was cold, damp and about as inviting as Bates Motel. The weather conspired to do its worst by raining almost every day, making the longed-for days on the nearby beach an impossibility. Simon had wanted to pack up and drive home to join the rest of the gang at Linston End, but then they all went down with food poisoning after eating at the one and only restaurant in the village where they were staying. Just as soon as they were well enough to travel, they piled their belongings into the car and headed for the ferry at St Malo. Rachel and Callum moaned the entire way home that they’d had the worst holiday ever and never wanted to go anywhere else but Linston End, to stay with Uncle Alastair and Auntie Orla.

Nobody actually blamed Sorrel for the disastrous holiday, not in so many words, but it became the family horror story that was given a regular airing at the slightest provocation. Usually by the children who adored Alastair and Orla, which often happens with couples who have no children of their own, especially if they can offer maximum fun and adventure. If they can do that, they take on an almost mystical persona that no parent can ever hope to emulate.

‘I expect you’re pleased Alastair’s home,’ Simon had said in the kitchen, when she’d been wiping down the table, rounding up the toast crumbs and refolding the newspaper.

‘Why’s that?’ she’d asked, taken aback at his remark.

He’d laughed. ‘Well, it’ll be like old times again with him being around, except even better now that Danny and I are retired as well; us boys will be able to spend more time together.’ He’d given another short laugh. ‘It means that I’ll be out from under your feet.’

‘I hadn’t thought of that,’ she’d said, wringing out the dishcloth at the sink. Although of course she had.

In common with Simon and the others, Sorrel had been surprised when, a few weeks after Orla’s funeral, Alastair had announced his intention to go travelling, to find some space

in which he could recover from the trauma of losing Orla so tragically. ‘I need to make sense of it,’ he’d said. Wouldn’t we all want to walk away and go travelling to make sense of our lives? thought Sorrel, jamming a peg onto the washing line and snapping it in two.

To add yet more shine to Alastair’s already sparkling golden halo, his travelling had involved helping to build houses for the homeless in the Gambia, as well as a new orphanage in Sri Lanka. He’d also thrown himself into attempting a range of challenging exploits, such as white-water rafting and extreme cycling trips around Kenya and Tanzania. What had he been trying to prove, that at sixty-two he still had ‘it’?

And where did that leave Simon and Danny?

Trailing hopelessly behind in his wake – no doubt his now tanned, fit and lean wake – just as they’d always been, that was where.

Oh, it was so maddening, this endless adulation of Alastair bloody Lucas! One day, if there was any justice in the world, he’d trip himself up on his own perfection.

Chapter Three

‘The thing is,’ said Danny Fielding, clasping his hands together on his lap, and staring through the open window at the garden in the bright July sunlight, ‘I’m scared of time running out for me. Well, I suppose if I’m honest, I’m scared of the actual moment when I know it’s game over. But then, don’t we all worry about that, that final moment of no return?’

There was no answer from dear old Mrs Maudsley, although he hadn’t expected a response from her. She was fast asleep, and had been so since Danny had exchanged a few brief words with her on his arrival. Talking to the old lady like this, with such honesty, as inappropriate as it might be for a woman who was so close to death, was his way of saying out loud the unthinkable, of uttering what he couldn’t possibly say to anybody else, and without the risk of any comeback. It was what he called his ‘thinking aloud’ time. Certainly he couldn’t burden poor Frankie with his concerns, or their daughter, Jenna. So here he came and poured forth his fears in the hope of getting everything off his chest.

Now, after saying goodbye to Mrs Maudsley and then chatting to Tess Moran, a volunteer at Woodside Care Home, he signed out in the visitor’s book by the main entrance door and set off for the car park.

With each recent visit he’d made, and seeing how fast Mrs Maudsley’s health had deteriorated, he’d wondered if it would be his last. But somehow she hung on. Bedridden, with her sight failing, and her body painfully crippled by arthritis, there seemed so little for her to live for, and yet she kept on going. Apart from Danny, she had no other visitors and he

had promised himself that for as long as the poor woman drew breath, he would make the effort to spend time with her.

Originally his visits to Woodside were to see his mother, a woman who, along with her husband, had come into Danny's life when he was ten years of age. After years of bouncing from one foster home to another, he landed with Rosamunde and Michael Fielding, a childless couple in their forties. He assumed that history would repeat itself and he wouldn't be staying with them for long, but he was wrong and proved to be their first and only foster child. They were both teachers at a small prep school for boys – Michael Fielding taught classics and his wife, English. Following several months of intensive tuition at home, they persuaded the headmaster of the school to allow Danny to take up a place. Which was where he met Alastair and Simon, both also relatively new to the school.

When Michael and Rosamunde decided they wanted to make things more permanent by adopting Danny, he had never known such happiness. Finally he would have a place he could call home, a forever home. They were kind and loving parents and it was a great sadness to him when Michael died fifteen years ago. With the passing of time, Rosamunde's own health started to deteriorate and Danny and Frankie suggested she move in with them, but she was an independent soul and wouldn't hear of it. But then last year, following a fall, Rosamunde took the decision to become a resident at Woodside Care Home, and so began Danny's regular visits, during which he got to know Mrs Maudsley. Her room was next to Rosamunde's and the two women hit it off when they discovered they had known each other many moons ago at university. It cheered Danny to know that Rosamunde wasn't lonely when he left her to go home. Her time at Woodside was short however; she died within three months of moving there.

Since retiring Danny had the time to visit Mrs Maudsley more often, but after a while he stopped telling Frankie where he was going. Irrationally he worried that his caring for Mrs Maudsley might show a weakness in him, as if he were unable to let go of that last remaining connection – as vague as it was – to an

extraordinary couple who had changed his life so dramatically. Had Rosamunde and Michael not fostered and then adopted him, who knew what would have become of him?

He surely wouldn't have been given the opportunities he had. He wouldn't have met Alastair and Simon, or gone to university and met the woman who became his wife, and then there would have been no Jenna, their precious and most beautiful daughter.

He was a lucky man, no question.

But as if to remind him that the Grim Reaper could take that luck away at any moment he chose, Danny's chest tightened and his heart gave a painful thud – *Hah, I'll give you luck, sonny!*

Behind the wheel of his car, and concentrating hard on keeping his breath steady – *in, out, in, out* – he drove through the gates of Woodside and headed for home, where he would arm himself with a pair of secateurs and the wheelbarrow and pretend he'd been busy – not too busy, of course – in the garden for the last hour or so. He was banned from using the lawnmower; Frankie had seen to that.

This afternoon Frankie was at the Sewing Bee in Chelstead where she ran quilting workshops twice a week. It was during those sessions that Danny slipped away to Woodside. The fact that he had kept quiet about his visits for as long as he had made it all the more difficult to admit what he'd been doing. Better to keep things as they were, he reasoned, and wait for nature to intervene, when his 'secret' would die with Mrs Maudsley.

He would have to find something else to do with his time when that day came. For the most part he enjoyed pottering around at home, fixing things that had been waiting since forever to be fixed, and being with Frankie, but at the same time being careful not to get in her way. According to Frankie, Simon drove Sorrel mad by not having enough to do. Whenever Danny mentioned to Frankie that maybe he ought to do some kind of voluntary work, she urged him not to rush into anything and put his health at risk.

It was early days, was what he told himself whenever he and Frankie had this kind of discussion. In the circumstances it was

understandable that she should be protective of him. For now he was still finding his feet in this new world of retirement, when the day stretched out ahead of him and was entirely his own with nobody making demands of his time.

Despite being at an age when retirement was clearly on the horizon, it had actually happened sooner than he thought it would. With no real specific plan in place he had foreseen going on with running the partnership of Wyatt Fielding Solicitors with Simon for some years yet, but fate had other ideas and put a stop to that when, out of the blue, he had collapsed in the office.

He'd been feeling vaguely out of sorts all that week, conscious of a hint of breathlessness combined with a spacey sense of not being quite with it. He'd put it down to tiredness, having had a run of nights when he hadn't slept well, worrying over a client's abusive husband who had taken to showing up at the office to harangue him. Twice the man had terrified Joan, their receptionist, by barging through to Danny's office and threatening violence unless he stopped acting on behalf of his wife who wanted to divorce him.

It had been the first time anything like that had happened to Danny and had caused his heart to pound ferociously fast, at the same time feeling as though a strong hand had wrapped itself around that vital organ and squeezed it painfully hard. It seemed obvious now that he had ignored the blatant warning signs that something was seriously wrong, but he'd convinced himself that it was nothing to worry about.

The next day, when everybody but the cleaner had left the office for home, he had collapsed while on his way up the stairs to use the toilet. He'd been halfway up when he'd felt as though that iron grip of a hand had seized hold of his heart and suddenly the air was gone from his lungs and his legs gave way beneath him, and down the stairs he tumbled, banging his head as he went. When he came to, he was on a stretcher and being lifted into the back of an ambulance, which the cleaner, who had found him – God bless her! – had rung for.

He was kept in hospital for several days with numerous tests

carried out on him, but then allowed home under strict orders that he was not to return to work for at least three weeks. ‘Treat this as a warning shot,’ he was told by a cardiologist who looked so young he should have been preparing for his A-levels, never mind qualified to perform heart surgery.

At home Frankie watched over him constantly; Jenna too, having caught the first available train home to Chelstead when her mother had phoned her. The concern in their faces filled him with anguish that he had caused them so much distress, and so he had made light of what had happened.

‘A lot of fuss about nothing,’ he’d said with more bravado than he felt, but Frankie was having none of it and laid down the law that he was not to work the long hours he had been used to doing. That was when the word ‘retirement’ was mentioned, not in an abstract sometime-in-the-future kind of way, but as hard indisputable fact.

Funnily enough it was Simon who seized the bull by the horns and declared Danny’s heart attack a sign that it was time to sell the business to the firm of lawyers from Chelmsford who had been sniffing around them for the last sixteen months. ‘Look,’ Simon had said, ‘Alastair threw in the towel, why don’t we? I mean, come on, let’s have some fun while—’

‘Don’t you dare say *while we still can*,’ Danny had interrupted him. ‘And it wasn’t a heart attack I had, it was just a ...’

‘A what?’ Simon had said.

‘A glitch. A small bump in the road brought on by that aggressive man putting the mockers on me.’

‘Call it what you bloody well want,’ Simon had said with a shake of his head. ‘I for one don’t want to have your death on my conscience because you wouldn’t retire. Come on, let’s sell up and take it easy. Who knows, we might follow Alastair’s example and chuck a few things into a rucksack and go travelling.’

‘Would that be with or without our wives?’ The thought of Sorrel roughing it with the bare essentials contained in a backpack was laughable to Danny. Frankie might consider it for a few days, combined with a walking holiday and a comfortable

bed to fall into after a decent meal, but months on end away from home not seeing Jenna would be out of the question. As it would be for him.

The surprise to Danny was that Simon was ready to retire, having shown no previous indication that he'd been giving it any serious thought. He claimed he'd been mulling it over ever since Alastair had taken the plunge.

Orla's death had also played its part in the decision they reached. Frankie said it had made them grow up, that they couldn't kid themselves they were immortal anymore. Within their close-knit group, Orla was the first of their number to fall, which underscored the realisation that at any moment one of them could be next, and with that 'bump in the road' that Danny's heart had given him, retirement – a chance to take it easy – seemed a sensible option.

All this had taken place in February and March of this year, while Alastair was in Sri Lanka. Danny had insisted that his 'bump in the road' be kept from Alastair, knowing that had he heard of it, he would have been sufficiently alarmed to cut short his travels and return home. It was what Danny would have done, had the boot been on the other foot.

He had been tempted to tell his old friend yesterday when Alastair had called with the news that he was back, but he hadn't been able to bring himself to do it. Besides, there was plenty of time to bring Alastair up to date. When Danny did, he would make light of it, shrug it off as just one of those things. Not a word would he say of his deep-seated fear that he felt as though every day was a day that could be snatched from him, that he might not live to see Jenna marry, to walk her proudly up the aisle, or have the chance to play with any grandchildren.

He slowed the car and turning the steering wheel, he pulled onto the drive and surveyed the house before him with its prettily painted yellow walls and front garden planted with a combination of box hedge and lavender. Walnut Tree Cottage had been their home – their very happy home – since Jenna was a toddler, and once more he told himself that he was a lucky man. The words had become a mantra to him, and maybe if

he said them enough Lady Luck would continue to bestow her generous favours upon him and fend off the Grim Reaper.

He was getting maudlin, he muttered under his breath while letting himself in at the back door. That's what came of spending too much time at Woodside with the elderly and the dying. Thank goodness he had the weekend to look forward to, when they'd all be together at Linston End. Except, of course, there would be no Orla. It still took some getting used to.

But there would be Alastair, he forced himself to focus on. He had missed his old friend while he'd been away. Never had they been apart for so long. Initially there had been regular updates from Alastair, but then the informative emails tailed off until it was only an occasional photo accompanied by a wise crack of a comment.

'I have something to tell you all,' Alastair had told Danny on the phone yesterday.

'He's met a woman,' Frankie had said when Danny had repeated this to her.

'A woman?'

'You know, one of those superior creatures with soft curvy bits that drive men wild.'

'But so soon after Orla?'

'There wouldn't be an easier time for it to happen, when he's vulnerable and at the mercy of his emotions. What better way to recover from his grief than to fall in love? Or to fall in lust for that matter?'

'Do you think that's what I would do?' Danny had asked, shocked. 'Find myself a replacement for you?' Frankie never failed to surprise him with her pragmatism.

'I'm not saying you'd seek a replacement straightaway, but your subconscious would be on the look out for a likely candidate.'

'Is that what you'd do?' As he'd asked the question, the grasping hand he imagined taking hold of his heart made its presence felt and he'd sat down.

Frankie had stopped what she was doing, laying out squares of fabric on her work table and stared at him. 'Are you all right?'

'I'm fine,' he'd lied, suddenly feeling clammy, his pulse beginning to race.

She'd come over to him then, knelt on the floor, her hands resting on his knees. 'Danny,' she'd said, in that gentle voice of hers, 'you have to stop worrying about everything. You care too much, that's your trouble. You always take things so personally.'

Did he? Did he really care too much? Was such a thing possible? If it was, was that what had caused him to collapse in the first place?

And why should it bother him that Alastair might have met somebody and fallen in love again? Didn't he want his closest friend to be happy?

Not if it meant things would have to change any more than they had already in the last year – first Orla, then his mother, and then his 'bump in the road', followed by retirement.

He wasn't a fan of change; he'd experienced too much of it as a young child. He liked things to stay the same. Rarely did it happen, but if there was the faintest of chances that Frankie was wrong, that Alastair hadn't met a woman, what else could it be that he was so keen to share with them?

Chapter Four

Friday morning and the prospect of getting out of London for the weekend and escaping to Norfolk brightened Jenna's day considerably. It would be great to see Uncle Alastair again and to hear all about his time away. After the charity projects he'd been involved with, she imagined it might take some readjustment to being back at Linston End.

For her part, she couldn't wait to be there, to spend two days relaxing by the river with friends and family. She had no complaints about her life in London, and her new job at Heart-to-Heart, but never far from her thoughts was the hope that one day she would gravitate back to Suffolk, or maybe even Norfolk, just as Callum had. She envied the life he'd carved out for himself, but she especially envied his cosy little cottage right on the river, the shortest of walks from where he worked. It was a far cry from the cramped studio flat she rented in Hackney and her tedious, jam-packed commute. A temporary arrangement, she regularly told herself. One day her life would be how she wanted it to be.

For now, she was fortunate to have a job she loved and a fun team to work with. She had been at Heart-to-Heart for three months, her decision to leave the goliath of a law firm where she'd previously worked coming shortly after her father's heart attack. She had grown bored of her then situation, having also made the mistake of forming a relationship with a colleague. Boredom was anathema to her, as were bad manners, and when she realised that Giles thought nothing of humiliating a waiter who made a mistake over their drinks order, she told him exactly what she thought of his behaviour. For good measure,

just in case he needed it spelling out, she'd said, 'I think we can safely say this relationship is over.'

From then on he made life awkward for her in the office, freezing her out of conversations, or worse, trying to make her look incompetent by deliberately not keeping her informed about a case they were assigned to. She was about to go to HR and lodge an official complaint, when Dad suffered his heart attack and suddenly Giles and his pettiness was the least of her concerns.

To be sure that Dad was receiving the correct treatment and care, she took to the Internet. As the leading charity in the country for research into heart disease, Heart-to-Heart figured largely in her online trawl for information, and when she came across a link for employment opportunities, she delved a little further and discovered an interesting job working in the legacy department. It appealed straightaway and following several rounds of interviews, she was taken on. Her team, including herself, numbered eight – six women and two men – all roughly in their mid-thirties, the same age as she was. She found the work enormously satisfying, and was astounded at the generosity of donors who bequeathed hundreds of thousands of pounds to the charity, their homes as well. The downside to these incredible acts of generosity was that occasionally there were disgruntled relatives who contested the will.

There was a great sense of camaraderie within the team, something that had been markedly absent from her previous place of work; there it had been a testosterone-fuelled bear pit of competitive aggression. But as well as she got on with everyone in the office, she had vowed never to become romantically involved with any of her colleagues. Which meant, given how much time she spent at work, there was little opportunity to meet anybody new. She had been unattached for nine months now, and in Rachel's opinion – given that Jenna was thirty-five years old – this was a very unsatisfactory state of affairs.

She smiled at the thought of Rachel and her bizarre eagerness to be married, and to anyone, or so it seemed to Jenna. For reasons which Jenna couldn't fathom, her friend had been

planning her wedding since the age of six. Back then she had forced her brother Callum to pretend to be her bridegroom and Jenna her bridesmaid. Sometimes their roles were reversed, but Rachel was always the bride. The part of vicar alternated between one of their teddy bears and Callum's precious Darth Vader action figure.

It felt like ages since all three of them had been together, with their parents too, and Jenna couldn't wait to finish work and make a dash for Liverpool Street Station. She was meeting Rachel there and they were travelling up together. She hoped Rachel wouldn't be late; punctuality had never been part of her skill set. To be on the safe side, Jenna sent her a text, then returned her attention to the matter she had volunteered to take on, that of constructing a Punch and Judy booth.

The charity was often left strange items in wills, but this one from a Mr Jim Percival of Basildon had drawn a mixed reaction on its arrival. Some had backed away when they caught sight of one of the puppets, others had smiled and adopted Punch's well-known catchphrase – *That's the way to do it!* – before drifting back to their desks.

The bequest had been delivered to the office that morning in a large wooden chest, not unlike a coffin, the courier having left it downstairs in the shared foyer of the building. Not knowing exactly what to expect, Jenna had gone down for it on her own and with a bit of help from the receptionist, together they had carried it into the lift by the rope handles at each end. It was surprisingly heavy and awkward in size, and the only way they could get it inside the lift was to stand it upright, which made it seem even more like a coffin.

The letter from Mr Percival's solicitor, advising them of the donation and its arrival, explained that puppets were traditionally burned or buried with their owner – or professor, to use the correct terminology – but in this case Mr Percival had wanted his collection, and the booth, to go to Heart-to-Heart, being all he had left to donate to the charity. The solicitor's letter further explained that Mrs Percival had died of heart disease and her husband had wanted to give something in her memory

to help others. Apparently they had performed their Punch and Judy shows on Margate beach during the 1960s and then when the vogue for British seaside holidays had fallen out of fashion, they had taken their act on the road, performing at village fetes, country shows and birthday parties.

The faded red and white booth now constructed, Jenna unwrapped the rest of the puppets, carefully removing their cloth bags and setting them out on her desk. Most were made of papier mâché, while the others were of carved wood. In all there was quite an array, each one a variation on the usual suspects – Mr Punch, Judy, the baby, the policeman, the doctor, the crocodile, the hangman and the devil. There was a dog with a string of sausages, and a few characters Jenna didn't know.

Unable to resist it, and checking nobody was about, Jenna slipped her hand inside a particularly old-looking Mr Punch. She found the lever on the wooden grip and moved it with her thumb to open Mr Punch's mouth. She smiled and snapped the mouth open and shut. 'That's the way to do it!' she said.

'Is it really?'

She spun round, and like a guilty child caught stealing a biscuit, she hid Mr Punch behind her back.

The cause of her embarrassment laughed, clearly amused. Jenna didn't have a clue who he was and could feel her cheeks reddening. He approached the booth and, tall enough to do so, he leaned over the edge of the opening and peered inside. 'There's not much room in there, is there?' he observed.

He was about the same age as she was, maybe a little younger, and dressed in a pair of dark indigo jeans with rips at the knees, and a charcoal coloured T-shirt that declared him to be 'built for speed'. It was pretty much the standard uniform for most male co-workers at Heart-to-Heart. Not that there were many male employees, they were far outnumbered by women. That was the charity sector for you, as she was told when she came for her interview.

'No,' she said in answer to the question. 'Not much room at all.'

He eyed the puppets on her desk. 'Can I have a go?'

Jenna hesitated, suddenly feeling protective of Mr Percival's bequest. The puppets had very likely represented a life's work; they weren't toys to be played with for the benefit of a cheap laugh.

'I promise I won't break anything,' he said. 'You know, when I was a child I was once chased by a giant-sized Mr Punch on the pier at Brighton and I still suffer nightmares from the experience.' He picked up one of the wooden puppets, a Mr Punch with a gruesomely large and pointed chin. 'You see,' he said solemnly, finding where to put his hand, 'this might be a way to exorcise the memory.'

Jenna stared at him. His brows were drawn in an expression of intense seriousness. 'A giant-sized Mr Punch,' she murmured, 'that must have been awful. How old were you?'

A slow smile worked its way across his grave features, and then he laughed. 'I was joking. But a full-size Mr Punch would be bloody scary, wouldn't it, especially if it was chasing you? I have to say, your face was a picture.'

Annoyed that he had played her for a fool, or more specifically that she had been gullible enough to be taken in, she removed the puppet from her own hand and laid it carefully on the desk. 'Were you looking for somebody in particular to annoy, or was I your intended victim?' she asked.

'I heard about the puppets and was curious to have a look,' he said. 'We haven't met before, have we? I'm Blake Darnell. I work upstairs in the brand and marketing team. You must be new. I'm sure I would have remembered your prickliness had I encountered you before.'

'I've been here three months actually,' she bristled, but then realised she was only endorsing his criticism of her. And had she really just said *actually* in that absurdly prissy voice? She tried to change tack, to offer some sort of apology. 'And—'

'And what?' he interrupted her, before she could get the words out.

'I'm sorry I was short with you.'

'There, that wasn't so difficult, was it?'

'What wasn't?'

‘Being nice.’

‘I’ll have you know, I’m always nice,’ she retorted. ‘I’m known for my niceness, you could say I’m legendary for it.’

Still holding the puppet, he raised it so it was level with his face. ‘Do we believe her, Mr Punch, that she’s known for her niceness? I want to believe her, but I have my doubts.’

Mr Punch’s mouth clacked open and then closed with another clack.

‘What’s that you say, Mr Punch? I should ask for her name? Oh, I couldn’t. She might bite my head off.’

‘Okay,’ said Jenna, ‘you’ve made your point. But you know, it’s not often anybody from Brand and Marketing deigns to visit us lowly types down here.’ She should have known which department he was from. With his boyishly grinning face and collar-length curly hair, he had the look of having been ordered straight from central casting to fulfil the role of creative geek.

‘Lowly types?’ he repeated. ‘You have to be kidding; we live in fear of you lawyers, you’re all so scarily smart and grown-up. And we know what you think of us, that we’re nothing but a bunch of hyperactive toddlers let loose with a box of Sharpies.’

‘In that case, I hope I haven’t disabused you of our reputation.’

‘Quite the contrary, your reputation remains fully intact, if not further venerated. I shall report back to the others, who, when I left them, were scribbling on the walls while waiting for a responsible adult to read them their home-time story.’ He paused, then directed his words to the puppet in his hand. ‘What’s that, Mr Punch, I still haven’t asked for her name? Do you think I should risk it? It could be dangerous. There again, I’m inclined to think her name might be Mrs Tiggy-Winkle, what with all the prickliness.’

The puppet nodded and unnervingly swivelled its head to look at Jenna, its large unblinking eyes as direct as those of Blake Darnell.

‘Mr Punch, tell your friend my name is Jenna Fielding,’ she said, and with a meaningful tap of a finger against her watch, added, ‘and I’d be obliged if he went about his business, as I have a train to catch.’

Chapter Five

Her dignity entirely abandoned, Rachel had to run like the wind to make it to the platform, and after making her way through a string of crowded carriages she eventually found the one in which Jenna was sitting.

‘Made it,’ she gasped, just as the train began to pull out of the station.

‘Yes, and by the skin of your ...’ – Jenna did a double take – ‘of your amazingly white teeth.’

Shoving her weekend bag into the rack above their seat, Rachel flopped breathlessly into the seat beside her friend. She smiled exaggeratedly, giving Jenna a proud flash of her teeth. ‘I had them done this afternoon,’ she said, ‘that’s why I was late. I thought I’d never get out of that dentist’s chair. Nearly two hours I was there with nothing to do but have a laser blasting away at my teeth. It was insanely boring!’

‘I expect that’s the longest you’ve ever been quiet, isn’t it?’

‘Oh, hello, Little Miss Snappy, what’s got into you? Bad day?’

‘Not especially.’

‘What then? Come on, I could do with a good laugh after being bored out of my mind.’

‘You’re killing me with your concern.’

Rachel laughed, and knowing that everyone jammed into the packed carriage would be deaf to their conversation – either they were talking on their mobiles or they had their ears plugged with headphones – she urged her friend to say what was bothering her. Because no amount of denial from Jenna would persuade her that nothing was wrong; she could see it in the set of her face, and hear it in the terseness of her voice.

Having known each other since forever, and with only a year's difference in age – Jenna was thirty-five and Rachel was thirty-four – they were as close as sisters, which meant they knew each other's moods through and through, as well as their likes and their dislikes, and what irritated them. They could also be completely honest with one another without ever causing offence. Jenna was definitely the more sensible and measured of the two of them, and hated not to be taken seriously, whereas Rachel was wildly impulsive and unguarded, and rarely took anything seriously, least of all herself.

'Did somebody at work annoy you today?' she pressed.

'Kind of,' said Jenna. 'But it's not important.'

'If you don't tell me, I won't tell you why I had my teeth whitened. And don't lie to me that you couldn't care less, I can see you can barely contain yourself.'

Jenna smiled. 'Whatever the reason, I'm sure it's a lot more interesting than me making an idiot of myself this afternoon.'

'Ooh, made a Charlie of yourself, did you? Sounds good.' Rachel wrestled a bag of Haribo Tangfastics out of the jumble of her handbag on her lap. 'I love nothing better than hearing about someone else making a fool of themselves. Makes me feel so much better about my own shortcomings.' She shook the bag under Jenna's nose.

'He called me Mrs Tiggy-Winkle,' Jenna said, after Rachel had listened to Jenna's account of embarrassing herself. 'I mean, come on, *me*, Mrs Tiggy-Winkle! Can you believe the cheek of him?'

'Yes, I can. Jenna, you're the prickliest person I know.'

'I am *not*!'

'There you go, defensive prickles out with hardly a prod from me. You do it all the time. But what annoyed you most about the guy? Was he hot? Was that it?'

Jenna helped herself to another sweet. 'I didn't notice what he looked like.'

'You so did. That's why you're annoyed. You failed to make a good impression on him. That's the rub of it, isn't it?'

'I had no intention of making a good impression on him.'

Anyway, haven't you forgotten, I took a vow of no more office relationships after Giles?'

'Well, if you ask me—'

'Something I'd never do,' Jenna cut in.

Rachel tutted. 'But if you did, I'd put to you the question – why are you so bothered by what he called you?'

'I'm cross because I behaved like such a cliché, like one of those pathetic girls in rom coms who meets an attractive man, takes a dislike to him and then surprise, surprise, falls for him. It's the plot of far too many books or films.'

Rachel laughed. 'I've heard you say some crass things over the years, but that's award-winning. I notice you used the word *attractive*, so using our unfailingly accurate hot-ometer, and assuming Kit Harrington and Tygh Runyan are still scoring an outright ten, what does this guy score?'

'I don't know.'

Rachel gave the bag of Haribos a shake. 'No more sweets until you've rated him.'

'If it'll make you leave me alone – a seven.'

'Are you sure?'

Jenna rolled her eyes. 'At a pinch an eight. And I mean, a pinch.' She indicated just how small a pinch with her thumb and forefinger.

'Which coming from you is a generous ten in my book. What's his name?'

'Blake Darnell.'

'*Nooo!* That's a made-up name if ever it was. Oh, my sparkling white teeth! This gets better by the second. Tell me more.'

'No, it stops right now. And since you've extracted every last mortifying detail out of me, explain about your teeth. Should you be consuming sugary sweets so soon after having them done?'

Rachel shrugged and popped another one in her mouth. 'A girl's gotta eat.'

'Hmmm . . . and the reason for this act of vanity, which doubtless cost a middling-sized fortune, would be what exactly?'

'In readiness for meeting my in-laws.'

Her hand poised over the bag of Haribos, Jenna looked at Rachel, her face wearing a satisfying expression of surprise. 'In-laws? Have you gone off and got married in secret?'

'You know as well as I do, that's never going to happen. When I marry you'll know all about it because you'll be helping to organise it, as well as being my chief bridesmaid.'

'Yeah, that's right, I'll be in charge of half a dozen bridesmaids following you up the aisle and we'll all be forced to wear hideous claret-coloured dresses with emerald green sashes.'

Rachel grimaced. 'I think you're describing your own distasteful wedding day. But to answer your question, I'm meeting Paul's parents for the first time next weekend.'

'For that you've had your teeth whitened?'

'I want to make a good impression.' She saw the disapproving expression on Jenna's face. 'There's nothing wrong in wanting to look my best.'

'Rachel, you always look your best. You couldn't look anything *but* your best. Are you nervous about meeting them?'

'Not at all. Well, maybe a little. But only because it's important.'

'How important?'

'I think it's a sign that Paul is getting serious, that, you know, he's finally over his ex and isn't worried that our relationship is a rebound thing. It's a step in the right direction, and after I've met his parents, I'll take him home to meet Mum and Dad. Mum's been on at me for ages to meet him.'

Jenna's expression had switched from disapproving to dubious. 'Remind me,' she said, 'you've been a couple for what, six months, or is it longer?'

'Six months and twenty-one days.'

'Not that you're counting. So it's taken him this long to figure out you're easily the greatest thing to come into his life?'

'Are you going to be like this all weekend, putting a downer on everything? No wonder that bloke in the office called you prickly!'

'I'm sorry. And I seem to be saying that a lot today. I don't know what's the matter with me.'

Rachel sniggered. 'I do. You're not getting any sex, that's your problem.'

'Oh, tell everyone on the train why don't you?' hissed Jenna, looking around the carriage to see if anyone had heard.

Her voice low, Rachel said, 'It's true though, isn't it?'

'I'd sooner put up with celibacy than be stuck with the wrong man,' responded Jenna, turning to look out of the window.

Rachel took it as her cue to keep quiet, which she'd be the first to say wasn't easy for her. Nor was letting somebody else have the last word. She pulled out the paperback she'd brought with her; it was one of her mother's book club choices and so far she was finding it heavy going. Secretly she preferred the type of book Jenna had earlier dismissed. She liked to be entertained, not lectured or preached at.

Some time later, when the train stopped at Manningtree and the carriage emptied by half, and she'd read the same page several times over, Rachel gave up on the book. Next to her Jenna had her laptop out and appeared to be working. Rachel rarely worked outside of the office if she could help it. Or even inside the office if she could get away with it. She wasn't a dedicated career girl like Jenna; her job in the HR department of an insurance firm was a means to an end; it paid the bills and enabled her to indulge in her favourite pastime, that of online shopping.

Recently work interested her less and less; she was, to put it bluntly, waiting for the next stage in her life to begin. She wanted a husband – or a committed partner – and a family, and not necessarily in that order. Without realising it was happening, she had reached an age when she desperately wanted a baby. Her treacherous hormones screamed out for one, made her do crazy things like look longingly at toddlers in pushchairs, or had her staring gooey-eyed at tiny babies strapped to their fathers' chests. She had even started browsing baby clothes online, which had to be a browse too far. Not a word of this had she dared so much as hint at to Paul. If he knew how fast and loudly her body clock was ticking, he'd probably run a mile.

She closed her eyes and thinking of Paul and the all-important meeting with his parents next weekend, she gave herself up to the familiar fantasy of her wedding – of the pretty church at Linston decked out with flowers, and the boat to take her along the river to Linston End where there would be a fabulous marquee on the lawn.

The sun always shone in her wedding dream, nothing ever went wrong or was overlooked. There were no last-minute nerves, no bride jilted at the altar, no hung-over groom who could barely stand, no bickering amongst the guests, no best man getting drunk and throwing up in the shrubbery or getting off with the bridesmaids in the bushes.

At the centre of this wedding perfection would be Rachel and the love of her life shimmying elegantly across the dance floor, fairy lights twinkling, music playing, her friends and family looking on with indulgent tears in their eyes as they watched the happy couple perform their first dance – the first dance of the rest of their lives together.

Over the years the shape and style of the wedding dress in the dream might have altered with the change in taste and fashion, along with the groom – Leonardo DiCaprio had been her long-standing fantasy husband, followed by Keanu Reeves and Jude Law – but the one essential ingredient that was always the same was Linston End. It had started as a joke with Alastair and Orla that that was where she would one day have her wedding reception, but now she couldn't imagine her big day taking place anywhere else.

'What do you suppose it is that Uncle Alastair wants to tell us?'

At Jenna's question, Rachel opened her eyes. 'I don't know, but Mum reckons he might have met somebody while he was away.'

'Mine said the same.'

'Do you believe it?'

Jenna shook her head. 'He and Orla were such an amazing couple together, I can't picture him with anybody else, can you?'

‘No more than I could imagine my dad with another woman, or yours.’

They both winced at the thought.

‘Then what else could it be that he wants to share with us all this weekend? What couldn’t he just say on the phone to our parents for instance?’ asked Jenna.

With a shrug of her shoulders, Rachel said, ‘You’re the one with the brains; I’ll leave it to you to come up with something. I have more important things to do.’

‘Such as?’

For answer, Rachel held up her mobile in front of her face, and instead of sucking in her cheeks as she normally did for a selfie, she smiled the biggest smile she could. ‘I’m going to send this to Paul and see if he notices my lovely shiny white teeth.’

‘What’s he up to this weekend while you’re away?’ Jenna enquired, after Rachel had shown her the photo and hit send.

‘Wishing he was with me, of course.’

‘Of course,’ said Jenna, ‘how could he not?’

Seconds later Rachel’s mobile pinged with a text. But it wasn’t from Paul; it was from her brother, Callum.

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