

May bank-holiday weekend 2002

Perfect, golden days. How many of them do you truly live in a year? Or a lifetime?

This had been one.

Georgina pulled her sweater around her and leant her head on the ticking cushion, reflecting that, in this moment, she felt so happy she could sob. After everything that had happened to her in the last few years, everything she and Phil had been through, to be here, now, with these people, feeling this way, seemed absolutely miraculous. She had never thought she'd be so contented – that life would feel so . . . right. She looked around the firepit at the others, taking it all in, determined to remember every detail – a snapshot of joy for her memory.

She was drunk, of course. Well, tipsy, at least. She hardly drank these days, so three decent glasses did the trick. Georgie felt delightfully woozy. And woozily delighted. She was a lightweight compared to the others, as the growing army of empty bottles beside the bin in the big kitchen testified.

Someone had pulled a CD player to the open window

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behind them, and there was music now. ‘Dancing in the Moonlight’. And they were.

The whole day had had a filmic quality – like they were all stars in a wholesome movie about happy families and good friends. Georgie had thrown herself into it wholeheartedly, but also kept finding herself on the periphery, watching, soaking it in. She’d brought the clever digital camera Phil had bought her and taken hundreds of pictures, the lens lending her that precious distance. The weather had been spectacular – the May bank holiday showing off, in the twenties all day, and staying warm into the evening. There’d been rounders on the beach, the kids like a Boden catalogue in their stripy towelling hoodies, sandy sandwiches and fizzy drinks, kept cool, Enid Blyton style, in rock pools, crabbing and sandcastles in the afternoon, adults snoozing in turn, unread Saturday papers blowing in the breeze. And then a straggling, sun-kissed parade to the old-fashioned ice-cream van halfway up the hill towards home, twenty 99s with a Flake for simplicity. Splashy, giggly, bubbly baths for the kids, and enormous gins for the parents, while someone fired up a rusty old barbecue and the men got serious about the business of grilling sausages and burgers. And then, sated, pink-nosed and sleepy, the kids had sprawled in various degrees of consciousness in front of a Disney film, and eventually were marshalled into beds or settled top to toe on sofas and piled cushions.

And now the grown-ups were sitting around the firepit, lolling on rickety teak loungers and plastic deck-chairs, sharing scratchy blankets that smelt of mildew

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and mothballs. In the absence of light pollution beyond the embers of the fire, someone who knew about stars was pointing out the constellations, and a few people pretended, good-naturedly, to listen.

It felt, to her, like she'd been initiated today. She was in this club. They were all founder members. If she was honest with herself, even though this was May and she'd known these people since the previous September, she'd had imposter syndrome almost up until this weekend. She wasn't, couldn't be, entirely sure she and Phil belonged with this gilded group. They were very ordinary people. She'd always thought so. It wasn't pejorative. At least, she didn't mean it to be. Not dull, she'd hoped, but ordinary nonetheless. She'd had what were almost crushes on these women she'd met at the nursery and school gates, and slowly, carefully, got to know over the last few months.

Sarah, with her glossy Anna Wintour bob and her perfect shell-pink manicure, was so in control, but then she had taught at the school for years, and she knew everybody and everything. She was the leader, the planner. She made things happen, even this weekend, although this house wasn't hers. She seemed so perpetually sussed. Never late. Always prepared for cake sales and World Book Day. Her husband Dom was equally together and organized. Even the man's hairline was exquisitely neat, and his blue linen shirt didn't seem to have wrinkled all day. Across from her, talking animatedly, Phil, also in linen, looked like an unmade bed. It was the way she liked him, but still.

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Natalie and Kit were so arty and bohemian: so unmarried, unstructured and unruly. They'd started the dancing, and it was definitely bordering on the dirty kind. You felt almost like you shouldn't watch them. Natalie had the sort of untamed curly hair, the glossy kind that oozed sexy and made women like Georgie try perms. When she grew impatient with it and piled it on her head, secured with a pencil or, once, a twig from the playground, it just stayed there, and looked like she'd come straight from a modelling shoot.

Their laid-back hosts Annie and Rupert – the Hawthreys – were so posh they were almost aliens. Easily the grandest people she'd ever known. Apparently this house, this effortlessly glorious coastal home they were all in now, was where Annie had spent summers for most of her life, messing about on boats with her long brown legs and boys from Eton and Harrow. This weekend – this extraordinary, pinch-yourself weekend – was just a regular Saturday and Sunday for her.

Flick was just wild and funny. Her husband Andrew was the only one who'd seemed distracted during the day they'd just shared – his Nokia mobile phone kept ringing and she'd seen him several times circling by the groyne, holding it aloft, an expression of exasperation on his face. Flick just teased him, and he didn't seem to mind: he'd grin, throw the phone on a pile of towels, and give the kids three or four minutes of high adrenalin attention, bellowing, and swinging whoever was nearest over his shoulder, before he went back to the phone. They'd been married less than a year, she remembered.

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You could see the newlywed sparkle between them – the tenderness. His proud eyes followed her everywhere she walked. Or swayed. She'd definitely drunk the most, of the women at least, but it didn't make her sloppy or embarrassing, like a fourth glass might have made Georgie. She just became her funnier.

Vanessa and Ross seemed terribly clever. Properly intellectual. The type who read more than one newspaper, even on weekdays, and listened to Radio 4 instead of Radio 2. They'd met at Cambridge, she knew. She imagined all their other friends were professors and junior government ministers and book editors. Georgie was pretty sure she wasn't smart enough to get into a serious conversation with them. She wasn't quite as sure who made her feel that way – was it them, or did she do it to herself?

But here she was. Here they were, the three of them, her, Phil and Liam, curled up now under a crochet blanket on an ancient green velvet chaise-longue at the foot of the bed in the room they'd been given. Liam, her beautiful and precious little boy, with his ginger curls and his dusting of pale freckles, was, it seemed, her golden ticket into this particular club.

They wouldn't have been her friends at school or university, these women – she was sure of it. She'd have envied them, imitated them, admired them, maybe even despised them.

It was different for the guys. Men didn't evaluate, didn't keep score. Not in the same way, she thought. They might all have been on the same football team, or

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propping up the same bar, and it would have been easier for them to be friends. An architect, a designer, a doctor, an entrepreneur, a house-husband and an insurance broker walk into a bar . . . They'd fallen, it seemed, into a quick and easy, matey friendship. If they had less in common than their wives – maybe if they *only* had in common those wives, their children and their postcodes – it didn't seem so obvious.

It was always more complicated for women. It always had been. But then Liam had been lined up between Natalie's Stella and Annie's Louis, and been invited to play with Vanessa's Daisy, and shared a lift to Sarah's Dylan's birthday party with Flick's Zoë. And over a few months, via dozens of playdates, a hundred cups of tea, and a Christmas fair committee, all this had happened, and now they were 'a gang'. She'd even used the word, on the phone to her mother, turning down an invitation to stay for the bank holiday. 'We'd have loved to, but we're away with the gang.'

And there were years to come. Years and years. These children would grow up together. And these people were going to be her friends. Hers and Phil's. She wanted to savour every moment, but at the same time, she couldn't wait. And it could only get better, right?

Spring: This Year

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‘Cheers!’ Six champagne flutes clinked. Annie always added, ‘Chin chin,’ because she was posh, and, with Natalie, it was a dramatic ‘*Na zdorovie*’, in a deep Russian accent, not because she was Russian but because she was, well, dramatic. These were the things you knew about people when you’d been drinking with them for almost twenty years. Celebrating, commiserating, commemorating. You’d notice if they didn’t do it, but you didn’t particularly notice when they did.

‘To Phoebe.’ This was a beaming Sarah, the orchestrator. ‘To Phoebe and her James.’

‘To Phoebe and her gorgeous James. And to the perfect wedding going off without a hitch this summer,’ Vanessa added.

Flick, her eyes closed, raised her empty hand towards the heavens, fingers crossed. ‘Amen to that.’ Then laughed her raucous, loud laugh.

‘How is Andrew?’ Georgie asked.

‘If that poor gorgeous man hasn’t had an aneurysm by August I for one will be very sodding surprised.’ Flick laughed and rolled her eyes.

‘Sssh. Don’t even joke.’ Georgie always shushed superstitiously, especially about health, which was not a laughing matter. *That*, she knew, was her thing. She

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wondered if they would miss it if she didn't do it. Probably not.

Flick laughed again, that contagious, easy, throaty chuckle. She put her hand on Georgie's arm. 'Oh, he's fine, honey. Don't worry about him. Truthfully, he's in his element. Loving it. He's got staff.' She made air quote marks. 'The marquee people, the flower people, the booze people, he's running his own little wedding business already and he hasn't had this much fun since he retired, which I always said he'd done too early, by the way. He's got a flippin' clipboard. At this point, as you well know, it's less a wedding, more a project. And they've only been engaged five minutes. Pity me . . .'

The other women nodded entirely without pity. This information did not surprise them. They'd all known Andrew a long time. The kids had in fact been engaged for almost a month now, although this was the first time the five of them had been able to get together, using the happy news to hook on a day at the spa. Flick put her spare hand on Sarah's arm this time, and patted her appreciatively. 'That's why I'm so eternally grateful to you, Sarah, for setting up today. When I woke up this morning and realized I'd be luxuriating in a delightful spa with my best girlfriends instead of spending another Saturday with the dreaded lever arch file, listening to a twenty-minute discussion of whether or not the hornbeams in the tent should all, in fact, be ten or fifteen feet tall, I was bloody ecstatic.'

'There are going to be real hornbeams in the marquee? Seriously?' Vanessa was wide-eyed.

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Flick rolled her eyes. ‘There are indeed. Four of them. More in the church.’

‘Blimey.’ Georgie couldn’t help wondering what they had cost. What it would all cost. One person’s wedding day, another person’s two-storey extension . . .

‘Poor Andrew. It’s a very short engagement by modern standards.’ The wedding date was set for August. ‘Brides usually need a year. Some venues are booked out for two.’

‘Ah, the beauty of having it at home, and a lucky break at the church. Which may or may not have been an unlucky break for someone else, since it was a cancellation, but let’s not dwell. And poor Andrew my arse. Absolutely no need for sympathy. He’s in his element.’

‘Still, though, there’s not long for all the other stuff. I’m seriously impressed he’s managing to put it all together so fast.’

‘People will think it’s a shotgun wedding.’ Annie giggled.

‘Annie! So old-fashioned!’

‘Is it, though?’

Flick smiled. ‘Nope. They’re far too sensible for that kind of mistake. Far too work-oriented, too, I should think. Just two crazy-in-love kids in a hurry, so far as I know. And I was there when she chose the dress – and it’s *not* an Empire line. It’s definitely the sexy side of demure, barely room for her breakfast, let alone a baby bump.’

‘All right, Hercule Poirot. I for one think long engagements are unnecessary. When you know, you know.’

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‘I couldn’t agree more.’ Flick nodded heartily. ‘I mean, I was engaged to Craig for years.’ Craig had been her first husband, her daughter Zoë’s dad. ‘Marriage lasted considerably less time than the engagement. Andrew, I met and married within a year. You’d think I’d have been more cautious, maybe. But, like you say, when you know, you know. With Craig, hand on heart, I’m not sure I’d had that moment of absolute certainty. With Andrew, absolutely. And we’re still married, twenty-odd years later.’

‘My mum and dad made me wait, but only because I was so young.’ They all knew Annie had been married at twenty-three. They all knew most of those things about each other. ‘I’d have married him after our first date, though.’ They knew that too. Knew that Annie tended to live her life in a Georgette Heyer haze. Rupert was a good man, though – on that they would all agree. And for all his male bluster, just as sappy about his wife as she was about him.

‘We saved up for the deposit on a house first.’ Georgie smiled, tongue in cheek. ‘Sensible.’

‘Nothing wrong with sensible,’ Vanessa chimed in. ‘It would be better if kids thought that way these days. Saving up for stuff – not really a thing for some of them, I’m afraid. Too many gadgets and clothes and exotic holidays to go on.’

‘God, we sound old and judgy.’

‘We *are* old and judgy.’

‘Speak for yourself . . .’ Flick hoicked her considerable bosom up in the swimsuit that was cut for someone maybe two or three cup sizes smaller. ‘I’m just judgy.’

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They all laughed.

Then it was back to the wedding, for Annie at least. ‘Are there going to be fireworks?’

Flick nodded. ‘I bloody love fireworks. Only the noisy ones, mind you. I like a bang.’

The others raised their eyebrows at Flick’s very obvious innuendo, but didn’t take the bait. It was too exhausting.

Flick continued, ‘I believe a ten-minute display, along the back fence, at going-home time, is under discussion.’

‘Which is? Going-home time, I mean. Are we talking all-nighter?’

‘Carriages, dahling . . .’ she made her voice much more posh than it was ‘. . . are at midnight, I think. Half past? Something like that. We’ll have been at it all day. Not sure I could keep going all night. As I left, someone was being commissioned to write out all the timings and stuff on a pallet in modern calligraphy, whatever that is. They’re having a monogram, you know!’ Flick drank again, deeply, and snorted.

Annie clapped her hands in delight. ‘Well, I can’t wait. It all sounds amazing. I love weddings. All weddings. But what was it that Simon Callow says in the film? You know. About the weddings of people you really love being the best. And we *really* love Phoebe.’ Poor Annie should have had a daughter to go with her three strapping sons. She, perhaps more than any of them, was the quintessential mother of the bride and, ironically, she would never get to be one.

Phoebe, Andrew’s daughter, and Flick’s step, although no one had ever used or even considered the distinction,

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was adorable. She'd been sweet-natured all her life. Always a peacemaker. The sort of kid who always sat with the child who was on their own.

'She's the first, too,' Annie added, before she remembered Natalie's elder daughter. 'Apart from Temple, of course.'

If they were honest, they didn't all love Temple in the same way. But, then, they didn't really know her. Natalie's daughter Temple was the oldest of all their children by some years. She was already married, to Max, and had been for a couple of years now. She and Natalie's youngest child, Arlo, just eight years old now, were 'the outliers'. The other thirteen kids ranged from seventeen to twenty-five, and they had always been treated by everyone as an amorphous body of child. This group of mothers and fathers had been the village that raised them. You wiped a nose, and even a bottom, if it needed doing, regardless of parentage. You fed whoever was in your kitchen at teatime, and you drove however many kids you could fit into your car wherever you were going. That was how it had been, the glorious, chaotic magic of it. Temple had already been a prickly teenager when the group had met and become a gang. Her nose piercing and her pink hair and her unbiddable psyche had seemed so alien to the rest of them, still dressing very small children in stripes and Start-Rite shoes, never imagining a time when they might not be in control and able to fix everything that went wrong.

For Temple's part, she had viewed them all, over the years, with cool detachment, which occasionally veered

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into disdain and even embarrassment. She had a cool dad, and he lived in London, where she preferred to be. She'd always been on the periphery, although she'd grown up to be a warmer and easier person than her teenage demeanour had promised, and she and Natalie, they knew, adored each other. Arlo, nine years younger than his next nearest in age, had been the bonus baby they'd all cooed over and loved a cuddle with while silently grateful they weren't being kept up at night and still carrying a pantechicon of gear wherever they went. Natalie had bookended the group with the oldest and the youngest child. By rights she ought to look the oldest, or at least the most knackered. She was lucky they didn't hate her because she looked neither.

'And we weren't at Temple and Max's wedding.'

'Even I only just made the cut for Temple's wedding,' Natalie joked. Georgie remembered the photographs of an achingly cool Shoreditch warehouse celebration – all neon signs, houseplants and smoke bombs.

'Do you think they'll all get married? Eventually? That we've got years and years of lovely weddings ahead of us?' Annie looked hopeful.

'I doubt it.' Natalie sounded cynical. 'Statistically speaking. Isn't marriage dead?'

'I thought it was making a comeback.'

'Nope.' Vanessa shook her head. No one ever questioned Vanessa's authority on issues like this. There was just a general assumption that she'd be right. 'Marriages are going down, have been for years. But, then, so are the number of divorces. Falling fast.'

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‘Well, we’re relentlessly happily married, aren’t we? Bucking the trend, this little group. Just me, huh, in this gang?’ Flick was laughing. ‘The one scandalous divorcee . . .’

‘Ah.’ Natalie raised one eyebrow. ‘You all forget Kit and I aren’t married.’

‘That’s *right*.’

‘We *do* forget that . . .’

‘I wasn’t married before either, so I’ve never done the engagement thing, the wedding thing, the divorce thing, none of it.’

It was odd, when you thought about it. Natalie was the most obvious centre-of-attention person of all of them, although she had some competition from Flick. But then she was, too, the least conventional. The most bohemian.

‘You *seem* married,’ Annie persisted.

Natalie laughed.

‘Has Kit ever asked you?’ Sarah sounded surprised as she spoke. A new question. A missing piece of information. That felt rare to them all – they could mostly tell each other’s stories.

Natalie laughed again. ‘Once or twice.’

‘And you turned him down?’

Natalie waved a hand. ‘Oh, they weren’t exactly conventional proposals. There was never a bended knee or a ring or anything like that. Nothing to turn down. Not Kit’s style, maybe, but I suppose I never really thought he was serious.’ She shrugged, and she was smiling, although a careful observer might have thought it was a

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weaker, less genuine expression than before, with less sparkle in the eye.

‘Too bourgeois for you both, maybe,’ Georgie supplied.

Natalie winked. ‘Totally.’

‘So . . . five of us relentlessly happily married, bucking trends all over the shop, one relentlessly bohemian unmarried –’

‘And the one wicked stepmother, to boot.’

‘Less of the wicked, thank you.’ Everyone knew Flick adored Phoebe, the daughter she’d taken on when she married Andrew. Phoebe had been six years old, all doe eyes and crazy curls, and ridiculously easy to love. Andrew had often joked that Flick only married him for his daughter, although Flick had had one of her own – Zoë – just three years younger. She always concurred.

Everyone was suddenly reminded, amid the joking, that Phoebe’s mum, Samantha, wouldn’t be there for any of the planning or the day itself, and the mood quietened almost imperceptibly. She’d died when Phoebe was born, from a haemorrhage so swift and so catastrophic that she’d barely seen her daughter. They hadn’t known her, of course. It sounded so unlikely, so Victorian, to die in childbirth. No doubt Vanessa could have produced some statistics on how often it still happened, but it horrified them, nonetheless. And it was deeply sad for Phoebe – they all felt that on her behalf. Held at bay, most of the time, by Flick, and the family she’d created of the four of them, but something that reared its head on certain days and some occasions, so that they lived

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happily as a cohesive, bonded four, but with the faint shadow of a fifth person always behind them.

Flick's face softened: she knew what they were all thinking, because she'd been thinking it for weeks, ever since they'd made their announcement at Sunday lunch, James standing up formally and putting his hand on Phoebe's shoulder, although he'd obtained Andrew's permission a week before over a pint in the pub, dear old-fashioned boy that he was.

'I've been thinking about it too. About how to make her feel her mum's presence on the day. Andrew too. I think that's why he's working so damn hard for her. I know I make fun of him, but he's not just doing it for himself, or because he loves a project, or even for Phoebe, bless her. He's doing it for Samantha. I know she's there with him in every decision. Phoebe's grandparents will be there, of course, and Sam's brother and his lot. And she'll be wearing Samantha's veil.'

'Aw. That's so lovely.'

'It's beautiful, thank goodness. Stunning Chantilly lace. It'll go great with the dress she chose. It's plain, the veil is fancy. They're gorgeous together. And of course Phoebe is shaped like bloody Gisele Bündchen, so that helps . . . And after we went for the first fitting last week, I took the dressmaker Sam's wedding ring and she's going to sew it into the bodice – it's got all those corset stays, you know, boning stuff. The ring is going to be sewn over Phoebe's left boob, over her heart, with a tiny piece of blue ribbon.' Flick patted her own bosom. 'She

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doesn't know yet. I'm not even sure she knew her dad had kept it for her all these years.'

'God's sake.' Annie's eyes had filled with tears. 'Tell the poor girl the day before, will you? Give her a chance to have a cry before she gets her make-up done.'

She put her arm around Flick and kissed the top of her head. 'That's lovely.' Flick leant against her friend for a moment, then shook her off, rubbed her eyes, and sniffed.

'Enough of that, you sappy bugger. Always you with the waterworks. Who wants to try the thalassotherapy? I've been writing articles all week. The knots in my neck have knots. And I'm banning the subject of the wedding from this point on. We *do* have other things to talk about. We have our own lives, you know!'

'And we have Dorfest to plan.'

'My very favourite weekend of the year!'

'All our favourite.' If there were dissenters in the group, they wouldn't have said so.

They'd done it every year since 2002, the first time they'd all gone to the Hawtreys' place by the sea. Annie's tentative suggestion that they repeat the exercise across the May bank holiday of 2003 had been leapt upon eagerly, and by 2005 it was, it seemed, an inviolate feature in all their diaries – it had become Dorfest at around the same time, the name coined by no one remembered who, but it had stuck. Apart from 2009 when Ross's appendix had burst the week before, so the Powells had missed, and 2011 when business had kept Andrew away, although Flick was there, they'd spent the same weekend

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together every year since. For a few years, Annie had half dreaded someone dropping out, but no one ever had.

It had most often, although not exclusively, been the Hawthreys' holiday home that they returned to, and they had loved being part of a big marauding gang. They'd slept, or not slept, in two big tents erected on the lawn, delightedly feral. In recent years, their offspring had inevitably faded away, building their own lives, and now it was just the twelve of them, and the world was their oyster.

Planning for the next year began over a few bottles of red around the table at the one before. No one remembered who'd suggested they go *away*-away, but everyone had keenly agreed. Empty nests didn't need feathering, and it was a novelty to make plans that didn't require elaborate childcare arrangements. Natalie, who still had Arlo at home, also had Kit's sister Maggie, who had never married or had children and worshipped her brother's, but especially Arlo, whom she often babysat. He was usually more excited for the weekend than they were. So they were free. The Eurostar to Bruges, beer and mussels, the train to Edinburgh, last year cheap easyJet seats to Barcelona and a sweltering tour of the Gaudí cathedral, which reduced Annie to speechless tears. Like so many things in the life of their friendship, a rhythm had imposed itself – one year they stayed in England, braving whatever the bank-holiday weather in Dorset offered up, the next, a city break. In part, this arrangement reflected the fondness they all had for the

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Hawtreys' home, and the memories it held, but also it relieved the financial pressure some may have felt – Dorset with a boot full of food and supermarket wine was a good deal cheaper than flights, hotels and restaurants in a European capital.

This year was to be a Dorset year.

'The long-range forecast is crack the flags.'

'It's a while off yet. The long-range forecast is almost always hopeless. You can't predict weather months out.'

'Nah. Not this time.' Natalie spoke in Betty Boop's voice. 'It's gonna be gawjus . . .'

'Sunscreen and raincoats then.'

'I'm bringing the picnic stuff.'

'I'll do cakes and brownies.'

'Didn't I say I'd do salads?'

'Hey, don't start making lists when we're in this hot tub. I need to write stuff down . . .'

They all laughed, and someone sent a spray of water at Sarah, who always wrote stuff down.

It was dusk when they hugged goodbye and got into their own cars to drive home. Natalie let them all go first. Windows were down, and her friends drove away, their waves and kisses, and see-you-soons fading on the breeze. They'd had a good time – they always had a good time. Her skin had that faintly medicinal herbal-spa smell to it, and her nails were neat and shiny from the manicure as she stared at them on the steering wheel in the dying light.

She minded that she felt melancholy. It had been a long time since Natalie had thought about not being married to Kit. And a long time since she'd lied to her friends. Actually, maybe she'd never lied about something important, just told the little white ones everyone told.

But today she had lied. The truth was that Kit had never asked her to marry him. Properly or not. And she wasn't sure why she had felt she needed to lie.

There'd never seemed anything sinister about it. Kit had had been in two long-term relationships before her, the second of which had ended about eighteen months before they'd met – and he hadn't been married to either of those women. His parents – both dead now – had been happily married for at least fifty years so there was

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no dark, twisted antipathy towards the institution. His sister Maggie hadn't married, but Natalie hadn't tried to add two and two to make five out of that. You could hardly have accused him of fear of commitment. Their lives were tightly, inextricably woven together, just like those of the others. Like they had all said, Kit and Natalie *seemed* married. Their home – the house here and the tiny flat they kept in London – were jointly owned, they had shared bank accounts, children together, all of whom he'd wanted and welcomed. Well, he'd perhaps taken a bit of persuading to feel enthusiastic about Arlo, who was born when Kit was fifty-five. But once the boy was here, he'd loved him as easily, and as completely, as he had Stella and Marley before him. It wasn't the same with Temple, but Temple wasn't his and she understood that. Or, at least, she tried to. No – their lives were undeniably as enmeshed and intertwined as any of the others'. It had, apparently, just never been about marriage.

She'd come to the relationship with Temple in tow. Perhaps she had let go of girlish dreams when her daughter had arrived and things had fallen apart with Temple's father, Toby. It was hard to remember now.

She'd thought he was going to ask her – just once. After Stella was born. Hers had been a relatively straightforward birth – much easier and quicker than Temple's had been nine years earlier. Then, she'd had a firm but kind Scottish midwife who had assured her, when she first got to the ward, that really young women gave birth like shelling peas and she'd be grand. She'd gone off shift, was back on again the next day before Temple was

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eventually delivered by ventouse, had wiped her patient's brow admiringly and apologized for her false promise as the young doctor sewed Natalie up. 'But, oh, you were a brave wee lass.'

Natalie was cynical of the proclamations midwives made about second babies, and had expected the same with Stella, who had slithered obligingly into the world three hours after her waters had broken in the freezer aisle of Waitrose. Ordinarily they'd have all been allowed to leave the hospital later the same day, but Stella had a touch of jaundice and they wanted to keep her overnight, just as a precaution. Dads were sent home, and Natalie had been able to take a glorious hot bath, and even sleep, so she remembered feeling like a serene, even beautiful Victorian new mother, in a fresh and pretty nightdress, with combed hair and clean teeth, when Kit had come back in the morning. He'd burst in with an enormous bunch of the palest pink roses, the ones he knew she loved far more than red ones, and a tiny Cartier box. She'd been surprised to feel her heart leap with girlish excitement. It was a beautiful pair of diamond stud earrings. She recalled a quick swoop of disappointment, a tightening in her chest. But then the lovely midwife had wheeled a tiny Stella in, and put her glorious baby in her arms, and it had been, of course, pushed far back into the recesses of her mind by more visceral and real things. She didn't look for a box after Marley, or after Arlo. And it went away, the vague feeling of somehow being unfinished. How could they be? They were a family, and that was so much more than a couple, wasn't it?

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She could have asked him, and she'd thought about it from time to time. But why would you ask someone who was so clearly uninterested in the institution? There were points, she was sure, when he would have said yes. But then she'd never have known whether he was agreeing for the right reasons, and she told herself she didn't want that. So she put it away. The way you needed to put things away to make stuff work. The way everyone did.

They'd last talked about marriage several years ago, just after Temple had announced to her over tapas one Saturday afternoon that she and Max, her boyfriend of just less than a year, were engaged. Her daughter had giggled delightedly, uncharacteristically uncool in the moment, and waggled her left hand across the *patatas bravas*. Natalie felt tears springing to her eyes. The ring was as unconventional and as beautiful as she was – a big cabochon aquamarine on a narrow gold band, with tiny pavé diamonds sparkling unevenly around the edge. It was far too big, and kept sliding around her finger towards her palm – Temple had already developed the habit of twisting it back into place. Her eyes had been bright with tears of her own, and alight with joy, and Natalie had found herself unprepared for the clash of emotion the sight evoked in her. Her happiness was contagiously bright, but for Natalie it was tempered with uncertainty about Max as her daughter's choice, with a tiny stab of sadness at this underscoring of her child's adulthood, and something else, something she was surprised to realize was envy.

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Kit's reaction to the news when she got home from lunch and told him had been characteristically low-key. Stella had squealed delightedly, much younger than eighteen in that moment. He had looked up from the newspaper he was reading, nodded once or twice, and said, 'Crikey. That's a bit quick, isn't it?'

'I love weddings!' Stella exclaimed. She'd only been to one, a couple of months earlier – a schoolfriend's big sister was marrying at home and she was the friend's plus one. She'd evidently had quite the night at the reception. 'And I bet Temple's will be amazing! Ooh, ooh, who do you think Temple's dad will invite?' Her excitement crescendoed at the notion of rubbing shoulders with A-listers from Toby's address book, and she scurried off to look people up on Instagram.

'You don't really like marriage, do you?' She was emboldened, later that evening, by red wine and mild irritation at his nonchalance.

'I never said that.' Kit looked over his glasses at her, an expression of mild amusement on his face that did nothing for her mood.

'But you don't.'

'I just don't think it changes things. I don't think it's a panacea.'

'Nor do I. Did you ever want to marry me?'

Now, sitting here, she couldn't remember. She couldn't remember what his answer had been. She remembered that he'd turned it around, like he could, made her laugh, and that the evening had ended with the two of them making love, and that they hadn't talked about it again.

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But she couldn't remember what he'd said when she'd asked him.

He was right about it not being a panacea, was the thing. Here they were, a couple of years later, and Temple and Max were as unhappy now as they had seemed happy that bright, stylish day in Shoreditch. At least, she felt sure Temple was. She didn't really know Max.

Her phone rang. She pushed the button that answered it while she was driving, and put the car into reverse.

'You on your way, Nat?' He always started in the middle of a conversation. Never said hello.

'Just leaving. Should be home in half an hour. How's Arlo?'

'He's fine. Good day, I gather. Chatting nineteen to the dozen when I picked him up. He was ravenous so I gave him some food. He's done his reading. So he's on the iPad.'

'Oh, well done. You're a hero.' Why did women do that, she wondered briefly. Treat husbands like babysitters, heaping praise on them, when they'd really just been parenting their own children.

'It gets better. I've cooked for us.'

'Wow!'

'Don't make it sound so rare.' A slight hurt tone in his voice. Affected or genuine, she couldn't tell.

'No – I mean, great.'

'I figured you'd have been on rabbit rations at the spa, so I've made my famous chicken korma.'

Was it famous? She didn't remember eating it before.

'Sounds amazing. Thank you.'

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‘Had a good time with the girls?’

‘Fabulous.’

‘Great. I’m glad. I’ll see you soon.’

She rang off, and drove. He had a way of doing that. Of being kind and good and even ideal. Just when he needed to remind her he could be. Like he had some sixth sense.

The weather forecast for the May bank-holiday weekend turned out, surprisingly, to be completely accurate. The sun had been shining all week before they set off, long enough for even the English to go to bed without assuming it would have broken by the time they awoke the next morning. On Friday, the relentlessly cheerful weather person on BBC *Breakfast* waved her arm across the green weather map like a magician's assistant, conjuring up that most elusive of tricks: a glorious bank-holiday weekend in prospect.

Annie had gone down mid-week 'to open the house up', so it had been agreed that Dom and Sarah, who pretty much passed the Hawtreys' house en route to the Hawtreys' other house, would swing by and pick Rupert up. The Powells were to drive the Coopers in their bus of a family car, and the Kennedys and Butterworths would make their own way. Andrew and Flick were delayed by a wedding-cake tasting, Flick had reported, in an emoji-laden WhatsApp, with heavy use of 'cake' and 'woman with head in hand in despair', and, traditionally, no one would offer to share a ride with Kit and Natalie, because it would be unbelievably stressful. They never left, and thus never arrived, when they said they would.

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Rupert was empty-handed, although Dom had opened the boot to receive his bag.

‘What? No gear?’

‘Have you met my wife?’ Rupert raised an eyebrow to go with his two empty arms, then shut the boot and climbed into the empty front seat. ‘She packed for all eventualities and took my stuff down with her on Wednesday.’

‘You are the last Victorian husband, d’you know that?’

‘Grateful and unashamed every day to be married to the last Victorian wife.’ Rupert smirked.

‘As well you should be.’ Dom laughed.

‘Hey! You’d hate me choosing all your shirts, and shorts, and taking your shaving brush three days early.’ Sarah’s tone was indignant.

‘How would you know? You never tried,’ Dom teased, incredulous.

It had never occurred to any of them that comparison of husbands or indeed wives might be not only, as the inspirational quote had it, the thief of joy, but the creator of trouble. That their banter was anything other than fond, observational, harmless.

A full hour behind them on the road, Kit and Natalie bickered about service-station coffee shops. The scratchiness between them had started earlier, before Maggie arrived to scoop up Arlo. It was a well-rehearsed argument, this one. Natalie had been on the phone with Temple when they were supposed to leave. He hated how she always dropped whatever she was doing when Temple called, disappearing with the handset behind a

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closed door. He was jealous, Natalie said. He wasn't fucking jealous, he said. He'd just like to be on time for once in his life. In their life. He'd been in the car with the engine running when she'd finished and come out. She minded that he didn't ask how Temple was. He minded that she didn't apologize for keeping him waiting. And it segued effortlessly, easily, after years of practice, into sniping about soy lattes. Natalie laughed, but it sounded shrill, even to her.

'My God, Kit. Even our arguing is mundane. We used to make each other laugh in the middle of a fight. Remember? Stop the squabble just like that.' She clicked her fingers in front of his face, and although the gesture didn't disturb his vision, he tutted irritably and moved his head, as though she were being dangerous and irresponsible.

'If we can't laugh each other out of it, can we at least fight about things that matter? Do it properly. Can't we scream and hurl things?'

'On the A303?'

She hated the amusement in his tone. It was patronizing. As if she was a silly child. In those moments, in that tone, was the acknowledgement of the age difference between them. Funny how she had never felt it at the beginning. It was his easiest, his first defence.

'Anywhere. Turn the volume up.' Frustration pushed at her ribcage. She raised her hands to the heavens.

Kit narrowed his eyes. In that moment he looked as if he didn't even like her. Then, deliberately misunderstanding, he slowly turned the knob on the car radio.

She should have taken the joke. It was exactly the kind

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of tension breaker she'd been talking about. Determined that this was him doing exactly what she wanted, even though it wasn't and his eyes were the proof. She should have been cajoled out of her spiky mood. She would have been. She had been, many times before. Today, she just didn't want to be.

She felt old. And helpless. Temple's unhappiness with Max weighed on her. She couldn't shrug it off. When Temple had called lately, it was always to cry or rail or worry, and it felt to Natalie as if she had spent the duration of the phone call absorbing it all. It hurt that Kit didn't seem to care, or didn't want to hear about it. Temple wasn't his daughter, and their relationship was nothing like the one Andrew, say, had with Zoë, or Flick with Phoebe. With them, you couldn't tell where blood ended and love began. It never had been like that with Kit and Temple. Temple had always had her own father, and Kit had never tried to replace him, practically or emotionally. Once that had seemed wise, considerate. But they'd known each other a long, long time and now she wondered if it had been unkind. Lazy, perhaps. If Temple had felt rejected by Kit's indifference, even as she gave a very good impression of not wanting anything else from him. And, of course, if it was Natalie's fault. Had she ring-fenced Temple, and not let him inside the steel barrier? She used to watch Andrew and Zoë, feel real envy for the easy affection between them, and blame herself for it. But maybe that wasn't right. Temple was his children's sister. Her daughter. They were both her family. His disinterest felt so unkind. She resented

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him for not helping her help Temple, and she couldn't seem to make him understand.

So she didn't turn the radio down and let the mood change, like she once would have done. She opened the window a crack and leant her head against the door frame and watched the landscape change. She hoped that by the time they arrived, she would feel less like crying.

'Opening up the house' was what Annie said when she meant 'have a couple of precious days to myself in my happy place' and everyone knew it. It took only a few hours to get it ready for guests. There was a lovely woman in the village called Suze, who came up and did the beds and towels, and gave everywhere a good clean. Annie filled jars with flowers, and baked treats on the range, listening to folk music on the ancient radio. This particular week, she spent hours in the garden, loving the feel of the warm spring sunshine on her skin. It couldn't be true, she knew, but it seemed like it was always glorious here. Her parents had bought the place when her older brother Giles was a toddler, before they could really afford it, but knowing money would get easier. She had all the yellowing documentation in a box in the master bedroom, so she knew what they had paid in 1963 and what it was worth now, and it had been a good investment. And, much more, the most joyful place to grow up. Giles hadn't wanted it, thank God, when their parents died, too young, and barely a year apart. Somehow, he had never loved it like she had, and their parents had sensibly left him their London house. When he'd

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immediately sold it to buy a ski-in-ski-out chalet in Chamonix Annie hadn't minded the loss or the shocking lack of sentimentality because her favourite memories of her parents were in this place. They'd been older when children had come along, and her father had been a judge by the time she was born, studious, absent and serious in London – altogether different here. Here, he'd had time for her, and they'd fished, and walked, and made things in the small workshop in the garden.

The house was an early Victorian rectory on the edge of a village within reach of Lyme Regis, sitting high in its plot, so the walk down to the sea was steep, but the views were wonderful. The greenstone walls and slate-tiled roof were a little shabby, and the paintwork peeled in places, but in May the whole front of the house was engulfed by the blue flowers of an ancient gnarled wisteria. It was so pretty it took her breath away every year.

Inside, it had hardly changed, although Rupert had persuaded her, in recent years, to replace the bathrooms – her own parents had done the same when she was young, but as this had happened in the 1970s, and the house had not been listed, the bathrooms she inherited from them were sky blue and avocado green. Natalie had recently assured her they were fashionable again, but she wasn't convinced. Everything was white now, with decent showers fed from a big, efficient water tank. There was a new kitchen too, built by a local joiner around the big red range of her childhood. She had her mother's Aga cookbook – an edition printed in the 1950s – and her collection of copper pots and jelly moulds.

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Rupert was inclined, she knew, to rip everything else out now they had time and money, start all over again before grandchildren – he was far more into that sort of thing than she was. He started a conversation every other year on this weekend with Dom, an architect, about how you might take the back off the kitchen and push out into a big orangery, or add a dormitory level in the roof space. Dom contemplated and sometimes sketched, but it never went further, and if it did, she had her power of veto. Rupert knew how Annie felt about it. He'd won one battle, over a swimming-pool, after a particularly happy family holiday in the Dordogne, where the house they'd rented had a very pretty and very safe fenced pool out of sight of the house. He'd been right about the pool – the boys, then three, six and nine, had been in it every day for hours – but she'd put her foot down about orangeries, dormitories and everything else. She liked familiarity and comfort, the fact that there were memories in every corner, and she wanted the grandchildren she longed for to see it as their fathers had seen it when they were boys, and how she had seen it before them, even if that meant things were a bit musty and threadbare.

When she 'opened the house up' alone, she slept those nights in the wrought-iron single bed in her childhood room, with the original rose-sprigged wallpaper, instead of in what she still thought of as her parents' room, where Rupert had installed a vast bed with an eye-wateringly expensive super-king mattress. As comfortable as that undoubtedly was, she liked it in here when it was

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just her. They were nights of pure nostalgia. Besides, their bed was too big without the lovely warm, familiar length of him in it alongside her. Not even Rupert knew she did that.

She loved the house best of all, though, when it was full of people and, as she sat on the wooden bench in the front garden nursing a coffee and waiting for everyone to arrive, she reflected that these were among her favourite people with whom to fill it. Second only, probably, to when the boys and boisterous crowds of their friends and various girlfriends descended. This was a lucky group. Lucky to have found each other, lucky to be such good friends, all these years later. Luckier still to be well, to be together, to have happy, healthy children. That had to be unusual.

There'd been challenging times, of course. Life was a roller coaster, not a steam train, and there wasn't one family among them that hadn't had a rough patch. Most of them had lost a parent, and a handful were middle-aged orphans now; they'd been there for each other through those sadnesses. Her own boys had practically lived with Andrew and Flick when she was nursing her own mother through the end stages of the heart failure that had killed her. Kids had been ill, been hurt. When Ross and Vanessa's youngest, Callum, had developed meningitis as a toddler, they'd taken turns to have his sisters Daisy and Jasmine for sleepovers so his parents could stay by his bedside during that frightening week in the ICU, cooked casseroles and baked brownies. Georgie had gone round, done the laundry and changed all

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the beds so that when the news was finally good, they could come home and fall into a dead sleep in clean sheets.

And they had all done it for her, more than once, when Georgie had been going through the gruelling treatment for breast cancer a few years back. Natalie had wanted them to shave their heads in solidarity but Flick had said that was easy for her because she clearly had a nice-shaped head, and she knew she wouldn't suit bald, so she was on her own. In the end Georgie hadn't lost her hair: she'd worn one of those cold caps that prevent it. Annie remembered then that Flick had tied an ice pack on her head with a jaunty ribbon when she showed up for the chemo session and said she'd take the solidarity points there and then, thank you. God, how they'd laughed at that. Even Georgie, who felt like crap, had laughed until fat teardrops rolled down her face.

There had been vicissitudes in their friendships too. It was a lot like marriage, a friendship with longevity. Any relationship that really mattered, come to think of it. There were bad patches. Of course there were. There were hot buttons, and pinch points. Sarah could be bossy, and Natalie was sometimes exhausting – Annie knew Vanessa was occasionally irritated by what she called Annie's 'Pollyanna complex'. Georgie's worried pessimism was sometimes repellent to be around, while Flick could certainly be OTT. Annie herself had struggled when she left nursing. Retraining as a therapist had taken it out of her – it had been hard, much harder than she had thought. She'd stepped back then, to focus.

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They'd given her the room to do that, without judging her for it.

The kids had fought with each other sometimes – fallen out. There'd been dangerous moments in the women's lives – through exams and university – when competitiveness, defensiveness and protectiveness had gnawed at some of the ties that bound them. 'We're all mammals after all,' Flick had once said. 'Mumma Bears.' She was right about that. They all had other friends, a life apart from the group – jobs, families, neighbours, older friends, and newer ones too. In that way it was very different from marriage – you could take time away, step back, have a breather. So far, they'd always gravitated back to this closeness. There'd been trial separations – if you were honest and looked back across the years you could see them – but no one had wanted a divorce from the gang. Or from each other, thank God. Annie had seen the collateral damage divorce caused when her brother Giles and his wife Hannah had split up a couple of years ago. The thought made her shudder. It would be a hand grenade.

They were all invested. They all understood the preciousness of the emotional ecosystem that supported them all.

And there had never been a bad day when they'd all been here. Scarcely a cross word – any bickering confined to couples, and not much of that. Generally, they all arrived, enjoyed, and went home warmed, if not by the Dorset sunshine, then by the glow of camaraderie. So Annie sipped her coffee, and waited.

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Andrew and Flick were first to arrive, just before midday, honking the horn joyously as they turned up the steep driveway. Then, scarcely a few minutes later, Phil and Georgie appeared with Ross and Vanessa. No one unpacked or bagged a room – Annie decided in advance who would sleep where – but there were bear hugs and fresh coffees poured, and the same old view to be fussed over as everyone stretched their limbs after the journey. Rupert, Dom and Sarah weren't far behind. Annie had Rupert on FindMyFriend, so she could track their progress through his phone. No one really expected to see Nat and Kit for another hour or two, so gradually, slowly, rooms were occupied, cars emptied, food and drink supplies unloaded into the big fridge. Someone – probably Phil, the music connoisseur of the group – synced his phone to a wireless speaker he'd bought, and there was music. As she looked around at her kitchen, full of friends, and her handsome husband whispered that he'd missed her, and that she must have finished 'opening up' early, because her freckles were out, Annie felt truly happy.

It was around two thirty when Natalie and Kit finally rolled up. Everyone was outside by then, changed, and beside the pool. Annie had laid out charcuterie on the long grey teak table – she'd cut a picture out of a foodie magazine, and recreated it: two big wooden boards with hams and salamis and cheeses and Marcona almonds and good olives from the deli – and someone had opened rosé wine. They'd all thrown swimming costumes on under shirts and sundresses, and most had been in the

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water already, even if just to dangle their legs, hot from the long drive.

Sarah was in the kitchen searching for the sunscreen Annie thought she had left over from last summer when she heard Kit's car on the gravel. She watched from the window, unseen, as their car doors opened and the pair climbed out. Spied on unaware, they were stony-faced and silent. Kit rubbed his forehead, one finger on each temple, as though he had a headache, then ran his hand through his hair. Evidently Annie had heard the car too, her hostess ear primed, and she came scuttling down the side of the house in her ancient striped kaftan and flip-flops. From her vantage point inside, it was only Sarah who saw Kit and Natalie instinctively rearrange their faces into broad, warm smiles as Annie opened her arms to embrace them each in turn.

'You made it!' Sarah heard Annie exclaim, through the open window. 'Welcome, welcome!' She pulled them both towards the back of the house. 'Come on, come on. Everyone's out here – there's bags of food left. We've only just started really . . .'

'Aha, last but not least!' Rupert, too, was expansive in his welcome.

'Sorry, everyone. Arlo . . .'

Natalie began her excuse. After all these years, she still offered one, although no one raised an eyebrow about their late arrival.

Andrew raised a hand to stop her. 'You're here now.'

Phil had poured two glasses of rosé and passed them one each. 'Here, you two. You're not far behind. You can catch up.'

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‘Let them at least get their gear,’ Annie protested. But Kit had clinked his glass against Phil’s, just a little too hard, and drunk his in one.

Natalie didn’t even sip hers, just smiled her thanks at Phil and put her glass on the edge of the table.

‘You’ll want to change. It’s sweltering. The water is delicious. Come, come . . .’

Sarah, who’d put the full water jug down, couldn’t tell whether Annie had sensed the tension or was just being the consummate host.

‘Is your car still unlocked? I’ll get your stuff. You’re in the downstairs double.’ Rupert pulled a T-shirt over his head, and scabbled under his chair for battered deck shoes.

Natalie let herself be led inside and Sarah followed.

The ‘downstairs double’ was Annie’s dad’s old study with a double bed in it. His law books and political biographies were still on shelves against the back wall, and the room smelt of libraries. A big window looked out from the front of the house towards the sea. Natalie went over to it and stared out at the view.

It was when Natalie was quiet that her friends knew something was really wrong. When she was vocal and melodramatic, things were usually fine.

‘You okay, Nat?’ Annie joined her at the window.

‘It’s so beautiful here, Annie. Why do I always forget?’ She sounded wistful, but then shook herself. ‘I’m fine. It was a bit of a stressful morning is all.’ She sighed.

‘How’s Temple doing?’

Natalie’s eyes filled with sudden tears.

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‘Oh, my darling.’ Annie stroked her friend’s arm. ‘What’s going on?’

Natalie took a deep breath, hesitated, then waved a hand in front of her face just as Rupert appeared in the doorway with two leather bags. He took in the scene. When Annie shrugged at him, he put down the bags and turned tail.

Natalie seemed to change her mind after the interruption. ‘Do you know what? I do want to talk to you guys about this. But not now. I just . . . I just want to have a peaceful, lovely, happy weekend with all of you. Does that . . . is that okay?’

Sarah nodded vigorously. ‘Of course. Of course.’

‘Yes, darling. Whenever you want to talk, but not at all until you do. You just put on your cossie, or whatever, come out when you’re ready, okay?’ Annie had lifted the bags Rupert had left onto the bed and joined Sarah at the door.

Natalie looked at their kind, concerned faces, and smiled gratefully. ‘I’ll be there. Give me five minutes.’ She held up her hand, palm splayed. ‘Five.’

The two friends backed out of the room, shutting the door gently behind them, and headed back towards the pool.

Once they were out of earshot, Annie shook her head. ‘Poor thing. That didn’t sound very positive, did it?’

Sarah pursed her lips. ‘We’ve got all this ahead of us, I suppose.’

‘You think you’ll stop worrying about them, don’t you, when they’re launched . . . grown-up?’

‘Never happens, I don’t suppose.’

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