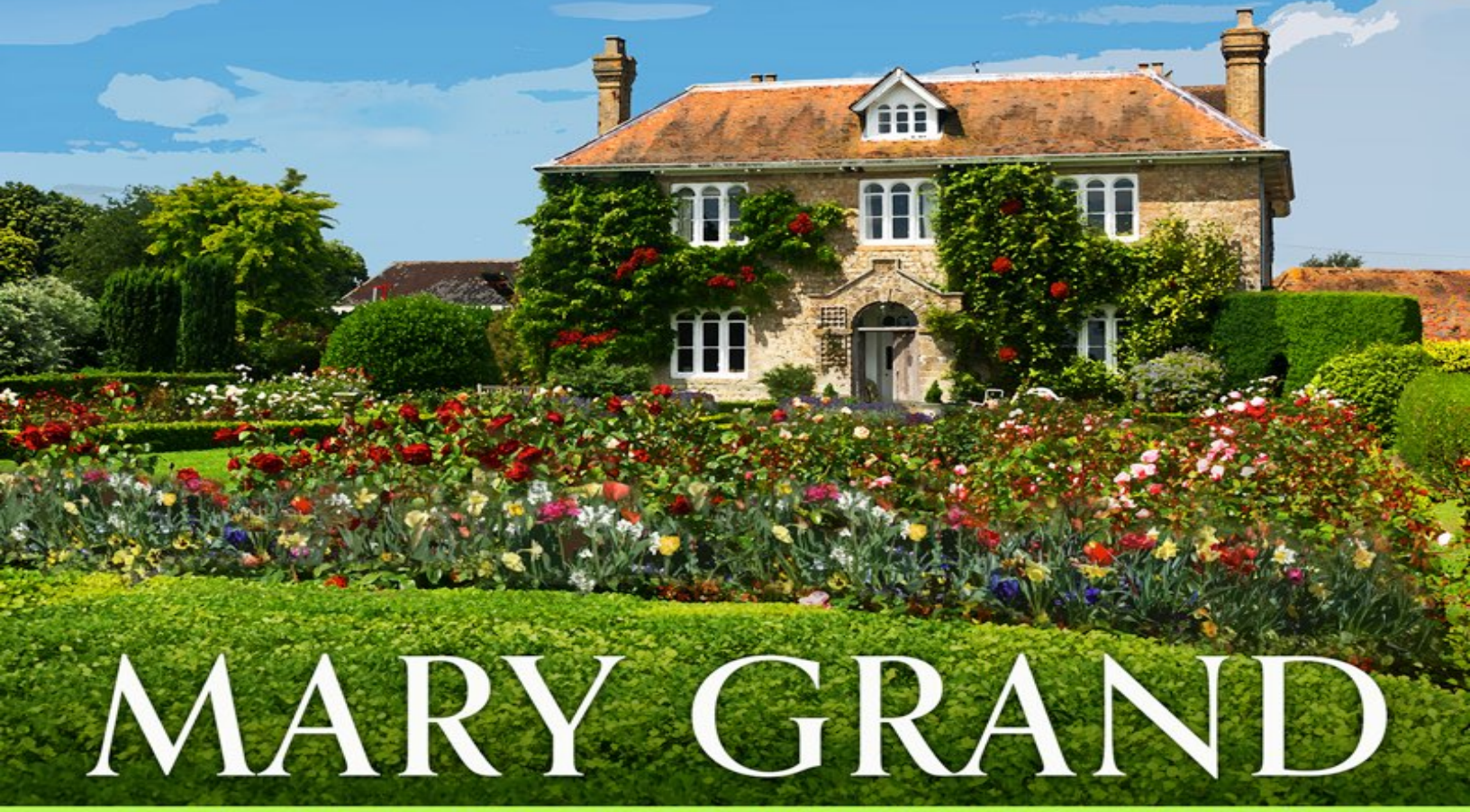
A Mother's Day Murder

A murderer is hiding at the heart of an English village



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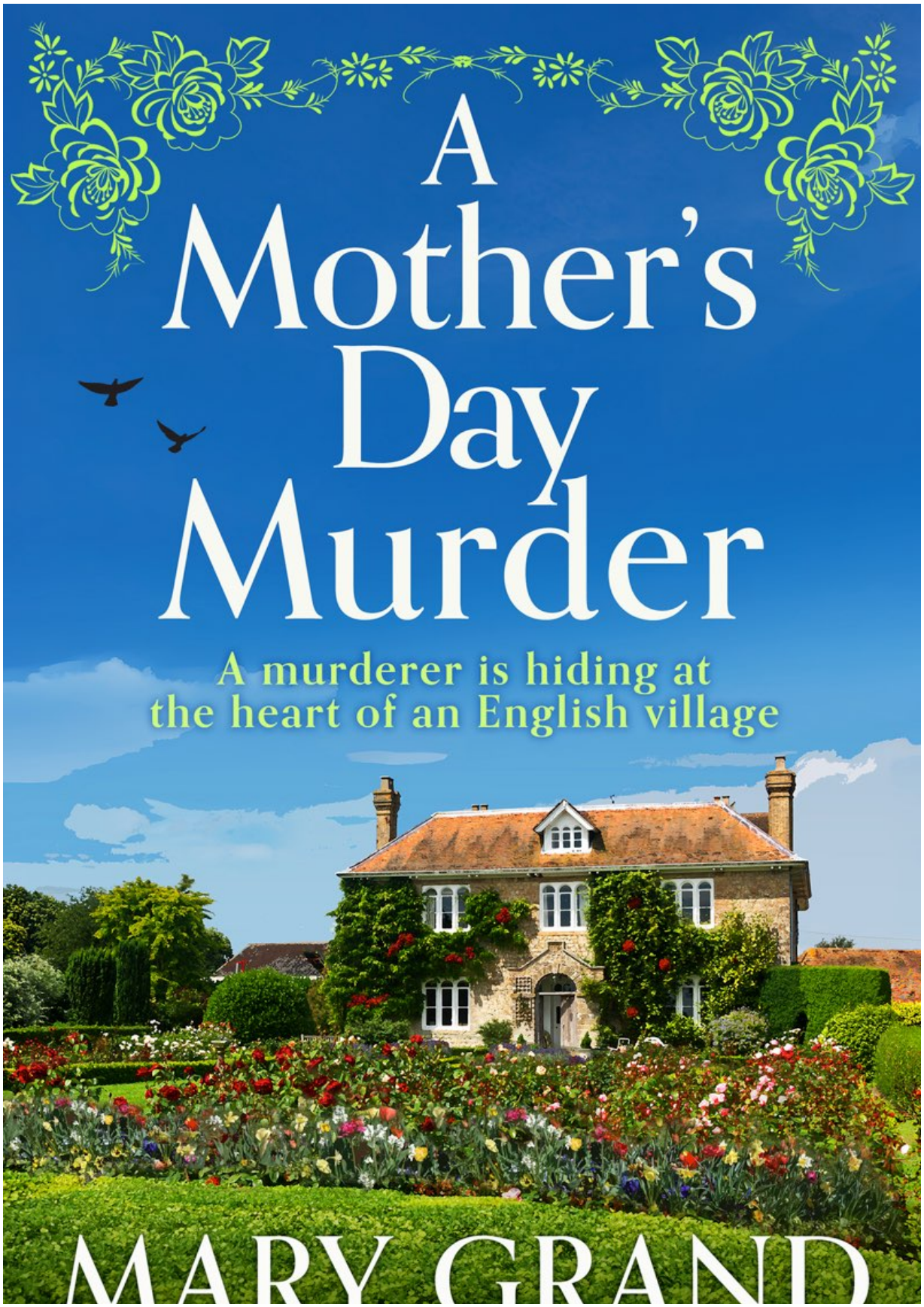
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A MOTHER'S DAY MURDER

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To Pauline, Andy and Gemma.
Thank you so much for all your support and encouragement, with love,
Mary x.

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Thank you!
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PROLOGUE

SUNDAY

Mother's Day

I stand staring at the body lying prone on the cold stone floor.

The setting for this execution is unique: a tiny thirteenth-century chapel, abandoned out here by the cliffs. It is fittingly dramatic. I can hear the wind buffeting the Purbeck stone walls but feel safe inside. This fortress has stood for centuries, and it will survive for many more. This event, this death, will be absorbed into its walls and become a minute speck of dust in its history.

Do I feel guilty? No, of course not. People should learn to leave well alone. I have my plans. I have to succeed.

An image flashes before my eyes… I watch her dying again. It wasn't pretty. I push it away; it had to be done.

I step back, walk away from her, leave the building, go out into the darkness.

It won't be long until the sun rises. The body will be found. People will shed tears, but they will get on with their lives. I will get on with mine. It's strange to think no one will ever know what I have done; no one will even know that I was here.

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SATURDAY

The Day Before Mother's Day

Jessica was visiting a new 'island' but the crossing would be a swift four minutes on a chain ferry. Having grown up on the Isle of Wight she'd been used to a much longer journey, enjoyed coffee and cake in the lounge, but today most people didn't even bother getting out of their cars.

However, Jessica was anxious to get an early view of this 'island'. She opened her door to go to the viewing platform, but her attention was drawn to the woman in the next car who was bent over her steering wheel. At first, Jessica couldn't see the woman's face because of the large green straw hat the woman was wearing, but she could see the woman's shoulders were shaking and she was sobbing uncontrollably.

Jessica was torn. Should she check on the woman, or leave well alone? And then, unexpectedly, the woman jerked away from the wheel, pushed back her wiry blonde hair, turned and stared at Jessica.

'Can I help?' Jessica mouthed through the window.

The woman shook her head; it was clear she wanted to be left alone, so Jessica gave a quick nod and left. Jessica wondered what private grief this poor woman was wrestling with and hoped there would be someone to comfort her at the end of her journey.

From the bridge Jessica looked out at the sparkling sea, watched the smaller boats sailing past and then ahead at the ‘island’ she would be visiting.

‘I know it’s not really an island,’ her son Jack had said, ‘it’s a peninsula and half the size of the Isle of Wight, but just you wait. I promise: it’s really special.’

Jack and his wife, Beth, had lived on the Isle of Purbeck, for two years now, but this was Jessica’s first visit.

As Jessica looked ahead at the stretch of beach with trees behind, she was impressed. Already she could sense this place had that unique island feel: somewhere remote, different, set apart from the mainland.

Jessica quickly returned to her car and glanced over at the woman in the next car. She was sipping water from a bottle now but didn’t look her way.

So, only a few noisy minutes after entering the ferry, Jessica was driving off. The journey was over in the blink of an eye.

Jessica looked eagerly out of the windscreen; she didn’t want to miss anything. Immediately after landing, she turned into a car park to get her first taste of this new land.

She stepped out of her car and rotated her right wrist. It was still stiff from when she’d fallen down a few weeks before. When she’d attended her first appointment the physiotherapist had said in rather a sad voice, ‘Well, we’ll just have to see what we can do. There are limits, you know, for a woman in her late sixties.’

Jessica had assured the physiotherapist firmly that she was fit and well, would do all her exercises and expected to make a full recovery. Maybe it was taking a little longer to heal, but Jessica was determined to prove them wrong.

Glancing at the information board, she followed the path from the car park through the dunes over a wooden bridge and walked out onto what the sign called Shell Bay.

The beach that greeted her was far more expansive than she'd imagined. A breeze whipped up the sand despite the sunshine. She breathed in the fresh sea air, the smell of her childhood and her teenage years.

Reassured, she walked back to the car and continued her journey. Jessica wound down her window, taking in the perfume of the soft, sweet bright yellow gorse.

Her route took her to Swanage and Jessica decided to pull into a parking spot on the esplanade. Swanage had the feel of the Victorian seaside town of Ventnor but instead of the enormous cliff face and staggeringly steep roads, Swanage seafront was flat, more traditional, with gentler sandy beaches, and a pier.

Jessica was aware she was putting off completing her journey, but she just needed a few more minutes to compose herself. This was the first time since losing her husband Julian, two years ago, she had ventured outside of her hometown of Oxford. His death had been unexpected and deeply shocking. Jessica had retreated into a bubble of grief. After a few months, her friends started to urge her to get out: 'Go on a cruise!', 'Join new clubs', they advised, but Jessica had quietly gone her own way. She continued to go to work in the Bodleian Library and return to her refuge back home.

It had taken a lot of persuasion from her son Jack that it was time to make this visit for Mother's Day. As she stood on the beach, Jessica realised maybe he was right. She could feel the wind on her face, taste the sea air, and Jessica could sense she was changing and feeling more a part of the world again instead of being a stranger looking on.

And so, with a new feeling of hope, Jessica headed back to the car and began the final leg of her journey.

As she drove, Jessica thought about her daughter-in-law, Beth. As Beth and Jack had got together close to her losing her husband, it had been a tough time for Jessica to get to know Beth. Their meetings had mainly been on Zoom calls, and through these Jessica had realised very quickly that she

and her daughter-in-law were quite different. Beth always immediately plunged into conversation, telling Jessica in detail all her news and asking Jessica strings of questions which she never quite had time to answer.

Jack and Beth's wedding, a year ago, had been as colourful, lively, and chaotic as Beth herself. Jessica had watched her daughter-in-law blossom as the day progressed, a sunflower raising its head to the sunshine of excitement, loud voices, and fun. In the midst of all the celebrations Jessica had the opportunity to meet Beth's teenage children from a previous relationship, and she'd been able to chat for a brief time with the daughter Rhiannon who shared Jessica's love of reading. The day had been full of warmth and joy but had also been exhausting and Jessica had quietly escaped to her room later in the evening.

Jessica hoped that the up-and-coming week would be quieter and she would finally have time to get to know Beth properly. She wondered what Beth had arranged for Mother's Day. It was her first with Jack for two years, having insisted that he stay here with Beth while she had been very content with a Zoom call. However, it would be lovely to spend time together this year, maybe enjoy a gentle Sunday lunch in a pub.

Jessica drove out of the town and into the countryside. Already familiar with the Thomas Hardy novels, some of which had been set around here, Jessica had re-read them before her visit, soaking herself in the wild heathland and stunning coastline.

* * *

While Jessica travelled to their home, Beth was casting a cursory look around the bedroom she was preparing for her mother-in-law. It was by far the tidiest room in the house; she'd even bunged a few daffodils in a vase and gathered together some books to go on the shelf. It was a strange assortment, nothing as highbrow as she knew Jessica normally read, but

they were the books she'd picked up second-hand in the local bookshop and charity shops. She'd tried to avoid anything too sexy, not sure what Jessica, as an ex-vicar's wife, would approve of.

She could picture her mother-in-law: slight, smart, with bright watchful eyes that glinted through black rimmed glasses, neat silver-grey bobbed hair, and that disconcertingly reticent manner which made Beth uncertain if Jessica was reserved, as Jack maintained, or disapproving. She had noticed Jessica slinking off during the evening of the wedding and wondered if she'd judged the whole day too raucous and unrefined.

'You've made yourself at home then,' Beth said to the large orange cat who had sneaked in and was making himself comfortable on the clean duvet. 'I hope Jessica can cope with animals. I don't think Jack had any growing up.'

As Beth went back downstairs, stepping carefully over the pile of 'to be taken upstairs' bits, the landline rang and she rushed to answer it. She heard a desperate voice on the other end. 'Hang on, Jena. It's OK. I know it's short notice but let me check.' She scanned the crowded calendar on her mobile phone, before replying, 'First week of May? Yes, I can fit that in, Monday to Friday. Great. I'll pop round and pick up the spare key. You can tell me all I need to know about Muffin the weekend before.'

The business that had started as popping in to feed a few neighbours' cats had grown exponentially. She now had a waiting list covering this village and those close by.

Beth checked her smart watch. It was coming up to six. Jessica would arrive soon. Beth had already made the casseroles and pudding for tea, and she realised she would just have time to make some Welsh cakes for Mother's Day.

She looked to see if her son Owen had replied to her text but there was nothing. Surely he must know if he was coming home this evening by now.

‘Your mam’s room is all ready,’ she shouted to Jack. He was in the room they grandly called his study, due to it containing a desk and his laptop. As editor of a local paper, he would normally still be in work, but he’d made an effort to be home for when his mother arrived. Nevertheless, he was constantly checking social media for any new stories to alert his journalists to.

‘I need to get a journalist over to Swanage, there’s been an RTA,’ he replied.

Ignoring Jack, Beth said, ‘I’ve still not heard from Owen.’

‘He’ll be in touch soon.’

Beth went into the kitchen, cleared a space on the work surface, and gathered the ingredients together for her Welsh cakes. However, she was still thinking about her son Owen. It was fine for Jack to be so casual, but Beth so wanted him home for Mother’s Day.

Martha, a blue roan cocker spaniel, came slinking over to her. Beth left her baking; this was special. As a rescue they were fostering, Martha was only just starting to gain the confidence to leave her bed and approach them.

‘Who’s a brave girl, then?’ Beth said quietly, stroking the dog gently. She found a treat and gave it to her. ‘Good girl.’ Martha took it and went quietly back to her bed.

Beth turned on the TV and then made up her cake mixture. After she rolled it out, she found her griddle. It had been her grandmother’s, was made of cast iron and weighed a ton. But she was convinced it made the best Welsh cakes in the world.

* * *

Jessica had finally arrived in Jack and Beth’s village of Worth Stone. Jack had sent her an informative small book written by a well-informed local,

which Jessica had avidly read. Apparently, for hundreds of years, stone had been quarried around here and used for paving slabs in London, and the sought-after ‘Purbeck Marble’ had been used for cathedrals like Salisbury, and Westminster Abbey. But, as Jessica looked around, she felt it was here, in the mellow grey houses, that the stone truly shone in all its natural beauty.

The centre point of the village was a picturesque spring water duck pond, and next to it stood a red phone box that, according to the book, still worked.

Jessica drove up past the church and the old vicarage, now simply called Worth Stone House, and finally reached Jack and Beth’s house.

Compared to all the neat cottages around, it looked exactly how an estate agent would describe it: ‘A large house with amazing views in need of significant renovation.’ It was, Jack explained, the only way they could have afforded to live in the village of Worth Stone.

She parked, took a deep breath, put on her best ‘sociable’ smile, and rang the doorbell.

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The door was answered quickly by Beth, who held out her arms, engulfed Jessica in a bear hug, and kissed her on both cheeks. ‘You’ve arrived, brilliant!’

Jessica remembered Beth with loose, long brown hair, but today it was tied back in a ponytail. She was short, curvy, and wore black leggings and a large bright baggy red T-shirt with the slogan, ‘I can’t help being loud and sexy, I’m Welsh.’

Beth shouted over her shoulder, ‘Jack, your mam is here.’

Although slightly overwhelmed by the welcome, Jessica enjoyed the warmth of the greeting and rather liked the Welsh ‘mam’.

Jack walked quietly down the hallway and stepped forward. ‘Hi Mum,’ he said gently, one hand on her shoulder and a quick peck on her forehead. ‘How was the journey?’

Their eyes met and they smiled. Neither was particularly demonstrative but there was nevertheless a deep bond of love and affection between them. She noticed Jack, now fifty, was losing some of that red hair he’d hated when he was a child, but he still had the warm smile, quiet confidence and charm she’d always loved about him.

‘Oh, don’t keep her standing on the doorstep,’ said Beth. ‘Come on in, Jessica. Jack, get her bags from the car.’

Before Jessica could step forward, a black Labrador came charging down the hallway and planted a muddy paw on her leg.

‘For God’s sake, Rhiannon, come and get this damn dog,’ shouted Beth. ‘She could have knocked your nanna over.’

Jessica froze. ‘Nanna?’ Names had not really come up before, but Jessica had expected that as they were older they would be calling her by her first name. ‘Nanna’ was a shock. Her eyes met Jack’s, he grinned but said nothing.

Rhiannon, a tall dark-haired young woman with extraordinary blue eyes, who today managed to look stunning despite wearing waterproofs and wellies, came to grab the dog. ‘You left the back door open! He ran straight in.’

‘Take him and wash his mucky paws.’ Beth turned to Jessica. ‘So, how’s your wrist? Did it hurt while you were driving? Was there a lot of traffic?’

The questions shot out like bullets. Jessica wasn’t sure what to answer first but Beth continued walking ahead down the hallway, past a bike and a pile of discarded footwear that had refused to make its way to the shoe rack.

Beth cleared a wooden chair in the kitchen and Jessica sat down. It might have been a mess but the aroma coming from the oven was gorgeous: cakes, and maybe some kind of casserole. It was the aroma of home comfort, which was missing from her own house. Jessica seldom baked or used the oven, usually having fish and stir-fry meals.

Beth put the kettle on. ‘Coffee or tea? Or a glass of wine…? It’s getting on.’

‘Coffee would be great, thanks.’

However, before Beth could make it, the house phone rang. Beth laughed. ‘We still have a landline here. It can be handy as the internet goes down sometimes… Mind you, the phone could be anywhere. Jack, where’s the phone?’

‘The table in the hall.’

‘Right, be back in a minute,’ Beth said, and rushed back out.

Jack came in. ‘I’ll make you a coffee, Mum. Tell me about the journey. Were there long queues at the ferry? It gets really bad in the summer.’

They chatted against the constant stream of Beth talking on the phone, and the TV, which was on somewhere in the background. Jessica was glad when Jack took her through to a conservatory off the kitchen.

It was a beautifully light room, with views over the fields and a glint of sea in the distance. Jack chatted briefly about his work, then asked his mother how the decoration of her house was coming on.

‘It’s fine. A nice straightforward job. The whole place just needs freshening up.’

‘I’ve been worried about you there on your own,’ Jack said. ‘The spiral staircase is treacherous and it can get very cold and damp. You deserve something more homely than that.’

‘I will have to move one day, but not yet.’

He looked at her seriously. ‘So, tell me how you’ve really been since your fall.’

Jessica baulked at the expression of ‘a fall’, but before she could answer, Beth joined them. ‘I’ve got a few animals to see to, fancy coming with me, Jessica? Have a nose at Worth Stone before it gets dark? I’ll take it slowly, it’s all on a hill around here, but the pavements are not too bad.’

Jessica wanted to reply that she would be fine to walk around the village, but Beth hadn’t waited for an answer and made for the front door.

Jack gave her a slight smile as she put down her half-drunk cup of coffee, grabbed her coat, and joined Beth.

‘I should be stick-thin living in this place, but then, what is life without cake?’ chatted Beth. ‘Tell me if it’s too much.’

‘I’ll be fine,’ said Jessica, quietly tutting with frustration. ‘So, how do you like living here?’

‘Love it, never a dull moment. Two years in the village, and I’m totally immersed in it.’

They walked down the hill and approached the lych gate leading to the church. A young woman with red hair, a black leather jacket, and jeans came out of the church and walked towards them.

‘Hi, Ellie,’ said Beth.

Ellie shrugged, mumbled, ‘Hi,’ and walked past them.

‘Honestly, that girl. She’s twenty-three, like my Rhiannon, but acts like she’s thirteen. She lives with her stepmother, Georgia, in the big house close to the pond.’ Beth glanced back at the church. ‘Maybe she’s been to see Vincent again. I wonder what’s up with her. She’s a right handful. I feel sorry for Georgia.’

Beth explained that Vincent, their vicar, lived in Worth Stone, though he was responsible for three churches. Every Saturday evening, he had an open time when people could go and talk to him about their problems.

‘Did your husband do things like that, you know when he was a vicar?’

‘Not quite, but people tended to come to the vicarage to talk to him.’

‘How lovely, people popping in and out all the time.’

Jessica didn’t reply, not sure how to explain how difficult she’d found adjusting to life in a vicarage. Julian had encouraged people to see the vicarage as ‘their second home’ – some took him too literally. Jessica hated to admit it, but when Julian had died, although she of course was devastated, moving back to her own home had been a huge relief.

Beth and Jessica arrived at the first house, where a cat needed feeding, and they stayed for a few minutes giving her a fuss. Next there was an old dog ready for a walk, and they took him through the village and up by the pub.

‘That’s the Square and Compass, very famous. We must go there for a drink; they have really good cider. It’s pretty cramped inside, with only one person serving at this time of year. Like going back in time.’

Jessica had read about the pub in the book Jack sent, recognised the egg shape, celebrating the stone of the village and the rope for the fishermen.

‘I read there’s a museum inside too, isn’t there?’ said Jessica.

‘Blimey, you read a book about this place? I went into the museum bit once. It’s quite good. You know, there were crocodiles around here millions of years ago. Can you imagine that? That would shake things up in the local pond, wouldn’t it!’

Beth threw her head back and laughed, the sound echoing off the stone cottage. ‘I always thought of myself as a kind of town girl; not really city, but not village. Growing up in Barry, then moving to Poole, then Swanage all suited me. I thought I’d go crazy when Jack suggested moving here, but it’s great. I think I know most of the people now, and there’s always something happening. I’ve got my business looking after animals too, of course.’

‘How did you come to do that?’

‘Well, I was a Teaching Assistant in Swanage, but when we came here, they didn’t need me in the school so I started just helping out, feeding the odd pet while people went away. People always wanted to pay, so I made it more formal and the business has really grown. I look after any kind of pet, I tell you. I’ve done dogs, cats, guinea pigs, hamsters, a parrot, goldfish, axolotls. You name it, I’ve fed it and cleaned it out. I also volunteer at the local primary school, hoping that if a vacancy comes up, they’ll think of me. What with that and all the other things happening in the village hall and the church, I’m always busy.’

They had arrived at the top of a long hill on the outskirts of Worth Stone. Jessica was well out of breath now, but Beth was striding on.

‘And that’s our own stone, well, wood henge,’ said Beth, pointing over towards a structure which indeed appeared genuinely like its namesake Stonehenge. ‘Apparently, the owner of the pub constructed it originally as a temporary structure, but everyone loved it so much it’s a permanent feature

now. I think we should come and dance naked here on Midsummer's Eve,' said Beth, 'but I've yet to find anyone to come and join me.'

Jessica smiled to herself, she would never joke about doing something like that, but she liked the fact Beth could.

Beth suggested it was time to take the elderly dog back to his home. Once there Beth explained, 'He'll be fine now, although I'll pop down at bedtime just for a final check. One last visit. His owners are only away a few days, and he sleeps a lot, but I pop in as much as I can.'

Jessica was impressed at the care and attention Beth gave to each animal and could understand why she was so busy.

They walked past the pond down to some terraced houses and then back up to the other side of the pond.

'My friends Pippa and Ray live in that big house over there. He was briefly on TV as a wine expert. He fancies himself as a celebrity and has his own restaurant now. Pippa was an actor before, but that was a long time ago and she doesn't work now. Right, let's see to the cat and guinea pig here and we're done.'

When they came out, it was noticeably darker. Beth took out her torch. 'No streetlights so it gets so dark. I don't know why they don't have them. It would be much easier for getting around.'

Jessica, however, loved the darkness. She'd grown up in an isolated house on Mottistone Down; the dark was somewhere she was comfortable.

They walked past the church. 'They have two services tomorrow: one at eight and then a family one at ten, over in the next village. Which one would you like to go to? I'm sorry we don't go – but I'm sure everyone will be very friendly. The family one is much livelier…'

'Thank you. I'll go along to the earlier service.'

Beth smiled. 'Yes, maybe more your thing.'

Back home, Beth busied herself preparing the tea, so Jessica thought she'd go and unpack.

‘I’m sorry, Oscar is on your bed. Throw him off if you don’t want him in there.’

Jessica went up and indeed was greeted by a large orange cat who lazily opened one eye.

‘I’m sorry to disturb you, but you and I will be sharing this room, Oscar.’

Jessica closed the bedroom door tight and opened the window. The darkening sky was wrapping itself around the village. The distant sea merged into the darkness now, but there was still birdsong. What she found strange was that, as all the houses were at different angles, she was able to look down into other people’s homes, see into some kitchens and living rooms. Jessica watched a woman sitting watching the TV, a child playing on some kind of console but then she stopped; it felt intrusive.

Jessica closed the window and the curtains and looked round the room. There were a lot of ornaments, mainly of animals, but it was the books that drew her eye. She smiled at the Agatha Christies; her mum had loved them. It had been years since she’d read one. Jessica was working her way through a series of books by Ellis Peters that had been recommended to her by one of the students who came into the university library. She was surprised to find how much she was enjoying reading crime for a change, particularly as it was set in the Middle Ages.

She opened her case, put the neat piles of clothes in drawers, and hung up a dress, skirt and tops using the strangest assortment of hangers.

Jessica shuffled along some of the ornaments on her bedside table and made room for her novel and her puzzle book. She wasn’t in a rush to go downstairs. She just needed a few moments on her own, to catch her breath.

Neatly storing her case under the bed, she sat next to Oscar and he let her gently stroke his head. Although she’d not had a pet for years, Jessica rather liked animals. With cats, she appreciated their slight aloofness, the warmth and love that had to be earned, but also the clear boundaries they

laid down. Part of her wished it was socially acceptable for her to walk away when she'd had enough of people, watch from the sidelines, give off subtle signs not to come too close unless given permission.

'Unlike you I'm not allowed to sit up here on my own and just pop down for a saucer of food and then return,' she said to Oscar. 'I have to go and be sociable. Still, I do have one piece of armour.'

From the bedside table she picked up her puzzle book. If all else failed, she'd go and sit in the conservatory and complete some of them. She glanced around the room. She recognised that Beth had made a real effort here: the bed was clean and comfy and the books, while seemingly chosen at random, seemed aimed to make her feel at home. However hard she found the next two weeks, she was determined to fit in and make the most of her time here.

The kitchen was busy and clearly the place where the family congregated. Jack was clearing the table around Beth, who was sitting doing some crafts.

'I'm making these bags for tomorrow, for the walk. It's going to be so lush. The weather forecast is excellent…'

Jessica looked at the small pile of bags.

'What do you have planned?' She kept a fixed smile on her face. This looked like something different to the Sunday roast she'd imagined.

'Well, I thought it would be fun to invite some others along, not just have a boring old family dinner in a pub. First, I thought of Georgia: it's the anniversary of her husband's death tomorrow and there are a few problems with her stepdaughter… I thought I would ask them both to join us on a walk. She was enthusiastic, then the idea just grew.'

Jessica retained the smile on her face, but she was starting to envision herself as part of a vast crowd of strangers going on a long expedition. She waited. 'How many are coming?'

‘I think there will be ten of us… well, eleven if Owen comes. It will be us, with Georgia and Ellie, oh, and I added our vicar, Vincent. He lives on his own. And now we’ll also be joined by Tanya. She’s a young girl, good friends with Ellie, going out now with a boy from the pub, but he’ll be working so I thought she’d like to come with us, then one more couple, Pippa and Ray.’

Jessica quietly let out a sigh of relief… eleven was better than the whole village, but still a lot of new people to meet at once. A million questions started to fire in her brain. What time would they go? How far was it? What and when would they eat? Did these people know she was coming? Did they mind? Who would she talk to? What would she say?

Oblivious to Jessica’s rising panic, Beth continued, ‘It’ll be lovely for you to get to know some of our friends in the village. They’re such an interesting group. I’ll give you the details when you come back from church in the morning.’

Beth looked down at the pile of bits and pieces in front of her.

‘For my sins, I thought it would be nice to make everybody a gift bag. So, each person will get a bath bomb, mints wrapped in this green foil, so they don’t end up tasting soapy, and a bookmark.’

Jessica picked up one of the bookmarks, which had pressed primroses on it.

‘This is beautiful.’

‘Thank you.’

Beth turned to one of her books of pressed flowers, carefully opening it and turning the pages. She explained that this was a hobby of hers. Jessica noticed writing under many of the flowers and Beth explained. ‘At a special occasion, for example, a christening, a birthday, even a funeral, I sometimes offer to press a few flowers, and then I make a card or bookmark on the anniversary.’

‘That’s a lovely idea.’

‘People seem to appreciate it. Georgia asked me to press some of the camellias from a spray of flowers at Alistair’s funeral, and so I’ve used one for her bookmark.’

‘That is such a thoughtful gift,’ said Jessica.

Beth gave a grateful smile in reply but then, checking her watch, turned to Jack. ‘Have you heard from Owen yet? It’s getting late now. He needs to get here tonight, not the morning, or he’ll miss half the day.’

Jack looked away and didn’t reply. Jessica knew her son and wondered what he was hiding.

‘Glass of wine?’ Jack asked Jessica. He poured her a large glass of red. ‘Tea shouldn’t be too long; Beth just wants to get those finished.’

They sat and chatted while at the other end of the table Beth finished her work. Each bag was made and tied up using a pretty pink ribbon, embroidered with the initial B in silver. ‘I get this ribbon made on Etsy. It’s lovely, isn’t it? That’s the last of it. I need to get some more.’

Eventually Beth said, ‘Right, that’s those done. Let’s eat. Good job it’s casserole. I’ll put some by just in case for Owen.’ She glanced at Jessica. ‘It’s beef, but there’s a vegan option for Rhiannon, so you have a choice.’

‘Beef would be very nice, thank you.’

‘Top up, Mum?’ asked Jack.

‘No thanks, I’m fine.’

Rhiannon came downstairs and food was served. It tasted as good as it smelt.

‘This is fantastic,’ said Jack appreciatively.

Jessica saw the warmth in the smiles they exchanged and could see how happy and contented Jack looked. However, the peace was soon interrupted by the house phone. Beth jumped up. ‘That must be Owen.’

Jessica noticed a nervous glance pass between Rhiannon and Jack. They all continued eating but Beth’s voice in the hallway was becoming increasingly tense.

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They could all hear Beth on the phone. ‘Look, get an early train in the morning. Join us wherever we are—’

She was silent, then after a brief goodbye, they heard the call end. Beth didn’t return immediately, but when she did, she had a fixed smile on her face.

‘So, um, Owen won’t be coming tomorrow. He’s got exams soon. I can understand of course. Shame, but there we are.’ There was a forced brightness in her voice.

‘He’ll be home for Easter in a few weeks,’ said Rhiannon.

‘I said he could work while he was here.’

‘It’s quite a journey from Cardiff.’

‘You always made it home.’

‘Because you persuaded me to go to Southampton University. That’s one train, Mum.’

‘Yes. Well, there we are. It’ll be our first Mother’s Day apart, but we’ll have a lovely day anyway.’

Jack patted her hand. ‘He’s sent a card and present. I have them safe.’

Beth sat back, crossed her arms. ‘You knew he was planning to miss the day?’

‘I knew it was a possibility. I’m sorry,’ he mumbled.

Beth gave a sigh and then a sad smile of resignation. ‘It’s not your fault,’ said Beth with forced cheerfulness. ‘Now, let’s enjoy our tea. More wine, anyone?’

Dessert was a creamy rice pudding made with oat milk, which had been gently cooking in the oven. Jessica smiled as she watched Rhiannon spoon homemade jam onto hers. It was how she’d always enjoyed it as a child.

Jack started chatting to Rhiannon about the next article she was writing for the paper, explaining to Jessica that Rhiannon was a freelance journalist but was regularly writing for his paper now on environmental and weather concerns.

‘Those beavers have settled well back at Studland,’ Rhiannon was saying, ‘but the big story is the wreck that has been exposed down there. A team from Bournemouth University are working frantically to reclaim the timber before the sea destroys it. I went down there earlier today; it’s exciting.’

‘Any decent photos?’

‘I took some, but John came down, got some brilliant shots. It’ll be a good article.’

‘Excellent, well done.’ Jack smiled broadly at his stepdaughter, then turned to Jessica. ‘We’re lucky to have a smart girl like Rhiannon. She could have gone to one of the bigger papers as an intern, but she came to us.’

Rhiannon rolled her eyes. ‘Mam would never have coped with me going away.’

‘You’ve been looking at flats, though,’ said Beth.

Rhiannon smiled. ‘I’m here for now, and very comfy I am too. The casserole was fabulous; you’re getting really good at vegan cooking.’

Beth took a breath and smiled. ‘Thanks.’

‘How about I take Roxie and Martha for a walk in the village while you see to any of the animals that need bedding down?’ suggested Rhiannon.

‘Jack can cope with loading the dishwasher, I’m sure.’

When Beth and Rhiannon had gone, Jessica helped Jack clear up.

Jack picked up on their earlier conversation. ‘Now, Mum, this fall—’

Jessica pressed her lips together and tutted. ‘It wasn’t a fall. I simply slipped. I took myself to A & E, had an X-ray, nothing broken. I’d not had a stroke or anything. I have not suddenly become some frail little old lady.’

Jack grinned and held his hands up in mock surrender. ‘OK! Just checking. How are you finding retirement? It must feel very odd leaving the library after forty years of working in the same place. How did the leaving do go?’

‘I’d not wanted anything, but you know how it is. There was a buffet, and they managed to track down a number of students and staff I’d got to know over the years. Nothing too fussy and it was over by nine, exactly right. I asked for no speeches, and they more or less kept to it.’

‘Beth and I would have come over if you’d given me enough notice.’

‘I really didn’t want a fuss, and you saw me enough at work when you were a student.’

‘I liked seeing my mum in the old library. Seems a long time ago now. I wonder why you stayed at the same level all that time; you could easily have made your way up there.’

‘I loved the work I did, and being in the Bodleian Old Library was heaven. That’s the beauty of books and reading; there’s always something new and interesting to learn and the students were constantly changing. I didn’t need anything else.’

‘Well, you were lucky to do a job you loved for so long. I was only thinking the other day that it must have been a bit of a shock when Dad, at the age of fifty, said he was going into the church full time. I’m guessing the library gave you some kind of stability through all that.’

Jessica took a deep breath. Jack could have no idea how difficult the whole thing had been. She’d had a feeling for a few years in their forties

that Julian was getting restless. They'd never been big churchgoers, but he started to become involved and got very friendly with the local vicar. It must have been his mid-forties when Julian became a lay preacher. Finally, he undertook training to become a full-time vicar.

'It was a shock,' Jessica admitted, 'but it suited him. He was such a good man: charming, outgoing. Everyone loved him.'

Jessica paused. It really was true. People who came to the house always looked over her shoulder, searching for Julian. When people phoned she knew they were just waiting for her to hand the phone on.

'I'm afraid I was a disappointment to some in the parish. I never ran clubs, or did the flowers, I just wasn't any good at all those things.'

'But you're a good listener, Mum, and I know you helped a lot of people.'

Jessica smiled. 'Thank you, but I was grateful that I could at least retreat to the library. I'm sorry, though, that Dad never got to enjoy a quiet retirement – although maybe that would have driven him mad.'

Jack grinned. 'You could be right, and I miss him. He was everything I could have wished for in a father. It can't have been easy for him taking on a ten-year-old child, but we were lucky.' He looked down. 'I wish he could have seen me make editor, he'd have been so proud.'

'Of course he would. He loved you so much.'

'I only hope I can be such a good stepfather to Rhiannon and Owen.'

'You seem to get on well with Rhiannon. I'm sure you're doing a very good job of it.'

'Thank you.'

'So, what's going on at work? I've been keeping up to date online and saw you have some big events coming up for the thirtieth anniversary of the festival. I've also loved reading about the white-tailed eagles over here.'

Jack arched his eyebrows. 'You've been keeping up well. We've also got some community matters that need supporting like fighting the shutting

of fire stations and local schools, and of course we cover crime.'

'I read about the cocaine smuggling.'

'Yup and there was a stabbing last week, and the local police are trying to tackle hare coursing and poaching, not inner-city stuff but interesting.'

At that moment Rhiannon returned with the dogs, who were fed while Jack made hot chocolate.

'Where's Mam?'

'She's probably giving some old cat or dog an extra cuddle; you know what she's like.'

* * *

Rhiannon was wrong. Her mother wasn't still in someone else's house. Instead, she was sat, alone, in a small community garden close to the pond.

Beth just needed a few minutes to compose herself. She would never want to burden her family with tears, but she let a few slip down her cheeks while she sat there.

It was silly. Of course, there was always going to come a time when one of her children couldn't make it home for Mother's Day. It wasn't as if Owen had forgotten. They'd only been talking on *Loose Women* the other day about letting children fly the nest, and a part of her knew that was true. And yet… her children had been her life for so long. Letting go of them was like letting go of part of herself. Being their mother was a huge part of her identity. She'd never begrudged that; she'd cherished it and still just wanted them close to her all the time.

Beth wiped her face. Enough. She had to accept that this year was a turning point. No one was ill, no one had died; things had just changed. She sighed. The last few years had been all about adapting and not all of it bad. Meeting and marrying Jack had been wonderful, but it had been hard Rhiannon going off to uni, then Owen. At least Rhiannon had come back

for the time being. Well, Beth's own mother had coped with her leaving Barry to come to Poole, and she must do the same.

As she was taking a deep breath, she became aware that she was not out there alone.

From the other side of the hedge, she could hear someone talking. The light from the phone box lit up the area but she couldn't see anyone. They must have been sitting on the stone wall. When they spoke again, Beth recognised the voice.

Ellie, Georgia's stepdaughter, was speaking passionately. 'I love you so much it hurts, Finn, and I promise you I've found a way of making her pay up. We won't be staying in grotty hostels; we'll have the best of everything.'

There was a pause as Ellie listened to the response. 'I'll sort it. I'll get the money, just wait a little longer Finn. Please, I promise you. Everything is going to work out.'

Beth frowned. She'd heard from Georgia that Ellie had gone back to her boyfriend Finn, but Georgia had underplayed it. 'It's a passing phase,' had been her words. However, to Beth, Ellie sounded like a young woman completely and passionately committed to making the relationship work.

Beth knew from Georgia that Ellie had asked her for a considerable sum of money to go travelling with Finn. Georgia had refused on a number of grounds, but the main one was her objections to Finn himself. She claimed Ellie was blind to Finn's faults, had too easily forgiven the unfaithfulness, wiped away too readily the time he'd spent in prison for aggravated burglary. Georgia also insisted that if Finn really cared for Ellie, he would give her time to save the money, not threaten to go off without her. It had been obvious to Georgia that the right thing at present was to stand firm and this passing phase would soon be over.

Listening to the fire and intensity of Ellie's words, however, Beth was convinced Georgia underestimated the intensity of Ellie's feelings. The

level of desperation Beth heard had worried her as had Ellie's claim that she had found a way to make Georgia pay. What did she mean by that?

* * *

Beth started to feel the chill of the stone seat and decided to make her way home. They would be wondering where she was and she still had a lot to do to get ready for tomorrow. She was glad that Georgia was going to be amongst the group going out for the day. It was an emotional day for her, being the anniversary of Alistair's death, and Ellie was certainly not going to make Mother's Day special for her.

Beth found Jack and Jessica in the conservatory. It was a lovely evening to sit out there; with side lights it was very cosy.

'We usually have hot chocolate at this time,' said Beth, 'would you like one?'

Jessica thanked her, and once she'd made the drinks, they were all sat in the conservatory.

'Isn't this snug?' said Beth smiling.

Jessica had to agree, it was lovely to spend the evening together and she could feel herself start to relax. However, this wasn't to last long.

Beth looked over at Jack and gave an excited squeal. 'Now, I don't want you to come down in the morning when we do all the presents and feel we have forgotten you. Your gift is coming later in the week.' She smiled at Jack, 'We have promised each other we are going to keep something as a complete surprise for you.'

Jessica sat up, 'Oh please don't worry about me.' And she meant it. For years Julian had been taken up with his church commitments on Mother's Day, and Jack had simply given her flowers and a card.

'Of course we do,' said Beth, 'and I have to say, I can't wait for you to see this.'

Jessica frowned in concentration. This ‘gift’ was something to see? So probably not a meal out, so, what could it be? Maybe a new hobby for her, or clothes? But why the wait?

Jessica felt a rising panic, what was going on? ‘Um, could you give me a hint?’ she asked.

Beth shook her head and laughed, ‘Now where would be the fun in that? No, the big reveal will be on Thursday, there is no way you will guess what this is going to be, but I promise you this could be the best thing that has happened to you for a long time.’ She glanced at Jack, ‘He has promised in blood not to say anything, you will have to wait, but it really is well worth waiting for.’

Jessica looked over at Jack who gave a smile, ‘Don’t worry Mum, it will be fine.’ But as he glanced back at Beth, Jessica could see she was clearly in charge of all this.

And with that Jessica had to be content. She tried to sip her chocolate but all the time she was trying to work out what was happening. She knew that someone like Beth would find it impossible to understand, but she really didn’t like surprises. She liked to plan ahead, prepare, but this was clearly not Beth’s way, all she could do was wait.

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4

SUNDAY

Mother's Day

Jessica woke early. She heard noises in the kitchen downstairs, then the front door slam. Rather than go straight down she decided to do her daily crossword on her phone and then maybe read for a while before facing the family. Oscar had left her, clearly eager for his breakfast. She always liked to start her day solving a puzzle or two. She'd loved them since she was a child. She could become completely engrossed, absorbed in the battle of wits with the setter, and with the entire process of trying to work her way through the puzzle. Then of course there was that brilliant feeling on completion, apparently it gave a hit of dopamine, all she knew was that it set her up for the day.

Jessica began with the daily quick crossword, not the cryptic, despite 'true' puzzlers claiming they were superior. No, she loved the challenge of trawling through the treasure chest of facts and information buried in her brain, amazed at how much was hidden in there.

She completed the crossword and was just getting lost in her novel when Oscar returned.

'Morning,' she said. He jumped onto the bed and curled up on her feet.

The book was called *The Leper of St Giles*. It was part of the medieval crime series she was reading. She was soon lost in the story.

In fact, she was so immersed in her book that she was shocked to see it was past seven. Morning prayer would be at eight. She needed to get a move on.

She saw no one was in the bathroom and decided to shower before she got in anyone's way. Beth had kindly left her a towel, so she grabbed her soap bag and made her way.

Using a strange shower was always a bit of an undertaking. Jessica was quite short and she was relieved to see it wasn't one of those fixed ones with a huge head. She had learned over time that the safest thing was to hold the head in one hand facing down into the bath while she got to grips with the adjustments. Once she had the right temperature and flow, all went well.

Beth was in the kitchen feeding Martha. She turned to Jessica and gave her a huge hug. 'Happy Mother's Day,' she said, grinning and then looked at her more closely. 'I heard you in the shower – were you OK?'

'Yes, it was straightforward, thank you. Happy Mother's Day to you as well. Have you been out?'

'Yes, seeing to my charges.'

'It's a big commitment, isn't it?'

'I suppose so, but I enjoy it. Jack is out with Roxie. Martha is quite a nervous eater, so I like to feed her without Roxie around as he'd just snaffle her food given half a chance. Anyway, what would you like for breakfast?'

'I usually have coffee and toast; I can get it myself—'

'Oh no, not on Mother's Day.'

Jessica gave her a searching smile, 'I'm assuming you made your own breakfast.'

'Well, of course.'

'Then I'm sure I can do my own as well.'

Jessica noticed Beth wince and was afraid the words had come out more sharply than she meant. Julian had called it her ‘headmistress’ voice and claimed she terrified some of the parishioners.

‘OK. Well, there’s coffee in the pot; the bread is sliced in the bread bin; the toaster is there, all set up; there’s spread in the fridge and marmalade in the cupboard over there.’

‘Perfect, thank you.’

As she made her breakfast, she noticed Beth taking a banner out of the drawer.

‘I’ve been putting this same “Happy Mother’s Day” banner up since the children were little.’

She used drawing pins to attach it to some pictures hanging on the wall.

‘Now, today,’ Jessica said, sitting opposite Beth. ‘I was wondering where are we going?’

Beth laughed. ‘Don’t look so worried. I’ve organised a staggered arrangement. Thank God the weather is holding up. Some of us will go to the quarry and then along the coast to St Aldhelm’s chapel. There’s a car park not far from there so Pippa and Ray will park there and walk to the chapel. I could ask them to ring you when they plan to leave, and you can walk down to their house and get a lift. The only problem could be the next part, which is down to Chapman’s Pool. It’s quite a clamber. Jack has worked out a route that avoids the hard flights of steps but it’s still a real hike down. Fortunately, it’s been dry, so it’s not too muddy, but Jack will stay at the top with you if it’s too much.’

Jessica took a deep breath. ‘I am quite capable of walking both to the quarry and down to the pool.’ She knew her voice was sharp now, but she didn’t care. She was not going to be turned into some old lady she didn’t recognise.

Beth bit her lip. ‘I’m sorry. People don’t realise how hilly and hard it can be. These places don’t look far on the map, but they are not easy.’

‘I walk a lot back home. Julian and I would go out in the Chilterns and take holidays in the Peak District and on the Isle of Wight. I’ve brought good boots with me.’

Beth shrugged. ‘Well, OK. Of course you can join in the whole thing. But if it’s getting too much, you must say. And don’t worry about food, I’ve got all that organised.’

‘Thank you, you’ve worked really hard putting all this on,’ said Jessica and stood up and put her plate in the dishwasher. ‘Now, I’m off to church. What time will we be leaving?’

‘About half eleven. We’ll do presents and cards when you get back from church.’ She grinned, ‘Well, some of them anyway.’

As she set off down the road to the church, Jessica tried to calm herself down.

Entering the church porch, she could hear an organ playing quietly inside. It had been a while since she’d been to church. In fact, after Julian died, she hadn’t gone for about a year. It was so confusing to know what her role was. A new vicar had replaced Julian and it was better to stay away, let them establish themselves. She’d tried going to one or two other local churches, but everybody knew her and looked unsure as to what to do with her.

Coming here this morning, though, was definitely easier.

There were few people at the early morning service, but that suited Jessica. Led by Vincent, the vicar, it was more formal than Jessica was used to. Vincent and the small choir wore traditional vestments and closely adhered to the prayer book. The organist played traditional hymns. However, Jessica appreciated the quiet, thoughtful service. Glancing around, she noticed there were none of the banners seen in more modern churches, but the brasses shone and there were fresh flower arrangements.

After the service, the vicar shook hands with every member, unrushed and listening to each person. He was a man who she guessed had always

looked old for his age: balding, with silver-grey hair and beard. He had a neglected look. Although his robes were all neatly pressed, his plain, round steel-rimmed glasses were held together at a hinge with Sellotape.

For all that, he had a gentle smile, and there was kindness behind those tired eyes.

‘Good morning, lovely to meet you. If you give me a moment, I’d love to say hello properly.’

Jessica found herself waiting in the porch. Why were all porches in old churches, even on the hottest days, such cold and depressing places?

‘Am I right in thinking you’re Jack’s mum? Happy Mothering Sunday. How lovely for Jack and Beth to have you with them.’

‘Thank you for the service.’

‘I understand you were married to the Reverend Julian Hall?’

Jessica took a breath, shocked initially at hearing Julian’s name spoken so casually but also at the coincidence of stumbling across someone who knew Julian.

Vincent seemed to read her mind. ‘Sorry, the Anglican Ministry is a small world.’ And then he continued, ‘I met Julian once at a meeting in London, a good man, very committed to his parish. People think of Oxford as full of the rich and academic, but there is also a quite different side to it.’

‘There is, and Julian worked hard.’

‘I’m sure he found you a great support,’ said Vincent. ‘I have made the choice to remain celibate, but I appreciate the support a spouse must offer.’ He rubbed his forehead, sighed deeply, and looked into the distance. ‘It was incredibly sad that your husband passed so young. You must miss him terribly.’

‘I do. It’s been two years now; I’m not sure where that time has gone. So, where is your vicarage?’

Vincent pointed towards a low dry-stone wall to her right. ‘My garden is the other side of that wall. It’s quite a small house. I’m so glad not to have

the original vicarage; it was enormous.'

'But that's how they used to build vicarages, isn't it? People had large families back then.'

'Was your vicarage some old mansion?'

Jessica described the modern estate house where she and Julian had lived. She'd actually quite liked it as a house. It was extremely easy to clean and keep tidy. It had a separate entrance to the study for when people came to see Julian. However, for all that, people seemed to naturally gravitate to the rest of the downstairs.

'We always seemed to have someone around. Do you find that?'

'Probably not as much as you. My larger congregations are in the other two churches, so people are less likely to be popping in. I think it makes a difference with me being single as well. To be honest, I'm more likely to chat to people out the front of the house or over the wall.'

They continued looking around the churchyard until they reached the grave of Benjamin and Elizabeth Jesty. 'Benjamin actually experimented with vaccinations against smallpox twenty-two years before Jenner. Mind you, I think he nearly killed his wife in the process, but in the end, she survived him.'

When they returned to the front of the church, he said, 'It's been nice chatting to you, Jessica. I'll be seeing you again later. I'm meeting up with everybody at the chapel. Beth insisted I join the Mother's Day outing, even though as I told her I strictly don't qualify. However, she informed me I was in effect mother to lots of people in the congregation and I deserved a treat.'

'That was kind.'

'Beth is. She brings me round cakes; she helps clean the church even though she doesn't attend. She has this rare kind of empathy. She will notice when I'm tired or unwell before anyone else. And you know what this job is like: it can be exhausting.'

For a moment Jessica saw the smile fade.

He glanced around and closed the main church door behind them. As he went to lock it, he dropped the key, and she noticed he had difficulty picking it up.

‘Sorry, just a twinge,’ was all he said.

Vincent glanced over and waved at a tall woman in her late forties: blonde bob, dark green gilet, and trousers. She was walking away from them but he shouted her name. ‘That’s the woman we have to thank for transforming our churchyard. Georgia is a professional gardener. She’s worked so hard out here.’ He paused, then added more quietly, ‘I used to think she was an angel.’ He paused again, then continued, ‘Now, I must go but do have a look around… See you later.’

It was very peaceful out here. A robin sang his heart out, and a group of sparrows fussed around in the hedges. The morning was glorious with warmth in the sun, and away in the distance Jessica could see the sea.

She made her way to an extension of the churchyard where there were more recent graves. In the corner she spotted Georgia placing flowers on one of them.

She smiled at Jessica and stood up. ‘Good morning, lovely to see the sun out. Are you visiting?’

‘Yes, I’m staying with Jack and Beth – they live close by.’

‘Ah, you must be Jessica?’

Of course, this was village life, thought Jessica. She had to admit it was rather nice to have Vincent and now this woman know who she was.

She held her hand out. ‘I’m Georgia. Good to meet you.’ Jessica noticed a small bunch of pansies in her other hand. Georgia explained, ‘I don’t know who put these on Alistair’s grave, they’re already dying. Actually, I can’t stand them. They have those nasty little faces; it always seems to me that they are giving me the evil eye. I said that to Ellie but still she grows them in pots.’ She then nodded towards some pansies growing in a border.

‘I didn’t plant them, someone else in the team did, and they’ve self-seeded and spread.’

Georgia glanced back at the grave, and sighed. ‘A year since I lost him, hard to believe. Alistair was the doctor here and people still come up to me and tell me how much they miss him. Maybe you’ve had the same; I hear your husband was a vicar?’

‘He was and yes, a lot of people were very upset when he died; he touched a lot of lives, as I’m sure your husband did.’ Jessica glanced around the graveyard. ‘I know how much work just maintaining a graveyard like this is. What you’ve created here is really special.’

‘Thanks, yes. It’s been a long project but coming together now. I try to keep part of it wild and then have a few more cultivated borders closer to the graves where people are visiting. It’s not all my work, obviously. We have a team. Even Vincent helps when he can, but he has to mind his back.’

‘Oh yes, I noticed that when he was locking up.’

‘It’s been going on for over a year now and it’s getting worse. He went to Alistair but refused the painkillers Alistair tried to prescribe. Apparently, he said he would never touch anything that was addictive.’ Georgia paused. ‘That’s his story anyway. Shame he’s not got a decent wife to talk some sense into him.’

‘He told me he’d chosen to remain celibate.’

‘That’s another ridiculous idea of his. Married to the church, isn’t that what they say? It’s absurd. Members of the clergy need support; it’s a difficult and demanding job, as you know too well.’

‘If remaining celibate is something Vincent believes in, he’s allowed to make that choice,’ said Jessica gently but firmly.

Georgia pursed her lips. ‘But his choices affect how he does his job. I feel sorry for the man, he is struggling and in pain. Pippa and I have said to him, if he wants to continue serving the people here, he has to rethink some

things. To be honest, we are not prepared to stand back and do nothing if he wants to continue working here.'

Jessica sighed. She was used to listening to dissatisfied parishioners, but it seemed to her, even from her brief contact with him, that Vincent was trying to do a good job here.

Jessica glanced around the beautiful spot, looking out over fields and breathing in the saltiness and freshness of the air. It reminded her much more of her childhood on the Isle of Wight than her present home in Oxford.

'You will be coming on the walk later?' said Georgia, fortunately changing the subject. 'Beth said you might be meeting us at the chapel.'

'I'm hoping to walk to the quarry as well.'

'Excellent. It's a gorgeous day for a walk. You'll get a chance to meet a few others in the village: it's a truly kind gesture by Beth. I mean, she could just tuck herself away with her family, but she's gathering us all together.'

Georgia leant down and made one more adjustment to the camellias she'd been placing at her husband's grave, then they walked back on through the graveyard. Jessica remembered the camellia on the bookmark that Beth was making for Georgia's gift bag.

'Alistair loved the garden. Roses were his favourite. It's a bit early for them, so I've been bringing up camellias which are gorgeous.'

Eventually they reached the gate.

'Right then, better get home, not that there's going to be any Mother's Day breakfast waiting for me – still, we look forward to the walk later.'

Georgia strode off down the village; Jessica made her way back.

As Jessica entered the house, she heard music and laughter coming from the kitchen. She went in. Although it was only Jack, Beth, Rhiannon, and the animals, it felt crowded and noisy, and overwhelming to Jessica who stepped back.

As if sensing her discomfort, Jack called out, ‘Happy Mother’s Day,’ and, grabbing a card from the sideboard, handed it to Jessica.

Jessica opened a card with a beautiful photo of a seascape.

‘That’s Chapman’s Pool where we’re going today,’ explained Beth.

‘You know they detonated an old hand grenade down there the other day,’ said Jack with a grin. ‘I think that’s seven hand grenades they found in this area over the last few weeks.’

‘I’m sure there won’t be any today,’ said Beth, laughing. ‘It’s a beautiful, secluded cove which was famous for smuggling in days gone by. Most importantly, because it’s a hell of a climb it’s always pretty empty.’

Jessica noticed a row of cards. In addition to the ones from Rhiannon and Owen was a large one covered in flowers – ‘To my wife on Mother’s Day’ from Jack – and cards from the dogs and cat. It seemed a bit over the top to Jessica, but Beth was glowing.

There was also a large bouquet of flowers in a vase, and some perfume.

‘I’ve been very spoilt,’ said Beth, smiling. ‘Now, we haven’t forgotten you.’ She handed Jessica a bunch of flowers, adding, ‘As I said, your main gift will be later, actually on Thursday.’ She gave an excited grin to Jack.

Jack smiled at his mum. ‘Don’t look so worried, Mum, it will be fine, now come and have some croissant I heated up this morning.’

At eleven, Beth, Rhiannon and Jessica left and headed for Georgia’s. As they walked down the road, Beth pointed to a beautiful house close to the duck pond. ‘That’s Pippa and Ray’s. They’ve been in the village about ten years, I think. Behind their house further up you can see where Tanya lives – she rents from Georgia.’

‘It looks a lovely little bungalow. The houses here are so scattered around, aren’t they? I noticed I could see right into a neighbour’s house from my bedroom window.’

Beth laughed. ‘No secrets in a village. Ah, here we are. This is Georgia’s.’

The house was called Misselthwaite. Jessica tried to remember why that name was familiar, but before she could bring it to mind Beth pointed to a wooden sign hanging on the door handle which said, ‘In the garden.’

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Beth turned a black ring on the wooden gate and they entered. There were trees and well-kept shrubs, then to the right an inner-walled Victorian-style kitchen garden, although it was surrounded by dry-stone walls rather than red brick.

‘I’m in here,’ shouted Georgia from behind the wall.

‘How on earth do we get in?’ asked Jessica.

Beth led them to a door, covered in ivy. To the right was a little stone robin and to the left an old, padlocked bike leant against the wall.

Jessica held her breath as they entered what felt like some other world; this was no ordinary kitchen garden.

It was on the brink of waking, with twiggy branches of climbing roses on the walls and some trees with tiny buds just showing. However, the lawn was covered in daffodils, narcissi, primroses and a magnificent magnolia, its white buds opening to the sun.

Then Jessica realised the significance of the house name.

As Georgia walked towards them, Jessica smiled. ‘Your own secret garden.’

Georgia smiled back, gratified. ‘Exactly. I loved that book when I was a child. I identified with Mary. I was lonely, never quite fitted in and gardening was my escape. It saved me.’

‘It’s beautiful,’ said Rhiannon. ‘I can’t believe I’ve never been in here. Ellie has never mentioned it.’

‘I’m afraid she has lost interest as she’s got older. This was all set up for her. I read her the book so many times and she came out here and helped me build and design it. Her dad loved it as well. We would have picnics out here.’ She smiled sadly at the bittersweet memory.

The stone paths meandered between bushes and trees so you never knew what was going to be around the next corner. It was a riot of spring colour: late snowdrops, daffodils, primroses, and crocuses.

‘Like Mary in the book, I try not to keep this place too tidy. She said it wouldn’t feel like a secret garden then, would it? And I agree.’

They found an old-fashioned sundial and secluded stone seats, strategically placed in sunny corners.

‘So much of it looks dead at the moment,’ said Georgia, pointing to the tangled twigs and branches that sprawled along the stone walls, ‘but soon they will be covered in green leaves and roses. The smell is heavenly.’

‘But it’s not all sweetness and light in here, is it?’ The harsh voice startled them all.

‘Morning, Ellie. You’re finally up,’ said Georgia, a slight smile on her lips.

Jessica noticed the smile was not reciprocated. Ellie ignored her stepmother and spoke to the others. ‘I see you’re having the tour. Have you seen the dark side of the garden yet?’

Ellie pointed to a border that stood apart from the rest of the garden. Jessica approached to pick one of the leaves, but Georgia called, ‘I wouldn’t touch those.’

Startled, Jessica withdrew her hand.

Georgia smiled apologetically. ‘Sorry, but it’s not safe to even touch some of these plants. However, despite what Ellie thinks of them, they are stunning and special.’ She leant forward and pointed. ‘I love these white

umbrella flowers. This is hemlock or conium maculatum, also known as Dead Man's Fingers, one of the most poisonous plants in the world, but so pretty.' Then Georgia pointed to a patch where she'd been digging. 'I'm just splitting the roots of my Aconitum napellus. Now is the time to do it. I've moved the roots over by the workshop ready to replant. The flowers are beautiful. Of course, I wear gloves. Just touching any of these plants is dangerous, and swallowing any part of the plant could be deadly, but the flowers are stunning.'

'Wasn't aconite used in executions in ancient times?' asked Jessica.

'Yes, and how cruel; such a very painful death. I wouldn't use any of these on my worst enemy; they would be an excruciating way to die.' She pointed to another plant. 'And this is of course Atropa belladonna, or deadly nightshade.'

'Didn't women in the Middle Ages use it to make their eyes look brighter?' asked Jessica.

'That's right. Obviously, they had no idea they were poisoning themselves, but the berries when they are growing wild are like jewels.'

'You gave that fascinating talk recently in the village hall, we all came, it was very interesting,' said Beth.

'Thanks. People need to know about these things, to protect them.'

'Well, I think it says something about you that you grow plants that could kill people,' said Ellie.

Georgia stared. 'Blimey, Ellie, what's got into you today? If they show anything about me, these plants illustrate my respect and care for all things growing in my garden.'

'Hiya, morning everyone.'

Jessica turned to see a young woman, short, with long blonde hair tied in a high ponytail. She must have been a similar age to Ellie, although she was far more conservatively dressed, wearing jeans, T-shirt, and a sweatshirt. She had a practical backpack on, ready for the walk.

‘Morning, Tanya,’ said Georgia. Turning to Jessica she explained, ‘Tanya is my tenant, and lives over the road behind Ray and Pippa’s. The bungalow used to belong to Alistair’s mother.’

‘And I am so lucky to live there; the views are to die for,’ said Tanya, smiling. ‘Although I don’t keep the garden up to standard, I’m afraid. I’m hopeless with plants. Not like Pippa and Ray, I look over their garden and it’s amazing.’

Georgia nodded but her expression was serious. ‘It is, but last week, I discovered it is hiding some disturbing secrets. I’ve always worried about Pippa and her garden, that she loves it too much, to the point of obsession, as if her life depends on it. However, I think I understand her relationship with her garden more clearly now.’

‘She certainly seems to live out there whatever the weather,’ said Tanya.

‘Actually, Tanya, I discovered an interesting secret in your garden yesterday.’

‘Really? I can’t imagine what and anyway, I didn’t know you’d been over.’

‘Just to put some new bird feed in the old shed. I know you said you like watching them.’ She gave Tanya a sideways look.

‘I do,’ said Tanya, adding, ‘but as I hardly do more than sit out in the garden with a glass of wine, I can’t imagine what secret you discovered there.’

Georgia smiled. ‘Well, it wasn’t exactly a state secret, I have to admit. No, all I found were some old packets of lobelia seeds. You’d never told me that you’d attempted growing plants from seeds. I was impressed.’

‘Thanks,’ said Tanya, ‘not that I was very successful.’

‘No, I didn’t notice any growing. I was looking around. I’ll need to rethink the whole garden when it goes back to being a holiday let. The two sheds take up too much space.’

‘You hadn’t told me you were planning that,’ said Tanya, panic in her voice.

Georgia caught her breath. ‘Oh sorry. I hadn’t meant to bring that up today.’

‘But you can’t do that! This village is my home now. I can’t leave.’

Georgia paused and then replied quietly but firmly, ‘I’m afraid you are going to have to find somewhere else, there are plenty of other rentals around.’

‘Not in the village. They’re all holiday lets apart from the flat above the shop, which is no good for me. I’m allergic to cats, and there are two there. Please, Georgia—’

Jessica could hear the desperation in Tanya’s voice.

‘I realise this isn’t easy for you,’ replied Georgia, ‘but you must have realised there would come a time when you would have to leave.’

Georgia bent down, snapped off the dead bloom from a pink rose bush, and threw it to the ground.

Tanya scowled and started to speak, ‘But—’

Georgia stood upright, held her hand up, ‘No, we won’t talk about this again today, this will keep for another day.’

Tanya pressed her lips together, but her cheeks burned with frustration.

‘Don’t worry, I won’t let her chuck you out,’ interrupted Ellie lightly, apparently oblivious to the tension.

Ellie looked around. ‘Talking of gardens and secrets, I went round to see Vincent the other day. The selection of herbs and potions he grows must rival Georgia’s.’

‘A lot of those are for his herbal teas,’ explained Georgia. ‘I’ve tried to help him sort out that garden, but he says he likes it wild.’ And then she added quietly, ‘Mind you, even he has secrets hidden in his garden, you just have to know where to look to find them.’

Jessica found the insights Georgia gained about people from their gardens fascinating. Georgia's close affinity to gardens and plants seemed to give her a unique understanding of the person who had created that space, as if they had unwittingly exposed themselves and their secrets. As interesting as Jessica found this, she knew that depending on the nature of their secret, some people could find this alarming and threatening. She wondered if Georgia had any idea how dangerous this special gift could be.

Tanya stepped forward and asked Georgia, 'Talking of Vincent's teas and potions, have you shown Jessica your workshop yet?'

'Not yet, but I'm happy to show you all,' said Georgia. 'If we have time, Beth?'

'Of course. I think Jessica will find it interesting.'

Georgia led them to a substantial garden shed where she pointed to a scattering of pots with herbs growing just outside the workshop.

'I grow some herbs close by, especially the horseradish which can be such an invasive plant.'

Georgia leant down, found the key under a stone, and opened the workshop. They all followed her inside.

Jessica stared around in wonder, this was unlike any other 'garden shed' she'd ever been in. Most were full of clutter – the lawnmower, spades, and boxes of muddy forks and trowels – but this was a well-organised space and clearly had quite a specific purpose.

There were long workbenches on either side and on shelves were some tall, labelled jars full of green plants and some kind of liquid. There were also some small brown bottles, again all neatly labelled and dated. At the end of the bench, surprisingly, were a few bottles of vodka.

'I make tinctures – herbs macerated in alcohol – which can be effective against illnesses of all kinds. Alistair thought it was nonsense, but as I said, he didn't know what he was missing.'

‘Dad had some sense. This is hocus-pocus. She’ll poison one of us one day,’ said Ellie.

‘I am far too knowledgeable to do that.’

Ellie turned to Tanya. ‘Fancy checking on your pot?’

Tanya gave an apologetic grimace to Georgia and followed Ellie out of the shed.

Georgia seemed to relax when Ellie left. As she looked around proudly at her workroom, her face lit up.

‘I just love coming in here. It’s a wonderful process making tinctures. I feel myself connecting with the plants.’

‘Why do you have different sized bottles?’ asked Jessica.

‘There are various stages of the process. I start making them in these larger bottles, filling them with the herb or bark or whatever I’m using. See, I have a pestle and mortar, a vegetable mandolin, grater, and knives here to cut the ingredient up very small and then it goes into the jar.’

‘So, what do you use?’

‘Different things. Valerian, elderberries, lavender, marigolds, chamomile flowers, lemon balm, sage. They all help in different ways. I’ve got some horseradish and ginger root here ready to make some more.’

‘So where does the alcohol come in?’ asked Beth.

‘Once you’ve filled the bottle with the herbs or whatever, not too tightly packed, you pour in the vodka, put the lid on, leave it in a dark, cool place, and shake it every day. After a few weeks they are ready to decant.’

Georgia picked up a piece of muslin and a large jug. ‘I strain them into this and then decant into these small dropper bottles.’

‘How often do you take them?’ asked Jessica.

‘Depends. At the moment, I’m using this horseradish and ginger one a couple of times a day. It’s brilliant for clearing my sinuses. It’s why I need to make some more.’

‘But this tincture is full of vodka,’ said Beth, laughing.

‘You literally put a few drops under your tongue, that’s all.’

‘It must be expensive using this amount of vodka.’

‘I use very cheap stuff.’ Georgia picked up a bottle and showed them the label. It simply said Vodka Basics, the only colour a shot of orange. ‘Supermarket own brand,’ she sighed. ‘To drink I like the expensive stuff. Unfortunately, Alistair hated it and I’d never spend out on good stuff for myself.’ She sighed. ‘I’ve been given lots of wholesome gifts over the past year but never vodka. It’s so long since I had a glass. Maybe I’ll put it on my next Christmas list.’

She turned to her shelf and took down a small brown dropper bottle.

‘I need a new bottle of this, the horseradish and ginger. I strained this one at the end of February. Those remaining three bottles are all March. That should keep me going for a while. A bottle lasts a few days. I’ll take this on the walk.’ She tucked a bottle in her pocket.

‘It can’t taste very nice,’ said Beth.

‘Makes your mouth tingle, but I always wash it down with a drink.’

Georgia opened her mouth and carefully took a few drops. She grimaced, looked around, and grabbed a bottle of water, taking a long slug.

‘It looks pretty disgusting,’ said Beth.

‘No, it’s OK, but you need water after – want to try some?’

‘Couldn’t they upset your stomach?’ asked Beth.

‘This isn’t something I’d advise a novice to do. You must know your plants, know exactly what you are doing. You’d never give them to children or pregnant women, anyone with any vulnerabilities. But they help me, and by making my own I know exactly what has gone into them. I don’t go near anything that could be toxic.’ She pointed to the shelves. ‘Everything is labelled and dated as well. And I keep a careful record.’

Beth allowed herself a try of one drop but pulled a face after. ‘That is so hot. My mouth is tingling.’

Georgia laughed and gave her some water.

Jessica politely refused.

As they left, Georgia locked up the shed and they made their way back through the winding paths that led out of this incredibly special garden.

‘Now, I just want to show you what I consider to be the heart of the garden. It’s where the magic begins.’

Georgia took them into a large greenhouse. There were trays of seedlings, organised packets of seeds.

‘I am in awe of seeds.’ She held a seed in her hand. ‘Each seed contains DNA from both parent plants, meaning each seed is genetically unique and not an exact clone of the parent.’

Jessica loved the way Georgia held onto that sense of awe and wonder.

They returned to the garden and listened as Georgia talked about her plans then followed Georgia to Ellie’s pottery. Jessica noticed the pots of pansies close to the door, and thought Georgia wouldn’t like them being there.

‘This is Ellie’s special place,’ said Georgia. ‘She may be earning her money online as an accountant, but this is where her heart is.’

The door was propped open and they could see Tanya and Ellie inside.

‘Come on in,’ said Ellie. ‘It’s not that big, but we can all fit in.’

Inside, they found a pleasant room with white walls. A pottery wheel was to one side and shelves with small vases and model animals were on the other. On the floor was a large container with clay wrapped in plastic. In one corner was a small sink. The main work surface had weighing scales, a covered ball of clay and dishes with tools and sponges. Another workbench had painting materials, brushes, and paper.

Beth picked up a model of a cat. ‘This is really good.’

‘Thanks. I’m getting better. I’m mainly hand-building now. I hardly use the wheel. I’ve found a market for these animals and I love making them. People send me a photo of their pet, and I sculpt it in clay. It’s fun.’

‘I think I will commission some models of Roxie, Oscar and Martha,’ said Beth. ‘I love them.’

Jessica picked up a vase painted in lovely blues and greens.

‘These are so pretty.’

‘Thanks. It’s an interesting technique. You build around a bottle. I love finding a variety of shapes.’

‘Do you have a kiln?’

‘I do, but that’s in a separate concrete building. It was an old outside toilet. It does the job and it’s safe.’

‘And you’ve been teaching Tanya?’ asked Beth.

Tanya laughed. ‘I come in to relax. It’s just a hobby and I’m really not any good, but Ellie puts up with me.’

The workbench was far less organised than Georgia’s workshop. On the table was a small container with soiled white gloves.

‘Why do you wear white gloves for handling pottery?’ asked Beth.

Ellie held out her hands and pointed to small red rough patches. ‘I get eczema, so Tanya brings me these from work. I can’t do all my work in them, but I wear them when I can.’

Tanya smiled. ‘Don’t tell Ray, but those of us who work in his restaurant have to create our own perks; the tips are miserable.’

Ellie grinned and opened a small cupboard door.

‘Our secret stash.’ She revealed a bottle of gin with shot glasses.

Tanya shot her a glare. ‘We all have secrets hidden in here, don’t we Ellie?’

Ellie looked away.

Georgia glanced at one of the larger vases that Ellie had made. ‘Would it be OK if I use this one this evening? I’m planning to go down to the old chapel this evening and I’d like to take some camellias with me for your dad.’

‘Help yourself.’

Georgia chose a pretty blue vase, and they walked with her into the house. She placed the vase on the kitchen worktop and they left through the front door.

Georgia looked over at a small car on the driveway. ‘Have you arranged for someone to come and collect that?’

‘They’re coming in the morning,’ said Ellie. ‘I don’t know how much it will cost…’ She looked sideways at Georgia.

‘Don’t worry. I’ll sort it,’ Georgia replied.

They headed out, down through the village and along a narrow path at the back of some of the houses into open fields. They were on their way.

Jessica held her face to the pale blue sky, not a cloud in sight. Surely this meant a perfect day lay ahead.

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Jessica was enchanted by the wild beauty that surrounded her. It reminded her of the downs where she'd grown up, that magical combination of land and sea. She wanted to fling open her arms and embrace this world, become part of it.

'Beautiful, isn't it?' said Rhiannon gently. 'The chalk grasslands will soon be rich with wildflowers. They attract so many butterflies, including the rare Lulworth skipper.' She sighed. 'I love it here so much. Mam doesn't like me being out here on my own. She thinks I'm safer surrounded by buildings and people. But I find time out here renews me. I love my friends, but I also need time to myself. I have to escape into books or be outdoors. Do you know what I mean?'

Jessica smiled. 'I do. I'm the same.'

'I'm so pleased. Some of my friends think it's very odd. Mam loves having people around all the time, especially family. She always reminds me of one of those sheepdogs: constantly rounding us all up and keeping us together.'

'Family means a lot to your mum.'

'It's everything. She's a proper Welsh mam.' Rhiannon pointed to the surrounding hillside. 'Can you see those curious-looking ridges? They date back to medieval times and were carved into hillsides to provide more

arable land for farming. Worth Stone used to have a much bigger population, and they needed to make this land suitable for farming.'

'How interesting; there's so much history out here.'

'There is. All the way back to the dinosaurs, but there's also a lot of more recent stuff from the wars. It's fascinating.'

'I can see why you love it. But going back to your mum. As you say, she is so Welsh. Why did she ever leave?'

Jessica remembered this thought crossing her mind at Beth and Jack's wedding. There was a strong representation from Beth's family, and it was clear they were all close. Jessica was realising how little she knew about her daughter-in-law.

'Mam took us away for Tad really and it was a big sacrifice. Sorry, Tad is what we call our dads in Wales. Yeah, I was only young, but Mam told me Tad was struggling. He needed a fresh start, so we came to Poole. I never knew the whole story, but when he died Mam talked to me and Owen about moving back to Wales, but we all agreed we'd settled well in this area and so she got the job in Swanage, and then of course Mam met Jack.'

Jessica listened with interest. She'd known Beth was a widow when Jack married her, and that her husband had died young. Jessica had assumed it was through illness, but she sensed there was more to this story. Jack had not wanted to share any details and clearly Rhiannon had been sheltered from the full truth as well.

It felt right to move the conversation on and so Jessica asked, 'After university were you happy to come back to Purbeck?'

'Yes. I love it here, particularly now we've moved to the village. I was never going to want to work up in London. Jack said if I came back and bided my time, he was sure work would come up. So, I got the job in Ray's restaurant for a few months but was just waiting for an opportunity.'

'Did you enjoy the restaurant?'

‘It was OK for a short time. We had a bit of a laugh which helped it along. Some of us would play tricks on each other.’

‘It sounded as if you had fun. I assume Tanya was working there as well?’

‘She was and she still is. We had fun but we also worked really hard. Ray actually offered me a full-time position: promotion to management.’

‘You must have shown potential.’

‘I suppose so, but I knew I was never going to stay. Tanya should be offered something like it. She’s so bright, but of course she won’t stay there forever. It’s just to supplement her studies; she’s doing an online course studying law.’

‘What does she hope to do?’

‘She wants to become a barrister. In fact, she did a year at Oxford but decided to leave.’

‘I’m sorry. Why?’

‘A mix of things. She didn’t feel she quite fitted in, and some boy was being a pain. Anyway, she decided to carry on her studies online. Ellie’s dad, Alistair, knew Tanya’s uncle and offered for her to rent the house. It’s worked out well for her, and now she’s settled with Orson from the pub. She’s very at home here.’

‘She sounded very upset when Georgia mentioned about changing the house back into a holiday let.’

‘Yes, it’s odd really how attached to the village she has become. She’s even talked about saving to buy the house off Alistair and Georgia one day, but that’s not going to happen now, is it?’

‘It seems unusual. Village life must seem very quiet for you young people. How do you find it?’

‘I’m quite happy for now. It’s incredibly convenient. I confess I have looked at a few flats but at the moment I’m very comfy and I’m saving money… so what’s not to love? I would like to get my own place

eventually.’ She took a deep breath. ‘But not too far from here. So that will please Mam!’

They were descending quickly now, and Jessica was aware they would be climbing back up on their return. For all her bravado, she realised she hadn’t done any proper walking for a few years now. However, her pride was certainly going to stop her admitting this to anyone.

Jessica took in the rugged beauty that surrounded her. Despite her concerns about her fitness, it was good to be out here, experiencing a new and beautiful place. She closed her eyes and breathed in the fresh air. Her moment of peace was interrupted by Ellie who was walking behind her.

‘For God’s sake, Finn. Stop being such a prat.’

Jessica looked round. It was clear that the beauty of the day at that moment was being missed by Ellie who appeared to be fully engrossed in a bitter argument on her phone.

They reached the head of Winspit Quarry where the view was incredible. The large area cut out from a cliff resembled the ruins of a great Greek temple, with pillars of stone in shades of gentle creamy grey.

‘Welcome to the planet of Skaro,’ said Rhiannon.

‘Sorry?’

‘They filmed a *Doctor Who* episode here, “Destiny of the Daleks”. You can imagine it, can’t you?’

‘I don’t remember that episode, although Jack loved *Doctor Who* when he was little, I can see why this place was used for an alien planet mind you, just rocks and dust, it’s pretty stark.’

‘More importantly, I guess, is that they used to quarry Portland limestone here and export massive building blocks. The quarry was active until the end of the Second World War. Now it’s famous for its bats, particularly the greater horseshoe bat. We’re not allowed in the caves, but come on down, it’s fascinating.’

They wandered among the pillars and ruins, avoiding the entrance, tempting as it was.

Jessica was ready for a sit down and found a grassy patch. Soon Beth flopped down next to her. ‘Are you OK?’

‘Yes, thanks.’

‘I’m quite out of breath,’ admitted Beth, ‘but there’s a lot more walking yet… Would you like a sweet?’

Rhiannon and Tanya came and sat apart from them on their phones, Rhiannon reading, Tanya sharing selfies.

‘Where are Georgia and Ellie?’ asked Beth, looking around.

It was at that moment they heard Ellie’s raised, angry voice, coming from behind a pillar.

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Jessica could hear Ellie very clearly, her voice harsh and cold. ‘I need to talk to you about me and Finn.’

‘Not now, not here,’ replied Georgia, her voice much lower and measured.

‘But Finn just told me he won’t wait any longer. You have to transfer all the money that is due to me today, you can afford it.’

Jessica glanced at Beth. It was embarrassing to be overhearing such a private conversation, but Beth showed no inclination to move.

‘Your dad wanted you to wait with good reason, when you are older, you’ll be glad to have the money and spend it wisely. You’ll be really sorry if you blow it all on some holiday.’

‘It’s not “some holiday”; this is me investing in my life, living my dream with the man I love.’

‘Oh, Ellie.’

‘Don’t you patronise me. You can’t bear for me to be happy. You only married Dad for his money. You have no idea what real love is.’

Georgia’s voice grew colder as she replied, ‘That’s not true—’

‘It is. And yesterday I found out just what an evil cow you are.’

Beth grabbed Jessica’s arm. ‘Poor Georgia. Should we go and stop this?’

Before Jessica could answer, Ellie continued, ‘Remember, after Dad died, you gave me a copy of his will because I couldn’t believe he was making me wait until I was thirty for my money? I decided to re-read it yesterday. And as I did, I remembered what Cherry said when I showed it to her.’

‘And what did she say?’ asked Georgia quietly.

‘Cherry took the will off me, read it carefully, but then looked confused. She asked me if I was sure I had a copy of the right will? Of course, I said yes, it was the one you gave me. Cherry shook her head, mumbled something about the date being wrong, and saying that’s not when she signed it. Anyway, she handed the will back to me and went to see you.’

‘I think I remember that,’ said Georgia carefully, ‘Cherry had just got confused about the date she witnessed the will.’

‘Yes, she came back to me, told me everything was sorted and not to worry and I accepted it at the time,’ said Ellie.

‘Of course. Cherry was right to reassure you.’

There was a pause, Jessica leant over to Beth, ‘Who is Cherry?’ she whispered.

‘Part-time housekeeper, close family friend,’ said Beth quickly. Jessica nodded, and then they heard Ellie reply.

‘I don’t think so. Yesterday, when I re-read the will, I realised there was a huge problem. You see, Cherry’s signature was nowhere to be found on that will.’

Jessica sat forward, glanced at Beth, who raised her eyebrows, but neither spoke, not wanting to miss Georgia’s reply.

‘I’m not sure where you are going with this,’ said Georgia, but her voice was shaking.

‘What I am thinking is that Cherry had witnessed a different will altogether.’

‘You think your father wrote a second will?’ asked Georgia, her voice a quiet, fragile whisper.

Beth gasped next to Jessica, ‘I can’t believe this!’

There was a brief silence, then Ellie burst out, ‘Oh my God, he did, didn’t he, I can see it in your face, I wasn’t sure until now. Dad wrote another will and you knew about it. Did he leave everything to me? Where is it, bitch? What did you do with it? Did you burn it?’

‘I would never do that.’

‘So, where the hell is it?’

An unsettled silence fell over the quarry, only interrupted by the screeching of a seagull high above them and then, finally Georgia replied. ‘I admit there was another will, but I promise you, you are better off without it. You have to trust me.’

‘Trust you?’ Ellie spat the words out.

‘I promise you are better off not knowing what it says.’ Georgia sounded surer of herself now.

‘You controlling bitch. I decide what’s best for me. I’ll find it. You can’t hide it from me.’

‘I can, you will never find it. You have to accept you can’t change anything.’

There was a pause. Ellie’s reply was ice cold and deliberate. ‘You know, I could destroy you and your life here—’

‘Of course you can’t,’ said Georgia, but then added with less assurance, ‘I mean, how could you?’

‘With words, and I shall start with the truth, tell people there was another will.’

‘No one will believe you.’

‘You’d be surprised. Actually, I suggested it to Vincent last night and I could see he was wavering. It was the mention of Cherry seeming upset, well, it made an impact. I was thinking if people start asking Cherry about

it, well I think she will crack, don't you? Cherry is not a natural liar like you. And, well, once people have accepted there was another will, then the conclusions are obvious. You did it for gain, you are a selfish monster who has screwed me out of what was rightfully mine.'

'You can't do this, Ellie, this has to stop. People here are my friends, they will stick by me,' shouted Georgia, the shock and fear in her voice palpable.

'You don't know what they say behind your back. They already hate you, because of the way you treated Dad in his final days. You bastard. You couldn't even be arsed to be with him when he was dying.'

'Stop!' Georgia screamed.

Ellie's reply was cold, 'This will all stop if you make a deal.'

'A deal?'

'I'll forget the will if you give me all the money I am owed, and of course some compensation, then I disappear. All this goes away. Your choice.'

'Ellie, please,' urged Georgia. There was so much pain and anguish in her voice. Beth started to get up. 'I have to go and help Georgia,' she said.

At that moment, Ellie appeared, red-faced, her lips pressed together. She strode over to her friends and slumped to the ground.

Rhiannon and Tanya continued looking at their phones. They seemed oblivious of the drama that had been unfolding. Tanya simply asked, without looking up, 'All right?'

Ellie, breathing heavily, replied, 'It will be.'

Georgia emerged from behind the pillar. She was wiping her face, trying to compose herself. She approached Beth and Jessica and sat, her body taut and upright, her knees pulled tightly into her chest.

'You OK?' asked Beth gently.

Georgia, frowning, asked nervously, 'Did you hear any of that?'

'Um, only bits…' said Beth.

‘It’s all nonsense,’ said Georgia sharply.

‘Ellie certainly sounded very angry.’

‘She’s desperate, and desperate people say and do terrible things.’ Georgia looked down, dug the toe of her walking shoe into the chalky soil. ‘The trouble is, maybe there is some truth in what she said – many a true word can be spoken in spite.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘She’s right about me neglecting Alistair. I should have been with him in those last days.’

‘You had no idea how ill he was; he kept it from everyone.’

Georgia looked at her sideways, then shook her head. ‘But that’s not true, Beth. In my heart I knew how ill he was, but I was obsessed with a gardening project. I wanted to get it finished. Even when Cherry rang me the day Alistair took so poorly, I stayed on an extra hour. That meant I hit rush hour, so I didn’t make it. You always think there will be more time.’ Georgia dropped her head, squeezed her eyes tight and bit her lip.

‘Look, it was a bad choice, but it wasn’t because you didn’t care,’ said Beth. ‘You just thought you had more time. You mustn’t let guilt eat you up like this. You must forgive yourself or it will destroy you.’

Jessica glanced at Beth. She spoke so sincerely and with such passion. She wondered where the words came from.

Georgia remained hunched over and shook her head. ‘But I don’t deserve forgiveness. You have no idea what kind of person I am.’

Beth moved closer, put her arm around her. ‘I know you loved Alistair very much. Listen, this was always going to be a hard day. It’s why I wanted to be with you. Just you see, things will look better tomorrow.’

Georgia shook her head. ‘No, I have to do more than just wish this away. I have to make amends; I have to put things right. I shall talk to Cherry, apologise, I should have taken her advice. I shall also make things right with Ellie.’

‘I’m sure you will,’ Beth replied. She glanced at her watch. ‘And now it’s time we made our way to the chapel to meet the others. Come on. Things will get better, I promise.’

They began the walk along the coastal path in single file, as the path was so narrow here.

Jessica was pleased to walk alone. The vehemence of the row had been disturbing, and all that talk of wills. What did it mean?

Soon Jessica was able to distract herself and get lost in the beauty of the day. She listened to the waves crashing onto the shingle far below. The sea was joined by the calls of jet-black cormorants, herring gulls, and fulmars. It was stunning.

They finally reached the end of this part of the path and were approaching some buildings ahead of them. They stopped first at a large metal sculpture.

‘That is so cool, isn’t it?’ said Rhiannon. ‘It’s meant to look like two radar dishes arranged to symbolise a large fire basket. You see, it links the celebration of this site being used for the development of radar in World War Two and the fire beacons used to warn of the approaching Armada in 1588… Clever, isn’t it?’

‘It is.’ Jessica looked further ahead and pointed to a smart white building close to the cliff edge. ‘What’s that building?’

‘That’s the coast watch. It’s run by volunteers, like Joe from the village. He was telling me that the coastguards work inland from computers nowadays, but they missed having actual eyes on the coast, so the coast watch here feeds information back to them. Over there are the old coastguard cottages. They’re holiday lets now,’ explained Rhiannon.

Beth came over to them. ‘Right, let’s head to the chapel. I had a text from Jack. The others are walking over from the car park at Renscombe Farm.’

The building they were heading for was unlike any church Jessica had ever seen. It was a tiny, square-shaped stone building. Only the cross on the top gave a clue to its purpose.

‘It’s unique,’ said Beth. ‘Built at the same time as the keep at Corfe Castle. They say it started off life as a lookout and then later became a chapel.’

‘It looks more like a small fortress than a church, so that makes sense,’ said Jessica.

‘There’s only the one window, and that’s like an arrow slit. I suppose it takes a pretty solid building to survive the wind and rain up here on the cliff.’

Jessica noticed Georgia coming towards her. She appeared much calmer now.

‘I love it up here,’ said Georgia. ‘We’re lucky to have it on our doorstep. Alistair and I used to come out here walking whenever we could. It was one of the few ways I could get him to unwind from his work. We renewed our wedding vows in the chapel.’

‘So, it’s still used?’

‘Not for regular services, but for special events. There’s a new altar consecrated by the Archbishop of Canterbury at the time, Rowan Williams.’

They could see a small group of people still a fair way in the distance.

‘Good. They’re on their way,’ said Beth. ‘When they get here, I thought we’d have a moment in the chapel, just to take time to think about our mums, or whatever this day means to people.’

‘That’s a lovely idea,’ said Georgia to Jessica. ‘You know, I always used to give my mum a bowl of daffodils on Mother’s Day. She would plant them out after and they always grew – she had real green fingers.’

‘So, you inherited yours from her?’ asked Jessica.

‘I must have. She gave me my own plot when I was very young. Mum used to leave me short notes under the pots, pretending they were from the

garden fairies. Mind you, she used to leave me little notes inside the house as well. I'd find them on my pillow, or inside my lunch box. If we had a row, she would always say sorry. Before she died, she wrote a letter to me, telling me how much she loved me.' She paused, adding with a smile, 'I know it didn't sound like it today, but me and Ellie have had times of being pretty close. I married Alistair, her dad, when she was ten. I remembered what my mum had done, so I left similar notes for Ellie. Did your mother do anything like that?'

'She never left notes, but we got on well. We lived in an isolated spot on the Isle of Wight, which suited me as I was quite shy and always had my head in a book. Mum thought it a bit odd, but she always supported me, took me into Newport to the library. She was there for me through, well, everything. Like you, I was extremely fortunate.'

'Do you still read a lot?'

'I do. I worked in the Bodleian Library for years and didn't retire until earlier this year. It was wonderful.'

'Oxford is amazing, isn't it? I used to go with Alistair, years ago. He had close friends at Oxford and loved going back to look around the colleges while I usually went to the Botanic Gardens. We always stayed at The Randolph. I'm hoping to visit again soon.'

'Spring is a lovely time to go there,' said Jessica.

The other group was close by now, led by Jack and Roxie along a chalk path across the nearby field.

'Here they come, the slackers,' called Beth, laughing.

A tall middle-aged man with an easy charm and radiant smile stepped forward. 'Happy Mother's Day,' he said, his arms wide as if to embrace them all.

'Morning, Ray,' said Beth. 'This is Jack's mam. She's staying with us.'

'Of course. I heard you were coming,' said Ray. 'Lovely to meet you. I hope you're feeling fit; the climb down is not for the faint-hearted.'

‘I have been warned,’ said Jessica.

‘At least we have a good day for it, and it’s been dry all week, which will help,’ said Ray. ‘Jessica, this is my wife, Pippa.’

Pippa, who had been standing just behind Ray, stepped out. It was the hat which startled Jessica; it was the same as that woman had been wearing on the ferry. Then she noticed the hair, and, despite the sunglasses, she realised this was indeed the same woman.

‘Oh, hello again,’ she said to Pippa.

‘You two have met?’ asked Ray.

‘Yes, on the chain ferry yesterday,’ said Jessica.

Pippa shook her head. ‘Sorry, that wasn’t me. I was in Wareham shopping.’

‘Goodness, you must have a double, a doppelganger,’ said Georgia. ‘Like I said to you the other day, I could have sworn I drove past you in the old town over in Poole, engrossed in coffee with some man.’

‘Like I said,’ insisted Pippa. ‘You were mistaken.’ She spoke with precision and care.

‘You been playing away from home?’ interrupted Ellie, a slight sneer in her voice.

‘I should hope not,’ said Ray, laughing.

Pippa pursed her lips in headmistress-like disdain. ‘That is a ridiculous thing to say, Ellie.’ She turned to Jessica. ‘Tell me, is this your first visit to Purbeck?’

Jessica paused, temporarily wrong-footed. She was sure she had seen Pippa, but she was not going to acknowledge that. She had to move on. ‘Yes, it is. I had no idea how beautiful it is.’

‘So, Beth, shall we do the chapel bit and then get down onto the beach? I’ll be ready for my lunch soon,’ said Ray.

They walked to the front door of the chapel. There was no path, no steps; you walked in straight off the rock-speckled grass.

As Jessica's eyes became accustomed to the lack of light, she could see a central column that supported four vaults. There was a stone font at the entrance, and to the side some old benches looking towards the plain marble altar Georgia had mentioned. Above that, the only window faced the cliff rather than east. There was a kind of beauty in the building's starkness.

They took a seat and Beth stood at the front. 'Make sure your phones are on silent and put away. I know Vincent should be doing this, but even vicars need time off. In any case, there won't be any sermons or prayers. This is just a few moments of quiet for people to reflect, maybe on some of the more difficult aspects of Mother's Day. So, we'll just be still for a few moments and then I'll say when it's time for us to move on.'

Jessica admired the restraint Beth was showing. For someone so chatty she was holding back a lot. The silence was powerful, and Jessica felt her shoulders relax. She was sat next to Pippa. After about a minute she felt a shudder. She saw Pippa clasp a tissue to her face, but she was silent. There were no tears and none of the heart-rending sobs she'd witnessed the day before. Ray slipped his hand onto his wife's knee, but Jessica noticed his hand was clasped in a fist, white knuckles showing. It seemed an intensely private moment and Jessica looked away.

As she did she glanced over at Vincent. She noticed he was rubbing his back and wondered if he also had concerns about the walk down to the cove.

In front of her sat Georgia, leaning forward, her body rigid, her eyes tightly closed as if in earnest prayer. Occasionally she gave a slight determined nod of her head.

Eventually Beth said, 'Thank you everyone. I thought we'd have a quick snack and fortify ourselves for the walk down to Chapman's Pool. Let's go out into the sunshine.'

They sat in small groups outside on the grass, while Beth handed around homemade biscuits, beautifully decorated as flowers. Vincent sat slightly

apart and took out his own biscuits to eat, adding a few drops of oil to them.

‘You’ve brought your own supplies?’ asked Beth.

‘They’re my high-protein ones… they’ll keep me going.’

‘I hope you’re going to share them,’ Tanya said.

‘No, um, no, sorry. I’ve only got a few,’ he stammered.

Tanya grinned. ‘Well, that’s a shame.’

‘I’m glad we came to the chapel,’ said Pippa. ‘I come here on my own sometimes.’ She smiled at Vincent. ‘No offence, but I find it more comfortable than a big church building. There is something very primitive about it, like Celtic… going back in time.’

‘I can understand that,’ said Vincent. ‘I conducted a wedding here, and it was quite special. The bride came on a tractor; her bridesmaids were dressed in white and had garlands in their hair.’

‘Oh, like the film of *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*?’ said Rhiannon.

‘Exactly like that, very like a Hardy novel,’ said Vincent.

‘Will you and Orson get married down here?’ Rhiannon asked Tanya.

Tanya laughed. ‘We’re not even engaged, give us a chance.’ She looked over at the chapel. ‘Anyway, this place is not me at all. I won’t be traipsing around in the mud in my silk dress.’

‘Right, is everyone OK?’ Beth glanced over at Jessica, who smiled at her. ‘I know it’s not easy, but Jack has been over this week and found us a pretty straightforward route, certainly better than climbing over a hundred steps. We just need to take it carefully, and we know the destination will be worth it… just think of all those people squashed together on Swanage beach. If we are lucky, we should have this place to ourselves.’

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The group followed Jack across some fields and then began the walk down a steep, clay path with bramble and gorse bushes either side. Jessica loved the intense aromas, the rich yellows and reds of wild shrubs and bushes.

Beth took over the lead and Jack hung back by Jessica.

‘OK? Thank God it’s not been raining. We came down here after it had been one day and we were slithering and sliding all over the place. Of course, Roxie never has any trouble.’

Jessica was stepping carefully. The last thing she wanted to do was fall. The route was actually pretty manageable as long as she concentrated. She noticed Rhiannon, Tanya and Ellie were getting ahead now, but the older ones were, like her, taking it more slowly.

When they were a good way down, she felt Jack’s arm on hers. ‘It’s worth taking a break here, not just to catch your breath, but to take in the view of the cove. I love it from up here.’

She looked down at the fantastic view of the horseshoe-shaped cove.

‘Apparently, smugglers called it “Dead Man’s Fingers” because of the dangerous rocks and ledges beneath the surface of the sea. There was a famous wreck here; a lot of men lost their lives,’ explained Ray.

‘The calm appearance is deceptive then,’ said Jack. ‘It’s surprising what goes on below the surface.’

They continued to clamber down until they finally reached the rock and shingle beach.

Beth grinned. ‘Look, we’re the only ones down here. Isn’t it wonderful? Like we’ve arrived at our own desert island. Not quite as sandy but so remote.’ She looked around. ‘Right, everyone, picnic.’

They all sat together on the pebbles while Jack and Beth opened the rucksacks.

Beth laid out homemade quiche and cakes. ‘I’ve brought some wine and soft drinks.’

‘And I have my herbal tea to share,’ said Vincent. ‘Mint today.’

‘I’d like to try some,’ said Pippa. ‘I need to get some recipes from you.’

‘Of course,’ replied Vincent.

‘We’ve brought some of Pippa’s excellent homemade jam, and some chutney,’ said Ray, adding them to the picnic.

Beth handed out paper plates and cutlery.

Jessica was impressed; it was an amazing spread for a rough outdoor picnic.

Jack attended to Roxie, who drank thirstily and received treats.

Everyone tucked in, chatting occasionally, complimenting the bakers and cooks, and generally enjoying the fare.

‘Thank you, Beth,’ said Pippa. ‘Happy Mother’s Day. You really understand that Mother’s Day is not just flowers and cards and it’s very generous of you to share your day.’

‘It’s a pleasure, Pippa. Now, there is one more thing to share.’

Beth took out the gift bags and handed them round. ‘The only one that’s a bit different is this one, Georgia.’

Georgia took hers and when she saw the bookmark, ‘A camellia. How thoughtful, thank you.’

After examining their bags, everyone put them into their pockets and rucksacks.

‘Thank you for inviting me,’ said Vincent. ‘You all know I appreciate how fortunate I am to be called to this work in the communities I have been entrusted with.’ He added with a smile, ‘They will have to drag me screaming and shouting from this place.’

Jessica remembered her conversation with Georgia earlier and glanced over at her. She was sat back eating an apple, apparently content to let the remark go unchecked.

‘We are lucky to have you,’ said Beth. ‘There aren’t many people left living and working in villages like ours. We were so fortunate when we had Alistair living here.’

‘But at least we still have a practice here, even if it’s only a few days a week. And the new doctor is particularly good.’

‘She is lovely, isn’t she?’ said Beth. ‘I worried we’d not be able to replace Alistair. He was always willing to listen. Even though he was part of the village you knew what you said didn’t go any further.’

Ellie let out a cold guffaw which seemed to cut through the gentle, undemanding conversation. ‘You believe that?’ she said. ‘My father would sit there with his whisky and pour everything out to Georgia… Although it was so frustrating, I’d hear a name and then he’d lower his voice. I never heard the juicy details about any of you.’

Pippa opened her eyes, wide, and turned very red. ‘I trust you are joking, Ellie.’

Georgia looked over at her thoughtfully. ‘Alistair knew I’d never share any confidences. Sometimes it was just his opinion about someone, and I’d not agree with him initially, but he was often proved right.’ She looked ahead, then spoke quietly. ‘I remember him saying you never really know someone, do you? People present one story to the world and then you notice or find one little thing and realise quite the opposite is true.’

Despite the gentleness of her tone, Jessica felt a sense of threat in the words.

‘I had no idea he spoke to you like that,’ said Pippa. ‘It was very wrong of him. He shouldn’t have said anything to anyone.’ She sounded very cross indeed.

Georgia turned to her, speaking sternly, ‘We were husband and wife; of course we talked about things that affected us. How can you call it a happy marriage if you are keeping secrets from each other?’

Pippa shot her a glare then looked away. An uneasy silence fell on the group.

It was Tanya who finally spoke, and she seemed to go off at a complete tangent. ‘So, have you all heard about our new chef at the restaurant?’

Georgia frowned. ‘A new chef? Alex was chosen because of his commitment to our vision of field to table. Why on earth did he leave?’

Ray shrugged but didn’t meet her eye. ‘Sorry, everything happened so quickly. Chefs move on all the time. He’s gone to somewhere in Manchester, I think. This new chap is exceptionally good. You’ll like him.’

‘It’s exciting,’ said Pippa. ‘Ray has a very special event coming up, a relaunch.’

‘Why does it need a relaunch?’ demanded Georgia.

‘I can explain it all to you. Don’t worry.’

‘You should invite everyone to this open evening,’ said Pippa, who seemed to have recovered from her earlier upset.

‘No, no,’ said Ray. ‘It’s not that big of a deal.’

‘Yes, it is. It’s going to be quite an evening: critics and press invited, black tie, the lot. All to introduce our new chef to the world. This should put the restaurant on the map.’

Jessica listened to the interchange between Pippa and Ray with interest. Pippa was speaking up and, although Ray was clearly wanting her to back off, she was refusing to do so.

‘Well, I’d like to come,’ said Georgia.

‘Of course, I was going to invite you.’ Ray looked around. ‘And the rest of you are welcome to come as my guests. I will email you the details.’

‘Do I get to be waited on for once?’ asked Tanya.

He shook his head. ‘I’m afraid you’ll be working.’

‘You’ll have to get Orson to take you there,’ said Beth.

‘I’d be paying out of my savings, as he doesn’t earn enough,’ said Tanya. ‘Unless we could have a meal on the house…’ she said teasingly to Ray. He smiled but didn’t reply.

Meanwhile, Georgia had taken one of her bottles of tinctures from her bag and was squeezing a few drops under her tongue.

‘Which one is that?’ Pippa asked.

Georgia held it out and explained it was the horseradish and ginger tincture.

‘How often do you take it?’

‘A couple of times a day at the moment. I must admit, I wish there was an easier way of taking them than under my tongue. It’s quite a fiddle. Sometimes I manage to miss, and it drips down my chin.’

‘Do you really find they help?’ said Pippa. ‘I can’t imagine Alistair thought much of them.’

‘He thought they were a placebo, which obviously I don’t. However, he knew that if there was anything seriously wrong, I’d go to the right place and get help.’ Georgia looked directly at Vincent.

‘Fair enough,’ he replied with a smile.

Georgia screwed on the lid and zipped the bottle back in her bag then turned to Ray. ‘Could I have a quick word with you?’

‘Of course. There’s something I wanted to ask you about as well. Let’s go for a walk.’

Pippa sat up and cast a concerned look at Ray. He replied with a reassuring smile as he and Georgia walked away. After they’d left, Tanya

turned to Rhiannon. ‘So, how’s work going? I’m sure you have charmed them all and are getting plenty of good stories out your way.’

Rhiannon narrowed her eyes. ‘I’m very junior. I have to earn that privilege like anyone else. How are things with you, Ellie? How’s the online accountancy going?’

‘It’s deadly. Honestly, if I stay in it much longer, I’ll go mad.’ She glared at Georgia.

Beth led the conversation to calmer ground while Jessica looked over at Georgia and Ray. Georgia appeared quite relaxed, but Ray was gesticulating madly and seemed to be far more animated. She noticed Pippa watching them as well, her eyes screwed up, frown lines buried deep on her forehead.

‘Good to see those two talking again,’ said Ellie, interrupting Beth’s conversation about the up-and-coming Easter fair in the village. ‘Georgia’s not been over to the restaurant garden for a while, and I assumed they’d had a lover’s tiff. She’d practically been living there.’

Pippa pursed her lips. ‘Georgia’s original role was to set up the garden at the restaurant last year. But there are staff now to take care of the garden. However, Ray is grateful for the amount of work she puts into recommending and promoting the restaurant, Georgia has a lot of business contacts.’

‘But they must have got close,’ persisted Ellie. ‘Georgia is an attractive woman. They make quite a pair. Looking over at them, Georgia’s not exactly a grieving widow, is she?’

Pippa glanced over at her husband and Georgia. Ray was certainly speaking very intensely. Pippa’s face was red hot now. Jessica noticed she was crushing the crumbs of a cake between her thumb and fingers.

‘That’s not funny Ellie.’

‘Who said I was joking?’

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Pippa took a breath as if reining in some strong emotion. Her voice was tight when she finally replied. ‘Ray and I have a happy marriage. I find the comments earlier about me and some man and now Ray and Georgia very hurtful. I know it’s all a laugh to you young people, but our marriage vows were made in the sight of God and are sacred.’

Ellie blushed and looked down.

‘Pippa’s right,’ said Beth sharply. ‘You need to stop upsetting people. This is meant to be a relaxing day out.’

Ellie shrugged and looked away.

Jessica quietly stood up and went for a walk on her own. She could see Georgia and Ray walking ahead. They seemed to be heading towards some small huts.

She walked further down the beach. Beth was right. It was lovely down here. She had read about it but was not prepared for how remote and wild it felt. Apparently, you could swim here, although the beach shelved suddenly into deep water.

She began searching and was amazed at how many fossilised shells and even large, intact ammonites she discovered on the rocks.

She was leaning down, picking up what looked like a fossil when she saw Rhiannon approach.

‘I see you’re escaping the heat back there… I don’t know what’s got into Ellie today.’ Rhiannon looked around. ‘So, what do you think?’

‘I think it’s magical. It has a kind of untamed beauty. I’ve seen mentions of it in your paper, about the problems with prevailing winds washing up a lot of plastics and other marine litter here.’

‘It’s a real problem, but huge efforts are made by the local community to clean it up. It’s not easy though, carting all the waste back up that path.’ Rhiannon took a beat and then added, ‘You read our paper? I’m impressed.’

‘I subscribe online, partly because it’s where Jack works but also it gives me a feel for where you all live. It’s the reason I’ve read a few books about the area and novels set around here.’

Rhiannon seemed pleased. ‘I think that’s really lovely.’ And then looking behind them said, ‘Oh, Jack’s on his way. I’ll leave you to have a chat.’

‘Found any fossils?’ Jack asked her.

‘The most interesting are imbedded in the larger rocks, but that’s quite nice; it means everyone can enjoy them.’

‘I remember you taking me to see the dinosaur footprints at Compton when we visited Granny and Grandad. You know they’ve discovered some over at Spyway close to here. A huge number preserved in the limestone. Prints from over one hundred and forty million years ago – I can’t get my head around that. I’ll have to take you.’

‘I’d love that. Just think, the same dinosaurs who walked here could have walked on the island. It’s no wonder these two places feel so connected.’

‘I was hoping you’d feel that.’ He looked around, and she saw the same thrill she’d seen on Jack’s face when he was a little boy visiting Compton.

‘You really love it here, don’t you?’ she said.

‘I do. And it means a lot to me to finally share it with you.’

They began to walk further along the beach. Jessica was aware they were approaching Georgia and Ray, but they looked engrossed in their conversation and decided it was best to keep out of their way.

‘I worry about you getting lonely in that house,’ continued Jack.

‘You must never do that. I am happy in my own company, as long as I have my puzzles and books,’ she said gently. ‘It’s a rare gift and I know how lucky I am.’

‘You are. Most people hate solitude. You and Beth are at opposite ends of a spectrum… I fall somewhere in the middle. I like people, heaven knows I need that in my job, but I also need time alone to recharge.’

They were then both distracted by Ray speaking loudly to Georgia. ‘You can’t break up this relationship; it’s too important.’

Jessica was intrigued. Did this mean Ellie was right and these two were having an affair?

Jack’s eyebrows shot up, and he took hold of his mother’s elbow. ‘Better leave them to it. Let’s head back. I could do with some more grub. Beth is a wonderful cook you know.’ He rubbed his tummy. ‘As my spreading girth bears testimony – good job there are plenty of places to walk around here.’

They went to join the others at the picnic, where Beth was packing up.

‘Hey, hold on,’ called Jack. ‘Let me grab some cake. I need it to get back up that slope.’

Georgia and Ray were returning now. Georgia gave them all a brief, efficient smile, but Ray was looking stern.

‘OK then, everyone. I know we’ve not had that long here, but I think we should be getting back. We can take our time,’ said Beth.

Jessica placed herself at the back, guessing she would be slower than the rest.

They walked at a steady pace, a quiet group now.

When they reached the top of the steep slope, everyone was out of breath but had a glow of smugness about them for completing the ascent. Roxie looked ready to carry on.

‘Well done everyone,’ said Beth. ‘Not far now,’ she said to Jessica. ‘There’s a car park over the field and Jack will drive us home.’

Jessica wasn’t going to admit it, but she was glad the walk was coming to a close, it had been a lot harder than she’d expected.

It was late afternoon now, and as it was only March, the day had the feeling of closing in.

Jessica found herself walking with Tanya, Beth and Georgia.

‘So where do you call home, Tanya?’ Jessica asked.

‘The village now,’ said Tanya, ‘but my roots are in Northumberland.’

‘Did you live anywhere near Barter Books?’

‘I did. Alnwick is my hometown,’ said Tanya.

‘You’re so lucky,’ said Jessica. ‘I went every day when I was on holiday up there.’ She turned to Georgia. ‘It’s an incredible second-hand bookshop with some really rare books. The building is a converted railway station.’ She paused and then added, ‘There’s a castle and gardens there as well, aren’t there?’

‘There are. They used the castle for the *Harry Potter* films. You can learn to ride a broomstick there now,’ said Tanya, laughing.

‘The gardens were fascinating as well. We went on a tour there if I remember.’

‘Didn’t you say you had a holiday job there?’ asked Georgia. ‘I’d have expected you to be an expert on growing things from seed working there.’

‘Well, I’m not,’ said Tanya, a hint of irritation in her voice. ‘I have just had a few feeble attempts.’

‘You made an interesting choice of seeds.’

‘They looked easy; that was all.’

Their eyes met, then Tanya scowled and looked away.

Jessica, not understanding the subtext of whatever was going on here, said, ‘Do you miss living up there? You’re a long way from home.’

‘Not at all. As I said before, this village is my home now.’ Tanya cast a look towards Georgia.

Georgia didn’t respond but turned to Jessica. ‘The garden I know really well is actually your botanic gardens in Oxford. I want to go again soon, and also have a good look at Magdalen, see the deer park, catch up with Alistair’s friend there. I just love the houses in the city.’

Tanya walked over to Ellie. Georgia asked Jessica, ‘Do you have many plans this week?’

‘We’ve not talked about them yet.’

‘I’m sure Beth will keep you busy, she has endless energy.’

They carried on until they arrived back at the car park and the group stood around together.

Vincent formally thanked Beth for arranging the walk and the picnic.

Beth looked over at Georgia. ‘When you asked Ellie for a vase, you said you were planning to bring down flowers to the chapel later. Is that still on the cards?’

‘Definitely. I’m going to be joined by Freya from the Twitchers – that was Alistair’s quiz team,’ Georgia explained to Jessica. ‘It’s extremely sweet of Freya. We’ve arranged to go there together for half an hour or so.’

‘I’m glad you will be with someone,’ said Beth. ‘So you’ll be going to the quiz after?’

‘I had intended to, as the quiz is being held as a kind of memorial to Alistair. However, I have just decided. I need some time on my own, so I’ll stay on after Freya has left, she will understand me missing the quiz.’

‘You can’t stay down there alone,’ protested Beth. ‘It’ll be pitch black, and it’s so isolated.’

‘I’ll be fine. I’ll arrange to have a FaceTime with my sister, Carolina, after Freya goes. She’d like time to think about Alistair as well. After that

I'll just have a short time of remembrance and then come back.'

'I could come and join you after Freya,' suggested Beth. 'I don't like to think of you there on your own.'

'Or I could come. Evening service will be well over by then,' offered Vincent.

'No, seriously, I want to be on my own… it's a kind of vigil. I'll have my phone, I'll be fine.' Georgia glanced at her watch. 'I need to get a move on. I promised to have a go at the border next door to you, Beth, and then a quick snack before going back to the chapel.'

'Right, some of us are off to work,' said Ray. Pippa smiled and added, 'Some of us will be having a well-deserved rest in front of the TV.'

'While others will be studying for the evening,' said Tanya.

'Aren't you coming to the quiz?' asked Ellie.

'Not tonight. Work to do. Orson understands, so you're going?'

'I'll go along later about ten, not to do the quiz, just for a drink. First I shall escape into my pottery,' said Ellie.

'Right, well thanks all for coming,' said Beth.

'Oh, Vincent, could you give me a lift?' enquired Georgia. 'There's something I want to talk to you about.'

* * *

When they returned, Jessica could see the others had things to be getting on with. Jack went to his study and Rhiannon disappeared to her room.

'I'm going to get tea and ring Owen,' said Beth.

'Can I help with tea?'

'Not really. I did most of the work last night.' Beth sighed. 'That wasn't quite the day I'd imagined. What the heck was all that about Alistair having another will? I'll ask Georgia the next time I see her. It all sounds quite

intriguing.’ She turned to Jessica. ‘Anyway, that’s for another day. Do you fancy sitting out in the garden? You must be exhausted.’

Jessica was more exhausted than she liked to let on, and was grateful to go outside with her book, find a sunny spot, and sit down. She was closely followed by Martha, who flopped down next to her. Jessica glanced around the garden. It was neat, with plants in pots, a mowed lawn, and plenty of seats. There was also a children’s climbing frame, basketball hoop, and a barbecue.

Next door she could see Georgia busy at work, but she didn’t call out to her. She was guessing she was happy to be lost in her work. Her mind went back to the row they overheard at the quarry. As she thought about it, Jessica realised this had been so much more than a simple disagreement between parent and stepdaughter. The accusations about the will were serious, and Georgia appeared to admit to hiding a second will. Ellie’s anger and frustration were understandable. However, the venom with which she attacked Georgia and the threats had been disturbing. She wondered how exactly Georgia intended to make things right with Ellie. Was she going to give her the money or maybe show her the will? Jessica couldn’t help but be intrigued.

Inside she could hear Beth laughing on the phone with her son Owen. She was pleased that Beth had heard from him. Although there had been a lot of walking, she had enjoyed the day and seen a different side to Beth: someone generous and thoughtful, who had worked hard to put on an event for everyone.

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Later that evening, Beth went out to check on the pets she was caring for. As she walked down through the village she looked back on the day. It had been more stressful than she'd expected, certainly not helped by Ellie arguing with Georgia and winding people up. It made her appreciate how easy Rhiannon was to live with.

Beth walked down London Row, a set of neat, terraced houses, reflecting the village's past links to London, when the quarried stone was taken to re-lay the streets after the Great Fire of 1666. Further down was a large barn conversion which was the home of an elderly retriever and a cat she looked after. After feeding the cat and making a fuss of her, she took the dog out for a short walk.

Beth headed towards the village pond. The old dog wasn't fast but enjoyed the smells and change of scenery. As she walked past Pippa and Ray's home, she noticed Ray's car was missing, then saw Pippa putting some rubbish in the recycling. She was wearing an old jacket thrown over a T-shirt and comfy trousers but although they looked scruffy, Beth knew the clothes had originally been very expensive. Somehow clothes like that aged graciously like vintage port, in a way her own high street clothes never could.

She felt a wave of weariness and checked her watch. It was only 8.45 p.m., but it felt later; it had been a long day. Beth walked over to Pippa, thinking she should say hello and also remembering she needed to find out what was planned for the next book club meeting, hoping it wasn't something too heavy this time.

'Hiya, how are you after the walk?'

'Exhausted. It was the climb back up that did for me.'

'How did you find the rest of the day? I know Mother's Day can be difficult for you.'

'It is, but it helped being with friends.'

'You said you were going to have another talk with Ray about adopting?'

Pippa sighed. 'I did, but it was hopeless. I have tried to talk to him about all the alternatives, but he says our baby must be from me and him, no other way.'

'But—'

'I know. The doctor said I can't have children, but I know that one day we will,' said Pippa. 'We will have children and our marriage will be stronger than ever, and we shall stay in the house until we are old. Nothing will get in the way of that dream.' She pressed her lips together, glaring into the darkness.

Beth looked down at the empty space on the drive. 'Is Ray out this evening?'

'Yes, he's at the restaurant of course. He'll be late again as well I expect. He always used to come home straight from work at half nine, but now he tends to stay on to work in the office without interruption… Gets more done in those few hours or so than he does all day. He's talked about joining a gym, but I'd see even less of him then.'

'I saw him running the other day; he seems determined to get fit.'

‘He is exercising a lot, isn’t he? We used to go on gentle cycle rides together but he’s too serious for me now. And he’s always watching what he eats. It’s mountains of protein at the moment.’ Pippa looked down and said quietly, ‘You know what they say you should suspect when your husband starts paying extra attention to his appearance.’

‘You aren’t worrying about what Ellie said, are you?’ Beth touched her arm gently. ‘You mustn’t take her seriously; she was in a horrible mood today.’

‘But you can never relax, Beth, never take anything for granted.’ Suddenly she flinched and looked around.

‘Something wrong?’

‘I thought I heard someone over there in the bushes.’

‘No, no one’s there. Your imagination is working overtime.’

‘That’s what Ray says, but I swear I can feel someone watching me lately. I hear footsteps, turn around and there’s no one there. I fell the other day. I could have sworn I felt hands on my back, pushing me.’

‘You need to watch fewer thrillers on TV,’ said Beth. ‘Anyway, back to Georgia and Ray. You must realise Georgia is still grieving for Alistair, and I’m sure Ray would never be unfaithful. Let’s face it, in a village like this, you can’t get away with anything—’

‘I don’t know why you’re so sure about that. If people are determined, they can keep anything secret,’ Pippa said firmly.

A red Range Rover drove past them. ‘That was Tanya, wasn’t it?’ said Beth.

‘Where’s she off to at this time of night?’

‘No idea. Not the right time to be going house hunting.’

‘Why would she be doing that?’ asked Pippa.

Beth explained about what Georgia had said, adding, ‘Tanya was upset about it. Of course, now she’s with Orson, she wants to be nearby.’

‘I do wonder how committed she is to that boy. I never see them out walking together.’

‘She has to pass her exams. He knows that.’

‘Well, she has expensive tastes. I’m not sure how he’ll afford to keep her on a barman’s wages.’

‘That’s a bit old fashioned,’ said Beth. ‘Tanya may well be the main wage earner and there’s nothing wrong with that.’

‘I don’t imagine that’s how Tanya has her life planned out.’ Pippa looked around. ‘Well, it’s time to get back inside. Night then.’

Beth watched her go and decided it was time to take the retriever home. Once he was settled, she began making her own way home. As she walked back up through the village, she noticed that Ellie’s car was still parked but Georgia’s wasn’t. If Georgia was still down at the chapel, she hoped she would return soon. The lights were on in the house. Beth could see Ellie looking out of the window so she waved, not sure if she could see her.

Beth walked up the hill until she was at the church, which was still lit inside. It was very late, but she knew Vincent sometimes went in there at all hours to pray.

Unusually, Beth felt herself drawn to the church. She much preferred churches when they were empty of people. Sometimes when she went to clean, she would sit on her own in the quiet. Beth knew it wasn’t something most people imagined her doing. And that was fair enough. Most of the time she didn’t want to be alone. She liked chatting and being with people. But occasionally she needed to be able to just breathe.

Beth made her way up the path and pushed open the wooden door. She couldn’t see anybody so she guessed Vincent must be in the vestry. Her steps echoed on the stone floor. The air was cold.

She sat down on a wooden pew, closed her eyes, and breathed deeply. Her mind wandered through the day, and she allowed it to pick out those moments of tension that she had so busily been trying to iron over. The hurt

of Owen not being there first thing. She paused. It was OK. She was allowed to feel sad. Then she remembered the phone call and smiled, and there had been a card and present. She had a bond that many children and mothers craved, and she was grateful.

Poor Georgia: she'd not had much of a Mother's Day celebration with Ellie. And then there was Pippa's sadness at not having children, worries about her marriage. No, it hadn't been easy for them. As for Vincent and Ray, she was guessing the day had its problems for them too. Ray wanted children, she understood that, but he was going to have to talk more to Pippa. And then Vincent: did he ever regret not getting married and having a family?

Beth sat back, breathing deeply, and slowly decompressed. It was only then that she was aware of the sound of someone quietly sobbing. It was coming from the vestry. Was this a parishioner talking to Vincent? Maybe she should leave. She wouldn't want them to come out and feel they'd been overheard.

But she couldn't hear any voices… Was it someone on their own who needed help?

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11

Beth crept down the church to the door to the vestry, which was ajar. She pushed it gently and looked in.

Inside, she was shocked to see Vincent on his knees, head in his hands, sobbing.

Normally she would have rushed over, tried to comfort the person in such distress but there was something that told her she was in fact intruding on a very private moment. Vincent would hate for her to find him crying like this.

So, she reluctantly crept back down the aisle of the church, left the building, closed the ancient wooden door as quietly as she could and left. As she did, she heard the clock strike nine.

Beth looked down the street. Just a few lights were on, but most of the village was in darkness. Usually she'd find the scene comforting, knowing everyone was safe and tucked up in bed. However, for some reason, tonight she felt a deep sense of unease. She felt like a stranger looking down, as if the village didn't know her and she didn't know it. Beth shook her head. She had no idea why she was feeling like this; maybe it was natural after an emotional, busy day. She turned and walked as quickly as possible home.

* * *

Beth found Jack with Jessica and Rhiannon in the conservatory, reading.

‘Hot chocolate?’ she asked them both.

‘Thank you,’ said Jessica.

‘Did you find it too much today?’ asked Beth.

Jessica’s legs were starting to ache and she was exhausted. However, she dared not admit to it.

‘I admit it was a bit of a harder walk than I expected but I enjoyed it.’

‘Well, I’m completely knackered,’ said Beth.

‘And me,’ said Rhiannon.

‘I’ll just try ringing Pippa. I saw her then forgot to ask her about the book I need to read for Book Club.’ Beth left the room to make her phone call, but there was no reply. She tried a few more times and then gave up, deciding to go and get on with the drinks.

Eventually, once everyone had their drink, Beth sat down in the conservatory, although not with a book. Instead, she took out some knitting.

‘How’s it coming on?’ Jack asked.

‘Good. This is my second jumper; it’s for a charity in Syria,’ she explained to Jessica.

‘Really? Maybe I should do something like that, if I can remember how to knit, that is.’

‘Let me know if you want to join in. I’ve all the info. I used a pretty simple pattern.’

Jessica had never been very ‘crafty’. Her knitting and sewing skills were minimal, but she admired Beth’s skill.

They sat quietly for a while, then Beth spoke.

‘Something a bit odd just happened when I was out checking on the animals.’

Jack looked up and Beth told him about how she’d found Vincent in the vestry.

‘Poor man. I wonder what has upset him so much,’ said Jack.

‘He carries a lot of stress, doesn’t he?’

Jessica remembered Georgia’s concerns about Vincent being well enough to cope with his job. Maybe he was struggling more than he let on.

‘But what were you doing in the church?’ asked Jack. ‘It’s not like you to be going there late at night.’

‘I feel all unsettled this evening. Today didn’t turn out quite how I’d hoped. Ellie didn’t help, having that row with Georgia and then winding Pippa up on the beach. Then Georgia and Ray went off and had what seemed like a heavy row. It wasn’t the relaxed occasion I imagined.’

‘These special days can be difficult,’ said Jack. ‘You did your best, but you can’t magically make everyone’s problems disappear. Don’t worry about it.’

‘I’ll try not to, but – and I know you’ll both laugh at me – I just have this feeling something is wrong and I can’t quite put my finger on it.’

Jack did indeed laugh. He teased her about her ‘feeling’, then looked at his mother. ‘What’s up, Mum? You look serious.’

Jessica gave a light sigh. ‘I’m sorry… but I agree with Beth. It felt like there was a lot going on under the surface.’ But then she added, ‘Of course, I don’t know everyone as well as you both do, it was simply an impression.’

She checked her watch; it was coming up to quarter to eleven, a late night for her. She stood up with her empty mug and book. ‘Anyway, as my mother would say, tomorrow is another day. Good night both of you, sleep well.’

‘Goodnight,’ said Rhiannon.

‘We’ll be up soon,’ said Beth.

* * *

Monday

Beth was up early the next morning. She had breakfast and went to see to her pet-sitting clients. There was more to do in the mornings, as some just needed one visit a day. There were fish and reptiles to be fed, as well as the cleaning out of hutches and cages.

Once she got going, though, she was efficient. After taking the retriever for a short walk she began heading home.

However, as she approached the pond, she saw Ellie in her front garden. It was very unusual to see her so early in the morning, but then she realised a pick-up truck was driving away with Ellie's car.

'Morning,' Beth called to Ellie as she walked over to her. 'Did you enjoy going to the pub? Had the quiz gone well?'

'All the people who took part seemed to have enjoyed it.'

'Good. I was wondering how Georgia was today. It was a, um, difficult day yesterday.'

'I've no idea how she is.'

From the shortness of the answer, Beth assumed the feud between stepmother and daughter was continuing.

'Ellie, you need to ease off Georgia. This is a tough time—'

Ellie gave a huff of annoyance. 'Look, I don't know how she is because she never came home last night.'

'What, from the chapel?'

'Yup. The last I heard from her was when she shouted bye before leaving to go there. She wasn't here when I got back from the pub at about eleven and her car is still missing.'

'And you're worried?'

'No. She's free to do what she wants,' said Ellie, adding, 'but I did send her a text. She just never answered. She's probably off with some bloke.'

'That's not likely, is it?' said Beth crossly.

Ellie shrugged but looked uncomfortable. 'I suppose not. Look, she'll turn up. I'm going to my pottery.'

And with this Ellie walked back into the house.

Beth, feeling uneasy, returned home where Jack and Rhiannon had already gone to work and Jessica was drinking coffee, Martha lying at her feet.

‘Martha has taken to you; she never does that with me,’ said Beth. ‘How did you sleep? Are you stiff from yesterday? Have you had anything to eat?’

‘I slept well. No, I’m not stiff and, yes, I’ve had toast,’ replied Jessica with a smile. She was getting the hang of these conversations with Beth. But she noticed Beth wasn’t smiling.

‘Are you OK?’ she asked.

‘I’m a bit worried, actually.’

Beth explained about Georgia not returning home.

Jessica put down her coffee. She shared Beth’s uneasiness. It seemed very strange that Georgia hadn’t returned home last night. ‘I don’t think you should ignore your feelings. Why don’t you ring Georgia?’

‘Of course.’ Beth tried phoning but her call went straight to voicemail. She left a message for Georgia to ring her as soon as she could.

Beth put down her phone. ‘That wasn’t very helpful.’

‘Who’s the last person who would have seen Georgia?’

‘I’m guessing Freya. She went to the chapel with her.’

‘Do you have her number? Could you check with her?’

Beth made the call. However, Jessica could see from her face she’d not been reassured. ‘Freya said she definitely stayed on down there alone. She’d not liked leaving her. She tried ringing Georgia first thing to see how she was and got no reply.’

Jessica was feeling increasingly ill at ease. ‘Do you think we should go to the chapel? It’s not far.’

‘You think Georgia could still be there?’

‘I doubt it, but she could have fallen asleep or even be feeling unwell.’

‘That’s true.’ Beth looked more closely at Jessica. ‘I thought you’d say I was overthinking.’

‘No, not at all. Let’s go.’

As they got into the car, Beth said, ‘I know she appears not to care, but I guess we could see if Ellie wants to come with us? She’s without a car and might be more worried than she’s letting on. We’ll call and ask her.’

They went straight to Georgia’s house and round to Ellie’s pottery and told her what they intended to do.

‘You’re that worried?’ Ellie put down the clay she was working with and removed her white gloves. ‘I’ll just go in and check the landline, see if she left a message that way.’

They followed Ellie through the back door and looked on the work surface. There was a note where the camellias had been. Ellie picked it up, read it, then showed it to Beth and Jessica.

I’m sorry for the row. We will sort things out when I come home.

Ellie half smiled. ‘She’s always leaving little notes. Does it with me all the time.’

‘She was going to speak to you, but still hasn’t come home,’ said Beth.

For the first time, Ellie looked concerned. ‘You don’t think she had a fall or something, do you? But then she’d send a text.’

‘We definitely need to go to the chapel,’ said Beth, turning to Ellie. ‘Do you want to come?’

Ellie cringed. ‘I’m meant to be FaceTiming Finn in a minute. And, anyway, someone should be here in case Georgia comes back. I’ll phone you if I have news. And, well, let me know how things go.’

Beth chatted all the way to the car park, speculating about what might have happened, but Jessica stayed silent. She was very worried now.

She was even more concerned when she spotted Georgia's car in the car park. There was a notice saying the car park was shut at 10 p.m. The car must have been there all night. They looked at each other and now even Beth was short of words. They strode quickly along the path towards the chapel.

Despite all the stress, it was a beautiful morning for a walk. Larks were in full song above them. The view was of rolling fields, the sea glistening in front of them.

At the chapel they started calling Georgia's name, but there was no reply. They looked at each other, waiting for the other to push open the door.

It was Jessica who went in first. She whispered Georgia's name as if approaching a frightened animal. 'Georgia, are you here? We're all worried about you.'

There was no reply. They went further in, towards the wall by the altar – and then they saw her.

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12

Jessica and Beth both stood frozen in horror as they stared down at Georgia lying prone on the ground, deathly still. One arm was dramatically reaching out, a finger pointing to the altar. Not far from her hand lay a half-empty bottle of tincture. To her right was smashed glass.

‘What is happening?’ Beth whispered. ‘It doesn’t look real.’

She rushed to Georgia and began to shake her. ‘Georgia, get up.’

There was an acrid smell. Jessica saw that Georgia had been sick. She gently touched Beth’s hand and said, ‘Stop. Go and ring for an ambulance, quickly.’

Jessica turned Georgia over. She knew the basics after being the library first aider, but that usually involved no more than a nosebleed or graze. She had never dealt with an unconscious patient.

She tried to stay calm. *Check for a heartbeat or if the patient is breathing*, she told herself. The staring unseeing eyes told Jessica what she didn’t want to know, but she still checked for a pulse.

‘I think you should talk to them,’ said Beth, holding out the phone.

Jessica explained as clearly as she could how things appeared and was assured someone was on their way. The operator gave her instructions for CPR and despite feeling it was useless, Jessica carried it out.

Beth was sobbing, ‘Can I help? Tell me what to do.’

‘Go and wait outside. Watch for any help coming this way. You can give them directions.’

Beth left quickly.

Jessica’s eye was caught by the tincture bottle on the floor. She could read the label: ‘Horseradish and Ginger’. Yes, that was what she was using the day before, but somehow the bottle looked different. Why was that? Jessica noticed something sticking out of Georgia’s pocket. She realised it was one of the gift bags Beth had given out. She could even see the edge of pink ribbon. Jessica was, for a moment, taken back to sitting on the beach when Beth had given them out. She remembered the look of delight on Georgia’s face at the camellia bookmark. It was hard to believe that had only taken place the day before.

Jessica was startled by the sound of people outside. Beth entered with a group of paramedics. With a huge sense of relief Jessica was able to sit back and let the professionals take over.

A paramedic led both her and Beth over to seats next to the altar and quickly asked them for basic details about Georgia, before returning to her colleagues.

Jessica found herself shaking uncontrollably. She felt terribly sick. Then she was aware of an arm around her shoulder. ‘Shush now,’ said Beth gently and held her. Slowly, the shaking and nausea subsided, and Beth relaxed her hold.

They stayed sitting close to each other, both very still, hardly breathing, staring at the backs of the paramedics.

‘This is surreal,’ whispered Beth. ‘I feel like I’ve wandered into a play.’

‘I know how you feel,’ said Jessica.

Beth grabbed her arm. ‘Oh my God. Ellie, I should phone her.’

Jessica frowned. ‘Maybe wait, just a minute, see what the paramedics say.’

Jessica began to look around and take in her surroundings. A few faint beams of sunlight were shining through the tiny stained-glass window behind the altar and were caught by the shards of glass. As she looked at them more carefully, she could see the remains of a blue and white label scattered among clouded glass.

Her eyes were then drawn to the altar where she saw the camellias in a vase, a candle and a small rustic bunch of pansies. Her eyes became fixated on the pansies. How odd that Georgia should have brought those… she didn't even like them. Then she noticed how the delicate stems were tied together using the pink ribbon with the initial B used by Beth – had it been repurposed from Georgia's gift bag?

And then she was aware of a change in the atmosphere. The sense of urgency had gone. It was replaced by one of resignation. The paramedics sat back.

Jessica recognised what had happened, gritted her teeth.

A paramedic came over. 'I'm so sorry—'

Beth burst into tears, sobbing hard. 'No, no I can't bear it.' Jessica felt painful tears burn her eyes and put her arm around Beth.

'She has a daughter, a stepdaughter, Ellie. She needs to know,' said Beth. 'I should go and tell her. She's at home, in the village.'

'We need you to stay here and answer some questions. We can contact Ellie. How old is she?'

Beth explained the situation.

'Right, the police are on their way. I will talk to them and make sure someone is sent straight there. They know how to break this kind of news, and someone will stay with her. Now, let me take you both outside.'

The freshness of the air, the brightness of the light were shocking.

The paramedic took her to a patch of grass and helped her sit down.

'You've had a nasty shock,' he said. He looked quite tough, well built, with tattoos and a shaved head, and yet he spoke to them gently.

‘She’s really dead?’ Jessica asked. She needed to hear someone confirm it again.

‘I’m so sorry. All the signs are that Georgia died a few hours ago.’ He glanced at Jessica. ‘There was nothing you could have done.’

‘What happened?’

‘Has she been attacked?’ Beth asked.

‘It’s far too early to say.’

At that moment, a police car arrived, bumping along the path. The officers got out and walked over to the chapel.

‘That’s Ruth. She was a few years above Rhiannon at school, but they were friends,’ whispered Beth. ‘Fancy her being a detective in plain clothes now. I remember when she was first in uniform.’

Ruth spotted them and came over. ‘I’m so sorry, Beth. We came as quickly as we could. I heard it’s Georgia, Ellie’s stepmother?’

‘That’s right, I’ve no idea what has happened, but someone needs to tell Ellie—’ Beth’s voice cracked.

‘Of course, let me just check what is happening. I’ll make sure someone is sent to tell her straight away.’

She looked over at the other police officer who was talking to a paramedic. ‘I’d better go but stay here. I’m sure we will want to talk to you.’

Beth began telling Jessica about Ruth and her friendship with Rhiannon. She told her in meticulous detail about the school choir they had both been in, and the concerts they had put on. Jessica guessed that this endless stream was part of Beth’s way of coping, but she needed peace. Fortunately, Jessica had developed a skill of being able to block out chatter. She allowed the words to be carried away on the sea breeze.

The situation was so hard to process. They had found a dead woman, someone who yesterday had appeared healthy and well. And yet you heard stories of people dying suddenly. It was sobering to think how quickly life

could be snuffed out. She pictured Georgia lying on that cold stone floor in the chapel.

The senior police officer came out of the chapel to speak to them.

‘I’m Constable John Fletcher. My deepest condolences on the death of your friend. I’m sure you’re anxious to get home but could I just go over a few things with you?’

He went through some rudimentary questions, asking for Georgia’s details, next of kin and for their own particulars. Then he asked them to give as accurate an account as they could of how they had found Georgia.

‘I’m sorry. I suppose I shouldn’t have moved her, but I was told to do CPR by the operator,’ said Jessica.

‘Of course, that would be procedure. You were right to carry it out. Now, I wonder if you could tell me more about Georgia.’

‘Beth would be much better at that. I hardly knew her.’

‘OK, Beth, have you any idea what Georgia was doing down here?’

Beth went through the whole story, explaining about the anniversary of Alistair’s death and why Georgia had come to the chapel.

‘I see. It seems quite an unusual thing to do, to come down here alone. As there was a smashed bottle of vodka next to her, we assume she had been drinking.’

Jessica blinked, looked up. ‘Oh, the smashed glass – it was alcohol, of course.’

‘Would it be unusual for her to have come out and be drinking down here on her own?’

‘Oh yes,’ said Beth. ‘She never did that kind of thing. The reason she was down here was because yesterday was the anniversary of when she lost her husband and she had planned to come down with a friend to remember him.’

‘Ah, are you able to give me the details of the friend she came with? We obviously need to talk to her as soon as we can.’

‘Of course, I know Freya well.’

The police officer wrote down all Freya’s contact details.

Jessica added, ‘Georgia did tell us all at the end of the walk that she had decided to stay down here alone, after Freya left to go and run the quiz at the pub.’

The constable frowned. ‘It’s very isolated down here.’

‘That’s what we all thought,’ said Beth. ‘Some of us offered to come down but she insisted she wanted time on her own.’ She gave a heavy sigh. ‘What on earth has happened?’

‘It’s very early to say. The forensic pathologist is on their way now. I will leave you for a moment. Do you feel able to stay just a little bit longer? It is very useful to have you on hand.’

Jessica and Beth sat on the grass together and watched the chapel transformed into a crime scene like they had seen on the TV. People kept arriving, some like aliens in their white outfits. Jessica didn’t like to think of Georgia in the chapel surrounded by strangers but knew she would not be allowed back in now.

‘What do you think happened?’ Beth asked Jessica. ‘Did someone come in here and attack her? It’s so isolated out here.’

‘I’ve no idea.’ Jessica thought for a moment. ‘I didn’t see any weapons, no knife or anything.’

‘Nor did I,’ said Beth. She sighed. ‘I think I should go and ring Jack. I won’t be long.’

When she returned, she told Jessica that Jack sent his love. ‘He’s talked about coming home, but I told him we had each other. I expect he’ll get a journalist down here pretty quick.’ She took a breath. ‘I suppose this will be a big story around here.’

Another police officer came to speak to them. He had a more commanding air than the previous uniformed officer as he introduced himself as DS Terry Hutching.

‘Thank you so much for staying. Now, forgive me if you find me repeating previously asked questions. The constable has filled me in, but it would be helpful for me to hear it all again in your own words. Firstly, tell me how you both came to be here this morning.’

Beth went through the morning; the detective took notes and then, moving on, asked them about the walk the day before.

When Beth had finished, the detective thanked her and then went on to say, ‘I sense it was an emotional day for Georgia. Could you tell me how she seemed to you?’

‘She was sad, of course. She talked about her husband.’

‘The constable mentioned Georgia had talked about feeling guilty over not being with her husband when he died.’

‘Yes, she did. It was definitely something that was playing on her mind. And it didn’t help that her stepdaughter Ellie reminded her of it when they had a row.’

DS Hutching looked up. ‘A row?’

‘Oh, it was just one of those things…’

‘Tell me what happened.’

Beth shrugged. ‘Oh Ellie wanted money to go travelling, Georgia refused to give her any. It was then that Ellie brought up about Georgia not being with her father in his last hours.’

‘And how did Georgia seem to you after this row?’

‘She was upset, of course. It had touched a nerve.’

‘How distressed did she seem to you?’

Beth screwed her face up. ‘I wouldn’t say distressed exactly.’ She looked over at Jessica and asked, ‘How would you describe her?’

‘I’d say, like you, she was upset, but also that she was trying to think of ways to make peace with Ellie.’

‘Thank you. Now, we found two small brown bottles which are both labelled “Horseradish and Ginger tincture” – can you tell me anything about

them?’

‘She had two bottles?’ queried Jessica.

‘Yes, one in her bag, one on the ground. Both contain some kind of liquid. The bottles look identical apart from the dates.’

Jessica sat forward. ‘That’s what was wrong. The one on the ground was from the new batch. But that doesn’t make sense. Why start another bottle when she had stuff left in the old one? Georgia was very systematic: she would never start a new bottle before one was finished.’

The detective looked confused and asked her to explain exactly what these tinctures were, and how Georgia came to have them on her. Jessica began to explain the process. The detective asked questions and took careful notes.

When he’d finished, Beth said, ‘If you’re thinking there was something wrong with one of the bottles, something that made her ill, you’re wrong. Georgia was deeply knowledgeable. She would never have made a mistake.’ When she finished the detective nodded and then seemed to move on.

‘Thank you. Now, you mentioned the row with Ellie, how did Georgia seem to get on with everyone else on the walk? I know it sounds odd, but we need to get a clear picture of everything that happened to Georgia yesterday. We will, of course, be talking to everyone who attended.’

Jessica understood their need to get as much information as they could, but she was starting to feel very tired now. DS Hutching seemed to pick up on this and closed his notebook. ‘You have both been extremely helpful. One of my officers will drive you back to Worth Stone.’

‘Actually, my car is in the car park.’

‘Well, we will take you back there then. Do you feel able to drive?’

‘Yes, I’ll be fine,’ said Beth.

Ruth came over and she drove them to the car park.

‘They ask so many questions, don’t they?’ said Beth.

‘They have to; there are a lot of facts to establish.’

‘Do they have any idea how she died?’ asked Beth. ‘We didn’t see any weapons or anything. Does that mean no one attacked her?’

‘It’s much too early to say any of that,’ said Ruth. ‘We must wait for the results of the autopsy.’

‘It’s hard not knowing.’

‘Of course, but try not to speculate. It’s not a good idea.’

Ruth dropped them at the car park before heading back to the chapel.

‘She wasn’t much help, was she?’ said Beth.

‘She’s bound not to say anything yet,’ replied Jessica, and then she paused. ‘I’ve just remembered we didn’t tell the detective that we heard Ellie and Georgia discussing a second will.’

Beth’s eyes widened. ‘Oh God, I forgot.’ Then she shook her head. ‘I can’t see that would matter, if the row comes up again I’ll tell them then.’ She sighed. ‘It was horrible answering all those questions, wasn’t it? Trying to remember what you saw and what people said. I hope I didn’t say too much, you know, about the rows and everything. It’s not like it has anything to do with Georgia’s death. I don’t want to make out anyone hated her or anything like that. I wouldn’t want them to think we had been saying things about them behind their backs.’

‘We only told the police what happened,’ replied Jessica. ‘We didn’t exaggerate. They just need to get a picture of how Georgia’s last day was. By the way, did you notice the pansies?’

‘What?’

‘The pansies on the altar, next to the camellias.’

‘No. I didn’t see them.’

‘I just wondered why they were there. Georgia had planned to take camellias, she asked Ellie for the vase. But when I looked on the altar there was also a bunch of pansies, tied with the ribbon you’d used for the gift bags. Why on earth would Georgia bring them down? She hated those

flowers. I saw her taking them off Alistair's grave when I went to church yesterday.'

'I've no idea.' Beth moved on, plainly not that interested in the pansies. 'The important question is how poor Georgia died. If she wasn't attacked, maybe it was some kind of undiagnosed illness? Or did she take something by accident?'

'They asked a lot about the tinctures, but then the bottle was by her hand. They must wonder…'

'Georgia was so careful making her tinctures. She wouldn't have made a mistake with them.'

'But why the second bottle?'

'I don't know,' said Beth. 'They asked a lot about how she was.' Her eyes filled with tears. 'They don't think she took her own life, do they? Oh God, I hope not. She had talked about feeling guilty about not being with Alistair at the end.'

'She did, but I'd say she was upset rather than distressed, and she didn't talk of wanting to end her life. Although she talked about guilt another time, she also spoke of making amends.'

'That's true. Maybe it was some kind of accident. Maybe she took an overdose of some pills. There was that smashed bottle on the floor, I suppose she must have been drinking.'

Jessica nodded. 'I think she must have been, but it seems odd. You say she didn't normally drink like that?'

'She liked the odd drink, but I've never thought of her as a heavy drinker. Maybe she brought the vodka down to toast Alistair and ended up drinking more than she planned. Maybe that has something to do with why she died.' Beth sighed. 'I hope the police get some answers soon. I hate not knowing what happened to her.'

Jessica silently agreed. She may not have known Georgia well, but she was worried, some things didn't add up here, she needed answers.

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Jessica and Beth drove back to the house. It was comforting but strange to re-enter normality. Beth made them both drinks and Jessica took hers into the conservatory. Here she found Martha and went to sit next to her. As if sensing her need for comfort, the little dog placed her head on her lap and Jessica stroked her warm soft ears. Beth, meanwhile, kept busy, tidying the kitchen and loading the dishwasher until she eventually came and found Jessica.

‘I’m thinking of going to see Vincent, check he’s OK after last night and also make sure he’s been told about Georgia. After that I shall see Pippa. I’m guessing she hasn’t heard the news. I expect you’d like to rest; it’s been a terrible morning.’

Jessica really would have liked to stay quiet for a while, but she couldn’t relax. Her head was full of questions and maybe talking to some of the people might give her some answers.

‘Actually, I’d like to come with you if that’s OK,’ she said to Beth.

Beth looked surprised but said, ‘Of course. I’d rather go with you than by myself. Thanks.’

As they left the house, Jessica glanced at the clock, it was only ten. It felt so much later.

Vincent answered the door of the vicarage and invited them in. From his relaxed smile, Jessica presumed he'd not heard the news about Georgia.

As he led them into the house, Jessica looked around. It was tidy, clean but the furniture and décor seemed rather old-fashioned and shabby. Jessica guessed Vincent had moved into a house already furnished and had done little to it since. On the mantelpiece was a photo of a young Vincent, graduating from theological college. Next to this was a rather severe, plain wooden cross. The books on the shelves were all theological or about the spiritual life. Jessica noticed that the chairs were not all facing towards a television; in fact, there was no TV to be seen. There was a bare, monastic feel to the house.

Beth sat down and started to tell him gently that she was sorry to have to tell him, but Georgia had died in the night.

Jessica had expected an understated reaction. She knew that vicars, after years of listening to people sharing problems and concerns, often far more startling and graphic than others assumed, were used to at least appearing unshockable.

Accordingly, Jessica watched Vincent assume a neutral face, eyes steady and open, unblinking. He asked in a calm, still voice, 'What happened?'

However, as Beth began to describe the events of the morning, his eyes began to widen in shock, he was breathing heavily, his hands were clasped tightly together.

'God help us,' he whispered.

His face was frighteningly pale. 'She should never have been there on her own. I should have gone down.'

Vincent shook his head, scratched his fingers through his beard. 'How terrible for Georgia to end her days like that in a house of prayer, a place she should have felt safe and at peace in.' He asked, 'So you saw nothing that gave you any indication of how she died?'

‘There was no sign of an attack, no blood, no knife or anything. There was a broken bottle of vodka, a tincture in her hand, which is all we saw.’

Vincent shook his head and then his eyes lit up. ‘Of course Freya went down with her to begin with, do the police know that?’

‘We told them all that,’ said Beth.

Vincent nodded. ‘We have to wait and see then.’ He shook his head. ‘It’s a nightmare. I guess they’ve told Ellie?’

‘They’re with her now.’

‘Good, and you two, you’ve had a terrible shock. I think we should have tea. Something calming like camomile? Or lavender maybe?’

‘I’ll try the camomile,’ said Beth.

He glanced at Jessica, detecting her hesitancy. ‘Straightforward builders’ tea?’

‘Yes, please.’

They followed him into the kitchen, which was as basic as the living room, but the work surfaces were clean and fresh tea cloths hung on hooks.

‘I’ll need to get a fresh jar of dried chamomile from the shed,’ Vincent said. They followed him into the back garden. It was pretty overgrown; the long grass brushed against their legs as they made their way to the shed. To one side, however, were a few pots of herbs and flowers, artfully arranged.

‘Georgia helped me sort them out and would come along to keep an eye on them,’ explained Vincent with a sigh. ‘I suppose I’ll have to make sure to keep them now.’ He shook his head sadly and opened the shed door.

The shed was warm and well lit. However, unlike Georgia’s workshop, it was chaotic, with muddy tools scattered around and an old lawnmower propped against the side. On the workbench stood a few jars of dried flowers and herbs. Nothing was labelled, but there were some younger plants growing in a tray under a light. Vincent seemed to know exactly what he was looking for.

‘This is the camomile,’ he said, picking up a jar of dried yellow and white flowers.

They went back inside and he started to make the teas. He scooped out the flowers into a metal infuser, then carefully placed them into a bone china cup and poured boiling water over them. He repeated this with another infuser and cup.

Vincent made the process feel like a religious ritual, as if he was preparing communion, soothing them all.

‘Have you experimented with tinctures or remedies like Georgia?’ Beth asked.

Vincent caught his breath at the mention of her name and answered, ‘Far too complicated. Georgia is… was… much cleverer than me and far more organised. That notebook with careful account of everything she used was incredible.’ He paused and said, ‘Didn’t you say there was a tincture in her hand?’

‘There was. In fact, police were asking all about her tinctures and how she made them,’ said Beth.

Vincent shot them a look. ‘Why?’

‘I suppose it’s unusual, they wanted to know what was in the bottles, they actually found two bottles on her,’ said Beth.

‘Were they different tinctures?’ asked Vincent.

Jessica thought it was interesting that he should ask that question and sat forward. ‘No, they were the same: horseradish and ginger.’

‘The one she had on the beach.’

‘That was in her bag, but there was a newer bottle on the ground.’

Vincent tugged on his beard. ‘Really?’

‘Do you think she put something toxic in them by mistake?’ said Beth. ‘If you do, you’re wrong. Georgia wouldn’t have done that; she knew exactly what she was doing.’

Vincent went to speak but seemed to think better of it and instead picked up a small round tin. ‘I have some scones that Cherry made for me. We’ll take them out with us.’

‘I’ve heard Cherry mentioned a few times,’ said Jessica.

Vincent smiled. ‘I’m not surprised. Cherry is my unofficial housekeeper, but she also cleans and looks after half the village.’

‘That’s right,’ said Beth. ‘As I mentioned she worked for Georgia and she also helps out Pippa as well. They’re all close friends, particularly Georgia and Cherry.’ She turned to Vincent. ‘She is going to be so upset about Georgia; I should phone her.’

‘I will go round and see her when we are finished, she needs to hear this face to face.’

‘I think you are right, thank you. Oh, can I have some butter with my scones?’

‘Of course, can you get it from the fridge?’

She opened the fridge and took out a plastic container with butter in it.

‘Not that one,’ said Vincent sharply. He took it from her, found a different box, and put it with some knives and plates.

He handed them their cups of tea. ‘Let’s go back into the garden. Nature is healing.’

They found a rickety table and some chairs that wobbled alarmingly as you sat down. Vincent seemed oblivious and looked over at a robin singing in a cherry tree. It was in full blossom and there were pansies and a small plaque below.

Jessica went over and read the excerpt from a poem she remembered learning as a child.

The Secret

We have a secret, just we three,

The robin, and I, and the sweet cherry-tree.
The bird told the tree, and the tree told me,
And nobody knows it but just us three.

She'd always thought it rather twee but today she needed its innocent naivety. It warmed her and she returned to her seat.

Vincent opened the tin, his hands shaking. The rich aroma of freshly baked scones greeted them and Jessica realised how hungry she was. She guessed Beth must feel the same as she also took a scone, cut it and buttered it.

Before she bit into her scone, Beth said, 'It feels so normal to be sat out here, like I've dreamed everything that happened this morning.' She looked around. 'It's the sort of day Georgia would be out in her garden, loving watching everything come to life.' She blinked hard and put her untasted scone back onto her plate.

'I was wondering how Georgia seemed to you when you drove her home after the Mother's Day walk,' Jessica asked Vincent.

He hesitated before replying, 'It had been a difficult day for her.'

'Ellie had a terrible row with her before we met up with you at the chapel,' said Beth. 'I couldn't believe Ellie would speak to her like that. She had a go at her for not being with Alistair at the end and went on about something to do with a will. Georgia was terribly upset.'

Vincent didn't reply but picked up a scone and crumbled it into tiny pieces.

'Ellie mentioned she'd been speaking to you the night before,' continued Beth.

He nodded but, looking up, said firmly, 'I can't discuss anything we talked about.'

'There was some mention that Alistair made another will?' said Jessica.

Vincent lifted his cup to his lips but spilt some down his front. His hands shook as he replaced it in the saucer. 'As I say, I can't tell you what

we discussed.' He coughed and said quietly, 'Georgia was more complex than most people realised, and Ellie is a vulnerable child.'

'She's in her twenties like my Rhiannon,' said Beth.

'But much younger in her ways. One thing we need to learn in this village is to be less judgemental and think about the enormous implications of our words and actions.'

Jessica was struck at the sudden change of tone, not just firm but there was anger there.

'We have a right to say when something is wrong,' said Beth defensively. 'And the way Ellie spoke to Georgia was nasty and unkind. She hurt other people as well yesterday. You heard the way she spoke to Pippa, those stupid remarks about Ray and Georgia having an affair. Poor Pippa was very upset.'

Vincent gave a huff of exasperation. 'Georgia and Pippa are adults and quite prepared to sit in judgement. They are stronger than you think. But I will never leave this parish.'

It was a surprising outburst by the vicar. Jessica, remembering Georgia's talk of their concerns about Vincent, realised they definitely had him on the defensive. She wondered what it was that so concerned Georgia and Pippa, and what exactly they had planned to do.

Jessica watched Vincent, trying to read his emotions. She had briefly seen anger when he'd talked about Georgia and Pippa, but now she saw fear and wondered why.

Without warning, Vincent put down his cup and stood up. 'If you'll excuse me, I think I should go down and talk to Cherry and then check on Ellie, see if she needs someone there with her. Do stay and finish your scones and tea.'

Beth stood up. 'No, we ought to go. I was going to speak to Pippa and Ray. I've a feeling they won't have heard the news yet.'

‘No, probably not. I do hope they can support each other through this. I must make sure everyone knows I am here for them. It’s ripples in a pond in a close village, you two take care.’

They all left the vicarage and Vincent walked on ahead of them.

‘Poor man. He’s always rushing around looking after everyone else,’ said Beth. ‘It was awful to see him so upset last night. It shows that the job must get him down.’ She paused and then said, ‘I shall make him a cake later. Yes, that’s something I can do.’

* * *

As they made their way through the village, Beth looked around. ‘Everything feels different now, doesn’t it? Obviously, people get ill here, even die, but what has happened to Georgia is different. It’s ugly, shocking, unexpected. It will shake people up. Vincent is right, this tragedy will touch everyone.’

They passed the duck pond and made their way over to Ray and Pippa’s.

They walked down a stone path that led to a large cottage built of Purbeck stone. Camellias and rhododendrons made a colourful display in the well-kept front garden.

Beth knocked using a large brass door knocker and Ray answered.

Although clearly not expecting to see Beth and Jessica, he politely invited them in.

‘This is a pleasant surprise,’ he said. ‘Pippa is in the garden. Do come through.’

‘Actually, we have some difficult news,’ said Beth.

Ray paused. ‘Something has happened?’

They followed him into a beautiful living room, which couldn’t have been more of a contrast to the dark, depressing vicarage. The carpet was

cream, the walls white, the sofas and chairs a light-coloured fabric, inviting you to curl up in them.

Some of what the estate agents would call the ‘original features’ had been preserved: inglenook, vaulted beamed ceilings, but it felt modern, light, clean and comfortable.

Beth glanced out of the window to where Pippa was busy gardening.

‘I’m afraid it’s bad news.’

‘What on earth has happened? Tell me before we break this to Pippa,’ said Ray, the easy smile gone now. Jessica thought it was odd that they weren’t going to tell the couple together.

Beth spoke. ‘I’m afraid it’s Georgia. Ray, I’m so sorry to tell you that Georgia has died.’

He stepped back and reached out to the arm of the chair, before sitting down.

‘Georgia is dead. Oh my God… dead? How?’

He appeared deeply moved and Jessica remembered the incident on the beach, him pleading with Georgia not to end a relationship. If they had been having an affair, maybe she had agreed to carry on, but either way he had lost her now.

Beth and Jessica sat down.

‘Let me tell you what I know,’ said Beth quietly.

He was shaking his head in disbelief as she spoke.

‘And you found her there, in the chapel – dead? What do you think happened?’

‘We have no idea, she was just lying there. There was a broken bottle of vodka on the ground, it’s possible she’d been drinking,’ said Beth. Ray stood up, strode across the room, and opened a cabinet. It was well stocked with a range of spirits. However, Jessica heard a clunking of bottles as he rummaged among them and looking up, he said, ‘I seem to be out of brandy… Would a whisky or vodka do?’

Jessica and Beth both said they were fine without, so Ray poured himself a small glass of whisky, explaining, ‘I know it’s early, but this has been a terrible shock.’

Slightly calmer, he screwed his eyes up in concentration. ‘Tell me everything again. I need to be clear before we break this to Pippa.’

Again, Jessica thought this was strange behaviour: why was this necessary?

Beth repeated in more detail what they had found.

‘I suppose it could have been her heart or something,’ said Ray.

‘Maybe,’ said Beth.

‘Or are they suggesting an accident?’

‘They asked us how Georgia was and when they realised it was the anniversary of Alistair’s death, they asked how she was handling that,’ said Beth.

‘My God, they think she took her own life?’ asked Ray.

‘They didn’t say that,’ said Beth. ‘Jessica and I thought about it; we don’t think it was very likely.’

‘But the police could be thinking that. She was extremely upset when she was talking to me.’

‘I thought she might want to talk about the restaurant. You know about the change of chef,’ said Beth.

‘We mentioned it briefly. I assured her we would be continuing the ethos of the restaurant, producing as much of our food as possible, her vision will continue. Actually, we quickly moved on to talking about the anniversary and her losing Alistair. Poor Georgia, she was so upset and obviously finding it extremely hard to move on.’

‘She talked to us about it as well, it was clearly playing on her mind.’ Beth sighed.

‘Yes, she was completely overwhelmed with grief, wasn’t she. She loved Alistair so much and those tears she shed with me spoke of how

unbearable she was finding life without him.’

Jessica listened but she was confused. When she’d seen Ray and Georgia walking together on the beach, she’d not noticed Georgia crying or upset and when they returned it had been Ray who’d appeared out of sorts not Georgia.

Jessica noticed a number of books laid strategically on the glass coffee table. Each focused upon a different wine-growing region and bore Ray’s name as the author. On the wall were photographs of him with various celebrities, memorabilia she guessed from his heady days on TV. She saw nothing of Pippa in here; this was all Ray.

He smiled down when he saw her looking at the books. ‘From my glory days,’ he said, ‘but we’ll get those days back, just you wait and see.’

He glanced out of the window. ‘Maybe I’ll make us some coffee to take out with us.’

Beth and Jessica followed him into the kitchen and Jessica had the distinct impression he was stalling, avoiding going out to face his wife.

This was a working kitchen, with expensive pans hung on hooks, herbs drying, and jars of homemade chutneys and jams on shelves.

‘Pippa is the cook. I just choose the wine to go with the meals. Her jams are excellent, and I serve her chutneys at the restaurant.’

‘I enjoyed them down on the beach yesterday.’

‘Thank you.’ He looked out of the window. ‘I wonder how Ellie is taking all this,’ said Ray. ‘First her dad and now Georgia. It’s tough. They were good parents to her; Alistair spent a fortune on her education, but then he could easily afford it.’

‘He was only on a doctor’s salary.’

‘Which is pretty good, but he also inherited a lot of money from his parents including the house up the back of us where Tanya lives. He never flaunted his money around though. I respected the man despite everything.’

‘Sorry, despite what?’ asked Jessica.

‘Oh nothing… I can’t believe I’ll never speak to Georgia again.’ Ray’s eyes softened. He wiped a tear away. ‘We’ll leave the coffee to brew while we go out and face Pippa.’

Jessica found his attitude very peculiar. Was he scared his wife was going to have some kind of dramatic fit or go into hysterics?

Their garden was large, partly landscaped with a wilder area towards the back. Down the bottom they could see a small stone building. ‘That’s Pip’s domain,’ said Ray. ‘She escapes in there. It’s not as bleak inside as it looks from here, and very dry. She has a comfy chair and lots of books. It’s her place to unwind.’

‘It’s a huge garden to maintain.’

‘Yes. Pippa manages a lot of it, but we have a chap who comes in to help with the heavy lifting, mowing the lawn, that kind of thing. Georgia has helped out as well, particularly with the wild area. Heaven knows what’s growing down there.’

Pippa was totally engrossed in her work, but she looked far more at home here than she had the day before, on the walk. She was wearing the same strange green hat, but with a baggy T-shirt and long flowery skirt, she looked the archetypal country woman tending to her garden.

She didn’t seem to register their presence until Ray called her name.

‘Pippa love, we have some news. Come and sit down.’

She wiped her hands on her apron and came over. As she sat down Jessica was struck by how exhausted Pippa appeared, her eyes puffy, cheeks pale, and she slumped back into the chair.

Ray broke the initial news of Georgia’s death in a few carefully chosen words.

Pippa showed little reaction, there were no tears, no exclamation of shock. Instead, she simply responded, ‘That is very sad.’

To Jessica, Pippa’s response to the news of the sudden death of a friend struck her as something different to the freezing she had observed in the

past. Pippa was sat very upright now, her eyes wider and alert, the words chosen carefully.

Ray leant forward and touched her hand. ‘It is, I’m so sorry Pippa, Georgia was a good friend.’

Pippa nodded and then looked around the garden. ‘We had some wonderful plans for the garden. Now I’ll have to do it all on my own.’ She frowned. ‘I shall have to find a new gardener, I think.’ She glanced back at Ray. ‘What happened to Georgia? How did she die?’

Jessica thought it was interesting that this hadn’t been Pippa’s first question.

Ray explained how Beth and Jessica had found Georgia, adding, ‘I’m afraid it looks as if her death was by suicide.’

‘We don’t know that,’ said Beth, her eyebrows furrowed, ‘we don’t know anything for definite yet.’

Ray gave a slight shrug. ‘Sorry, but after my conversation with Georgia it seemed clear to me, but of course, I could be wrong.’

‘Whatever happened, Georgia shouldn’t have gone down there on her own,’ said Pippa, then added, ‘Is someone with Ellie?’

The way her mind seemed to jump from one subject to another was startling, but Beth replied, ‘The police have been with her and Vincent has just gone down.’

Pippa raised an eyebrow. ‘Vincent? I suppose it’s his duty. Anyhow, I am sure Ellie will be fine. Georgia wasn’t her mother; that’s a blessing… her stepmother… it’s not the same.’

It seemed a rather cold response to Jessica.

‘But Georgia and Ellie were close,’ said Ray gently.

‘Of course, but Ellie was desperate for her independence.’

With another unexpected swerve in the conversation, Pippa asked Jessica if she would like to see the garden. Jessica accepted, while Ray and Beth went to fetch the coffee.

Pippa started the guided tour and was clearly very knowledgeable. Not only was she a keen horticulturist, but she was deeply attached to her plants.

‘All these violas, pansies and snapdragons I have nurtured from seed. I love watching them grow up, until like now they are in full bloom, each one a miracle.’

‘That’s how Georgia talked of growing things from seed.’

‘Yes, she kept her sense of awe. It keeps you connected to nature.’

‘You’ve created something very special here.’

‘Thank you. I spend many hours out here. This is my world; the plants are my family. Nothing will ever part me from them. Ray is lucky. He knows I will never let anything split us up, because then we’d have to sell the house and I could never do that.’

Georgia had talked about Pippa loving it too much, the obsession and also the sadness out here. Jessica could certainly feel the passion and was finding it rather disturbing. And then, in what Jessica now realised was a typical swerve of conversation, Pippa said, ‘I suppose Georgia should have a woodland burial, close to the earth. Yes, that would be perfect.’

They had reached the end of the garden. On the left was a small gate with the word ‘private’ on it. It led to a path, but this was surrounded by trees and bushes. It was impossible to see what lay beyond.

Pippa noticed where Jessica was looking. ‘That is my private place. Not even Ray goes in there. Over here is my reading room.’

The concrete building was quite unprepossessing. This was no quaint summer house, but there were large windows facing towards the house.

Jessica followed Pippa over, expecting to be taken inside but Pippa made no attempt to open the door; instead, they stood by the window. Inside looked a lot more attractive than the outside with comfy chairs and bookshelves, and a thick rug on the floor.

‘There’s electric here, so I can come at night. I even have a small heater. It’s very cosy.’

‘It looks wonderful. I would love a reading room like this,’ said Jessica.

‘You like reading?’

‘Oh yes. I worked as a librarian most of my adult life.’

Pippa’s face lit up. ‘How wonderful. I have worked hard on this room, it is well insulated. Nothing gets damp, so my books are quite safe. Ray thinks I’m mad. We have that huge house. He could easily make one of the rooms into a library for me. But I said I would pay for it all, my inheritance from Dad is kept separately, I do think it’s important to keep financial independence. Anyway, there is something magical about coming down here, particularly in the evening and reading when it’s dark outside.’

‘It sounds perfect to me.’ Jessica glanced at the shelves. There was an interesting range of books: novels including classics, romance, historical fiction and sagas, as well as a range of non-fiction including, of course, a whole shelf of gardening books. They headed back down the garden.

Ray had come out with the coffee and was sat at the table with Beth, so Jessica and Pippa joined them. Pippa was a lot quieter now, while Ray chatted about Purbeck, suggesting places for Jessica to visit.

It felt slightly surreal sitting in the beautiful garden, with the birdsong and blue sky above. The events of the morning started to feel like some terrible nightmare.

It was only as Ray was seeing them out that he referred back to Georgia’s death. ‘Thank you so much for coming to tell us about this distressing news in person. It is terrible to think of Georgia being in such a state of heartbreak and despair. All we can do now is take care of each other and find a way of moving on with our lives.’

Jessica glanced at Ray, as he opened the front door, was he really talking about ‘moving on’ already? He had repeated his belief that Georgia took her own life, and yet how could he be so sure? It seemed to Jessica they still had a very long way to go to find answers to how and why Georgia had died.

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As Beth and Jessica walked back home they discussed their visit to Ray and Pippa.

‘Am I right in thinking Pippa’s reaction was rather odd?’ Jessica asked.

‘For someone who used to be an actress she’s not very demonstrative,’ said Beth, continuing, ‘and she’s become even more like it over the past year. I often don’t know what she is thinking. Like I can’t make out if she believed Ellie when she said about Georgia and Ray having an affair. We talked about it last night. I was assuring her neither of them would do a thing like that.’

‘You’re sure?’

‘Of course, why do you say that?’

Jessica told Beth what she’d overheard on the beach, and Beth expressed her shock. ‘My God, he was pleading with her not to end their relationship? So, they were definitely having an affair!’

‘We can’t be sure of that.’

‘I don’t see what else it could be, I’m shocked. I’d said to Pippa it would be impossible to keep such a thing a secret, and she’d said I was wrong. I’m particularly surprised at Georgia, she was so devoted to Alistair, I didn’t think she would have wanted another relationship so soon.’

Jessica shrugged. ‘We will have to see if we can find out more about that. By the way, what did Ray mean when he said he liked Alistair despite everything?’

‘Oh, that’s a long story. Actually, involving our Rhiannon—’

But before Beth could finish, they were distracted by the sound of voices across the road.

Beth and Jessica saw Ellie and a friend going into the house.

‘Ray mentioned how well-off Alistair was,’ said Jessica. ‘I was wondering why Ellie seemed so desperate for money. Surely, he would have left her money of her own?’

‘He did but he stipulated in the will that Ellie had to wait until she was thirty to inherit. Hence all the rows with Georgia.’

‘The argument we overheard was certainly pretty vicious,’ said Jessica. ‘Ellie seemed to be accusing Georgia of hiding some other will.’

‘I have to admit I am intrigued by this will business. I would be interested to ask Cherry what she thinks about it.’

‘She sounds a busy woman.’

‘She is. Funnily enough I am down to clean the village hall with her and Freya this afternoon. If either of them turns up, it will be interesting to speak to them.’

‘You feel up to going?’

‘Oh yes, the hall still has to be cleaned. Life goes on as they say.’ Beth grimaced. ‘Sorry, that sounds heartless but to be honest, I’m better keeping busy.’

‘I can understand that. We all have our ways of coping. Now, I know it sounds a bit odd, but could you ask Freya if she or Georgia took a bunch of pansies… or if they were already there when she went to the chapel?’

‘You’re a bit obsessed with these pansies…’

‘I know… just a piece of the puzzle I’m trying to make fit.’

‘Well, I’ll make sure I ask her.’

* * *

That afternoon Beth went to her cleaning duties and was pleased to see both Freya and Cherry had indeed turned up.

They all hugged and shared their sense of shock. Cherry was much quieter however and took herself off to hoover in the main room while Freya and Beth went to clean the toilets and cloakrooms together.

‘I can’t believe this has happened,’ said Freya. ‘Like I said, I’d phoned her this morning and was a bit worried, but not enough to go down there. I’m so glad you did, even though it must have been awful.’

‘It was terrible. I’m still in a bit of a daze to be honest.’

‘The police have been to see me as I was one of the last people to be with her.’

‘How was she when you were with her?’

‘Well, a bit subdued, but you’d expect that. She was just Georgia. Very down to earth. We had a peaceful time. She brought the camellias in a vase. I took one of my candles and we shared a few memories. Nothing heavy, and she seemed fine when I left her.’

Freya hesitated. ‘Of course, I didn’t like leaving her down there on her own. That place is pretty creepy, and so dark. But it’s what she wanted. When I left her, she was starting to FaceTime her sister. She and Carolina are close, I think. I heard her laugh as I left—’ Freya’s voice broke.

‘You went straight to the quiz at the Square and Compass?’

‘Yes, I rushed straight over. I organise it with Orson who had everything set up. I got there just as it started at nine. We had a good time. I was a bit worried about Georgia, and sent her a text, just checking in. She replied with a heart and a smiley face. That was about quarter to ten. I responded saying she should go home and she just sent another smiley face. We were well into the quiz by then… it went on to gone eleven in the end. Ellie came along at about quarter past ten, I think, which was nice… not to be in a

team, but just for a drink. I asked her about Georgia, but she said she wasn't home before she left. It crossed my mind to ring her, but I didn't want to fuss… maybe I shouldn't have waited until the morning.'

'None of us were to know what was going to happen.'

'I got the impression that the police weren't thinking about an assault, but that maybe she'd taken ill. They kept asking me about how she seemed to me, oh and about the vodka, how much she'd been drinking.'

'We saw the smashed bottle; there was a lot of glass.'

'They told me about that, but Georgia didn't drink when we were together. The police said it was a large bottle, but she only had a small bag, so I'm not sure where she was keeping it.'

Beth then remembered something Jessica had said. 'Did you or Georgia take a bunch of pansies to the chapel?'

Freya shook her head. 'No, I took a candle. And Georgia took that small vase of camellias.'

'No other flowers on the altar?'

'No. I wasn't there long, though… I had half my mind on getting to the quiz, which seems so heartless now.'

They continued with the cleaning until their area was finished. Freya glanced at the clock on the wall. 'I'm sorry I have to be off now.'

'That's fine. You go. I'll finish off with Cherry.'

Beth found Cherry, who was now wiping down surfaces in the kitchen.

'Freya had to go. I'll help you in here,' said Beth.

'Thanks,' said Cherry but as she turned towards her, Beth saw the tears coursing down her face.

'Oh Cherry, I'm so sorry,' said Beth and wrapped her arms around her. 'How about we stop now and have a cup of tea?'

Cherry agreed and after making a cup they went through to a side room with armchairs.

Cherry was around ten years older than Beth. She was usually composed and it was a shock to see her at such a loss.

‘It’s a nightmare,’ said Cherry. ‘Vincent came and told me and then the police turned up. They’d picked up that I had worked with her for a long time and then of course there was the text.’

‘A text?’

‘Yes, Georgia sent me one from the chapel last night at about quarter to ten. I didn’t even see it until much later as I was at the pub quiz. But I was concerned. I knew yesterday would be a gruelling day for her, and she sounded stressed. I feel guilty now. I should have gone down to see her.’

Beth leant forward and held Cherry’s hand. ‘You mustn’t do that. No one could have guessed what was going to happen.’ She hesitated, curious to know about the message, but not sure if she should ask about it.

Fortunately, Cherry volunteered the information. ‘The text was a kind of apology, for something we had disagreed on some time ago now.’

‘What was that?’

Cherry flinched. ‘I had to tell the police, but I wouldn’t want this getting around the village.’

‘Listen, I overheard Georgia and Ellie having a row.’ Beth went on to describe what she’d overheard.

Cherry listened intently. ‘I hadn’t realised Ellie was still worrying about that.’

‘Can you tell me what happened? Georgia admitted there was another will.’

‘There was. Let me tell you.’

Cherry went on to describe how about a week before he’d died, Alistair had called her and the postman, Phil, in to witness a document, one he claimed was an application for a passport. Although most of the document was covered up, Cherry had realised it was, in fact, a will. It had concerned her as she’d worried Alistair was fearing he might not have long to live.

A few weeks after he died, Ellie showed Cherry a copy of Alistair's will. She was upset at having to wait until she was thirty for her inheritance. However, what had concerned Cherry was that the will was dated five years previously and it had not been witnessed by her. Cherry said nothing to Ellie but went straight to Georgia. She told her she was sure there was a more recent will that needed to be found.

Georgia's response had shocked her. Georgia knew of the recent will but admitted that she hadn't taken it to the solicitor as Alistair had requested. She had not agreed with the contents and believed it was better for it not to see the light of day.

'But that wasn't her decision to make,' said Beth. 'She should have honoured Alistair's wishes.'

'That is what I'd thought,' said Cherry. 'We argued, but she was stubborn, said her decision was final. I asked her if she'd destroyed the will. She said no, she couldn't bring herself to do that, but she had hidden it somewhere no one would find it.'

'What did you do?'

'In the end I had to decide whether to fall out with her over it or trust her judgement that this will was better off hidden away. I decided to go with the latter.'

'Had you been able to read any part of the will?'

'No, nothing. I even checked with Phil, but he was useless; he hadn't even realised it wasn't a passport application.'

'What do you think was in the will?'

'I don't know, but if Georgia said it was better for Ellie if it remained hidden, I believe her. I am guessing Alistair had made it even more difficult to get her inheritance. He was concerned about her wasting it, I think. Whatever it said, I guess from the text Georgia felt guilty about hiding it and not respecting Alistair's wishes.'

‘I agree. I think she did. Ellie also reminded her how guilty she felt about not being with Alistair when he died. Ellie said everyone judged her for it.’

Cherry shook her head. ‘That’s not true, and it was very wrong of Ellie to say that. Alistair had never told anyone how ill he really was. No one, apart from his doctor, expected him to die that day.’ Cherry sat back and sipped her tea. ‘I am worried about that text. I hope word of it doesn’t get round the village; I don’t want this business about the will slipping out. I hate the idea of everyone gossiping about her. And I hope it doesn’t give the police the wrong idea.’

Cherry fiddled with a bracelet on her wrist.

‘In what way?’ Beth asked.

Cherry took out her phone. ‘I can show you the text.’

I’m so sorry, you were right. I made a mistake. I feel so guilty.

Beth re-read the text, and asked, ‘What text do you think Georgia was referring to here? Was it about not being with Alistair at the end, or for hiding the second will?’

‘I’m sure it was to do with the will, which was the thing we had fallen out about.’

Cherry looked down at the text and then shook her head. ‘Oh God, Beth, you don’t think the police will assume this means Georgia was thinking of taking her own life, do you? I never saw it that way. Of course I didn’t. If I had, I’d have gone straight down there.’

‘Of course you would. I wouldn’t have seen it like that either.’

Cherry nodded. ‘Thank you, that is some comfort.’

‘The police will look into everything. Try not to worry,’ said Beth, ‘but thank you for sharing all that with me.’

Cherry patted Beth on her knee. ‘Thank you for listening.’

After they had put everything away and locked up, Beth returned home. She found Jessica in the conservatory and told her all she had learned from both Freya and Cherry.

Jessica listened, then asked, ‘So, do you go along with the idea that Georgia really did act in Ellie’s best interests?’

‘Of course. Georgia was my friend. I trusted her.’

‘I see,’ said Jessica.

Beth hesitated before adding, ‘I’m aware there is an alternative. Georgia could have hidden the will because she would have lost out. Maybe for some reason Alistair had cut her out, left her nothing, but I’m sure Alistair would never have done that.’

Jessica wasn’t so sure. She’d known a few people get upset by wills, and there was no telling how someone might choose to leave their estate. And when.

‘I wonder if Ellie looked for that will, she must have been curious to know what was in it.’

‘I suppose she may have but then does any of this matter any more?’

‘Probably not,’ said Jessica. ‘By the way, did you ask Freya about the pansies?’

Beth gave a wry smile. ‘I did. She told me neither she nor Georgia took them down and they weren’t there on the altar when they arrived. She mentioned the vodka. They didn’t sit drinking together. She’d not seen that bottle and was a bit mystified as the police said it had been a large bottle, and Georgia’s bag was small, so Freya wasn’t sure where Georgia could have been keeping it.’

Beth shrugged. ‘Still, those are all questions for the police to answer. I think I’ll go and take Roxie for a quick walk. Fancy coming out? There are bound to be people around who would like to chat.’

‘No, thank you. I’ll stay in here for now.’

As she watched Beth getting ready to leave, chatting away to the dog, Jessica understood that for Beth routine and meeting others, chatting, in the midst of high drama could be reassuring.

However, Jessica now needed to retreat. She'd needed to be on her own, have time to process and adjust without other people, other voices.

Finding Georgia had been traumatic, she recognised that. However, there was more on her mind. There were too many loose ends and unknowns here. It was the police's job to work out what had happened; they had the skills and the expertise. However, she was someone who, when they saw a puzzle, couldn't simply ignore it and hand it over to someone else to do. She had to grapple with it herself. And as horrendous as this death was, and as cold-hearted as it might sound, what was presented here was a complex, albeit nightmarish, puzzle.

* * *

Jack arrived home early in the evening and gave Beth a hug, asking her and Jessica how they were after such a traumatic day.

'Does Rhiannon know about Georgia?' Beth asked.

'Yes, she was in the office when you rang… she's gone down to see Ellie.'

'Good, I'll put her dinner to one side then.'

They sat down together and Beth poured them all a glass of wine to go with their fish pie.

'I sent a journalist down to the chapel. Did they talk to you?'

'No, they must have arrived after we'd left.'

'The police were pretty reticent. An unexplained death was the furthest they would go.'

'I suppose that is all they are going to say for now,' said Beth. Her eyes filled with tears. 'I can't believe she's gone. The entire day seems like some

terrible dream that I'm going to wake up from. Everyone is in shock.'

Jack put his arm around her. 'I know, love. It's awful. I hate to think of you and Mum having to witness that.'

'It was horrific. I've always loved that little chapel, but I'll never see it in the same way again now.'

'No, I can understand that,' said Jack.

'I just wish I knew what happened.'

'The postmortem will tell the police more,' Jack replied. He then added, 'You look very thoughtful, Mum. What are you thinking?'

'I was picturing the altar in the chapel… there was a bunch of pansies.'

Jack raised an eyebrow. 'What about them? Why are you worried about a bunch of flowers?'

Jessica described the bunch of pansies, and, as they had not been there when Freya was at the chapel, then someone must have brought them after, concluding, 'It seems to me there is only one possibility.'

'And that is?'

'Someone else must have been down there after Freya left.'

Beth gasped. 'I never thought of that, you really think someone else was there? But who?'

'I think it must have been someone from our walk. They'd used the ribbon – oh, that is unless you've been using this ribbon for other things?'

'Oh no, I just got enough for these bags. I was trying it out.'

'I see, so it seems logical that someone who received a bag repurposed the ribbon to tie up the pansies.'

'Georgia could have done that. Maybe she had them hidden in her bag?'

'No, I saw her bag in her pocket and the ribbon was still on. In any case, Georgia hated pansies. She felt they were creepy. She removed them from Alistair's grave that morning. Of all the flowers for her to take, why them? It doesn't make sense. The people who were given bags were Ellie, Vincent, Ray, Pippa, and Tanya. Oh, and all of us.'

Beth stood up and opened a drawer. ‘Rhiannon gave me hers. She’d eaten the chocolates and kept the bookmarks. But she thought I might like to reuse the bag. I put it with mine, Jack’s and the one I made for Rhys.’

Jessica reached in the drawer for her bag. ‘Mine is in here, untouched.’

‘So that leaves one of the others. We’ve spoken to Vincent, Ray and Pippa. None of them mentioned they’d been down to the chapel, and they would have in the circumstances, surely?’

‘So that leaves Ellie and Tanya,’ said Jessica.

‘Hold on, Mum, you’re sounding like some kind of detective. All this over a bunch of pansies?’

Beth sat forward and spoke gently, ‘To be honest, Jessica, I didn’t see them. Are you sure you aren’t mistaken? It was very dark in there and we were in shock.’

‘I’m certain I saw them,’ said Jessica firmly. ‘I think that rather than fogging the issue, for me it worked the other way. My senses were heightened. I can remember so much: the smells, the feeling in that chapel. I can see Georgia lying there, reaching out towards the altar.’

‘We all make mistakes,’ said Beth quietly.

‘Not Mum, not like this,’ said Jack. ‘You don’t know my mother. She has a photographic memory. She remembers things in horrifying detail; very difficult when you’re a kid trying to get away with anything. If you’re right, Mum, hopefully whoever took them will tell the police. They need to know who the last person was to see Georgia alive.’

Jessica added, ‘I do have another concern. You see, the police found two tincture bottles.’ She went on to explain to Jack her concerns.

‘You told the police this?’

‘I did. The detective asked us all about the tinctures and how Georgia came to have them on her, how she made them.’ Jessica looked directly at Jack.

‘I see. It sounds as if they think they could be important then. Of course, they will be testing them to check what was in them.’

‘Yes,’ said Jessica. ‘I’m sure they will.’

Jack grimaced and turned to Beth. ‘I know what you think, but this does suggest that something in that bottle may be linked to Georgia’s death.’

‘But Georgia didn’t make mistakes and I don’t believe she took her own life. Oh God, what happened?’ cried out Beth, bursting into tears. ‘Yesterday was meant to be a day of friends coming together, supporting each other, a day of healing and kindness, but it was the opposite. It was dark and tragic. It was the worst possible day.’

Jack spoke gently. ‘Hey, none of this is your fault. You actually thought about Georgia and invited her for the walk; that was a really kind thing to do. The police will be able to tell us the truth of the matter soon enough and we will handle it together, OK?’

They had finished eating, and Jack stood up.

‘We all need a break. Another glass of wine and a good detective show? How do you fancy a *Vera*?’

‘Great. They’re all on catch-up,’ said Beth. ‘Why don’t you take your mam into the living room? It’s more comfortable in there.’

‘What are you doing?’

‘I thought I’d make Vincent and Ellie some Welsh cakes. Making them was my grandmother’s default in times of crisis, and I need to do something to keep my mind occupied.’

Jessica hadn’t been in the living room yet; the kitchen and conservatory were by far the most used rooms in the home. This room was cluttered, and they had to clear seats, but once Jack had closed the curtains and put on some side lights, it was cosy enough. In one corner she noticed a closed-up piano.

‘Who plays?’ she asked.

‘That’s Beth. She’s very good, but hardly ever finds the time.’

‘I would love to hear her.’

‘You have to get her to sit still long enough first,’ Jack said, laughing.

He set up the TV and slumped back in the armchair.

Jessica sat back, half watching the programme but also mulling over the day.

Jessica didn’t watch much TV at home but was soon caught up with the story, and particularly liked the fact they had an older, clever woman as the detective.

Jack closed his eyes as they watched. He would be off early in the morning to work.

Beth finally joined them but didn’t sit down for long.

‘I need to go and tuck my animals in. I’ll see you later for a soothing cup of chocolate.’

‘Be careful,’ said Jessica.

Jack looked up. ‘You don’t need to worry about Beth in the village, Mum. This isn’t Oxford. She couldn’t be safer.’

‘I’ll be fine,’ said Beth, and with a laugh she was gone.

But Jessica was uneasy. Georgia’s words kept coming back to her… ‘*Desperate people say and do terrible things.*’

Beth started her round of visits. First, she took the Welsh cakes to the vicarage. There was no answer when she knocked, so she left them in the porch and carried on.

She had to admit to herself that she didn’t feel as relaxed as she usually did when she was walking around the village at night.

Jessica’s words didn’t seem so funny out here on her own. Beth found herself imagining footsteps, shadowy outlines in the darkness. Seeing the animals soothed her. They wanted food and cuddles and that she could do.

Having finished, she was making her way past the pond when she glanced over at Georgia’s house which stood in darkness. She walked over, thinking she would leave the Welsh cakes in the porch for Ellie. However,

she found herself attracted by that dark path which led to the back and to Georgia's secret garden.

Beth thought again about those two bottles. What had happened down there? Georgia had to have returned to the shed at some time to get that second bottle. If there had been anything added to it, then maybe there would be signs in the workshop. If only she could have a quick look down there, maybe she could get some answers?

In that moment Beth knew she had to go and see for herself.

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Beth knew that neither Jack nor Jessica would approve of her going down to Georgia’s workshop but if she found answers, that disapproval would be put aside.

Before she had any more time to think about it, Beth pointed her torch down at her feet and crept towards the house. She was flooded in light as the security lights switched on and beamed down on her. The hand holding the torch became cold and clammy as she glanced round nervously, feeling very exposed.

Fortunately, no one was about. She made her way down the side of the house until she reached the back gate. Luckily there were no security lights back here and the garden was shrouded in darkness. The only sound was the breeze in the trees and the tawny owls, spookily calling to each other. She shone her torch around. There was no one to be seen.

It felt quite different here at night. The bushes and trees formed strange shapes. She could hear small mammals rustling in the grass. As she crept along the top of the garden she stumbled over an old bike, bashing her leg. Adrenaline masked the pain, and she continued on, her first mission to find the gate into the secret garden.

She shone her torch along the brick wall and then she spotted the gate, the statuette of the little robin looking up at the sky. Beth opened it and

went in.

It was not a straightforward route to the workshop. She had to push past bushes and through tunnels, with branches brushing against her face.

She finally arrived at the workshop and approached the door.

Beth realised that the police would be wanting to look in here. She must be careful not to touch anything. And then she had an idea. In her pocket she had a few pairs of disposable gloves. She always took them in case she needed to change dressings when she was caring for the animals.

She pulled a pair on with a quick thrill as she imagined herself like one of those police officers at a crime scene she'd seen on TV.

Beth located the key under the stone and let herself into the workshop. For the first time since entering the garden she allowed herself to breathe. She wondered if she dared turn on the light but reminded herself that Ellie was not at home so there was no harm in it.

The workshop felt more homely lit up and it only seemed hours since she'd stood in here with Georgia. Initially everything looked much the same, as tidy, clean and organised as before. Beth looked at the pestle and mortar: it was perfectly clean. The jars on the shelves looked undisturbed.

This den had been so important to Georgia. Her happy place, where she would work alone with her plants. No one else in the family had shared her passion. Alistair had been dismissive of it and so had Ellie.

Beth began to look around more carefully. She started to notice little things were out of place. The first thing she noticed was a lethal-looking knife on a chopping board. Hadn't Georgia put all these away? That was the kind of detail Jessica would remember, so Beth took out her phone to record it. There were horseradish roots there as well. Beth took more photos; in fact, she decided to take as many as she could, sure that Jessica had a better nose for detail than her.

Her eye was caught then by the grater. There were shards of plant matter caught in the holes.

Together with the knife this was evidence that Georgia must have been in here since Sunday morning.

Beth examined the shelf with the dropper bottles of tincture.

Then Beth noticed the record book, clinical and organised. Georgia kept careful records of everything she did in here. Beth opened the book and checked for the last entry: a week ago. Nothing about any work done on Sunday, no record of taking that extra bottle.

Beth scanned the room and noticed the vodka bottles. One had been left open, with the top next to it. She quickly took a photo: who knew what might be helpful?

She paused; she could hear the distant roar of a motorbike approaching. The only one she'd heard lately was Ellie's boyfriend Finn's.

Beth knew she had to get out. She switched off the light and raced out of the workshop, through the garden, all the time the sound of the motorbike getting louder.

She left through the side gate and rushed along the side of the house. However, just as she was emerging, the security light picked her up and flooded the front of the house in light. The timing couldn't have been worse.

Ahead of her, the motorbike was pulling onto the driveway. The riders got off and removed their helmets.

Standing in the spotlight of the security lights, Beth felt like an actor in a tense play.

She recognised Ellie of course, but she had never actually met Finn before. She assumed that this young man with long black hair and arrogant, striking features was him.

He looked up at the house. 'Can you believe this is all finally yours?' His Irish accent was rich and smooth. It coated the words.

Finn and Ellie looked over at her.

‘Beth, what are you doing here?’ demanded Ellie. ‘Have you been in my pottery?’

Beth stammered that she thought she’d heard someone in the garden and was doing her bit for the neighbourhood watch. The excuse sounded thin even to her.

‘Seeing what you can nick from the garden more like,’ said the young man. ‘You need to get locks on your pottery and that back gate, Ellie.’

There was no warmth in his eyes. They seemed cold and calculating, and his smile was more of a tight smirk. Despite the good looks and melting voice, Beth wouldn’t trust him and could understand why Georgia had taken such a dislike to him.

‘Beth wouldn’t do that, Finn,’ said Ellie, but there was doubt in her voice.

‘Don’t you believe it,’ he sneered, then looked up at the house. ‘You have to be careful now; you’re going to be a rich bitch.’ Finn put on his helmet. ‘I’ve got to be off, but you watch your back Ellie, see you.’

Finn strode back to his bike and roared off into the night.

Beth turned to Ellie, ‘How are you? I am so sorry about Georgia.’ She reached into her bag. ‘I brought you some Welsh cakes,’ she said, quietly feeling she was handing out a rather weak peace offering. She was half expecting Ellie to tell her to keep them.

However, Ellie’s shoulders relaxed, and her face softened as she took the gift. ‘Thanks, I’m hungry. You forget to eat, don’t you?’

It struck Beth how young and abandoned Ellie looked.

‘Do you have any family to go and stay with?’

‘My Aunty Carolina offered to come up from Cornwall, but she was in such a state, still in shock from the call from the police. Did you know she spoke to Georgia that night she died?’

‘Freya told me she left Georgia FaceTiming her sister.’

‘That’s right. The police asked Aunty Carolina all about that conversation, which was upsetting for her as it was the last time she spoke to Georgia.’

‘That must have been very hard for her.’

‘It was but I think she was trying to reassure me. Georgia had talked about Dad, but didn’t seem, like, overwhelmed or anything. And she mentioned that we’d had a row. Aunty thought I might be worried about that, but she told me Georgia hadn’t been too hurt or upset by it and said she was planning to talk to me about it.’

‘Like Georgia said in the note,’ said Beth gently.

‘That’s right. It’s a relief to know. Anyway, I told my aunt I’m OK on my own and always have Finn.’

Beth didn’t think it was fair to point out that Finn had been happy to go off and leave her to spend the night alone. Instead, Beth said, ‘Are you sure you’re happy to sleep here on your own? You can come to our house, you know. We could make up a bed.’

‘No, I can cope.’

‘Well, you know we are only up the road. It’s a lot to handle on your own.’

‘The police have given me this family liaison person who I can talk to. I said I don’t need her in the house, but I told her I need to be kept up to date with what they find out. She contacted me this afternoon actually.’

‘What did she say?’

‘Not a lot. They think Georgia died sometime after quarter to ten. After she spoke to Aunty Carolina and sent some text to Cherry. I don’t know what that said. Basically, they still don’t know why Georgia died. I suppose we have to wait for them to do the postmortem.’

Ellie looked up at the house. ‘It’s hard to believe this really is mine now.’

‘You think Georgia will have left you the house?’

‘I know she has. On our call Aunty Carolina told me she is an executor of the will. Despite being in such a state, she asked me if I needed to know anything about the will. She knew that Dad’s will still stands and I get my money from him when I’m thirty but thought I might be worried about the next few years. It appears that Georgia, apart from leaving a small amount to my aunt’s two children, has left me everything: the house and all her money.’

‘That was very good of her.’

‘I’m still in shock. I wish we’d not had that argument now.’ Ellie glanced at Beth.

‘I overheard some of the conversation in the quarry; it sounded pretty heated.’

Ellie looked horrified. ‘You heard us? Did everyone else there hear it as well?’

‘I don’t know.’

Ellie cringed. ‘God, what will they all think of me? I was a right cow to Georgia.’ She looked down thoughtfully, then said, ‘I didn’t hate her, nothing like that. We’d have sorted it out.’

‘Of course, we all have rows. I heard something about another will?’

Again, Ellie shuddered. ‘Shit, you heard that too? Don’t go spreading it around. I was pretty upset with Georgia. I still think she had no right to hide it away.’ Beth saw a flash of anger in Ellie’s eyes. ‘But now I’ve calmed down, I know that I should have trusted her from the word go.’

‘Did you find the will?’

Ellie shook her head but then spoke carefully. ‘No, but I didn’t need to. Georgia would have done what was right. I am really sorry we had that row as I knew in my heart she always loved me and she showed that in her will.’

‘Will you be off travelling soon?’

‘Like I said to Finn, I have to wait for a bit. I need time to adjust as well.’ She glanced at the smaller house across the road.

‘I’m Tanya’s landlady now, aren’t I? That’s weird. Do I chuck her out like Georgia was going to?’ Ellie gave a strange smile. ‘Weird to think I hold her fate in my hands. You know how she is about that place; she told me she’d die if she had to leave it, but on the other hand that house is worth a lot.’ She paused, then added, ‘Sorry. Poor Georgia. We’ve not even had a funeral yet.’ Her voice cracked. ‘I’ll miss her. I wish things had been different. I really do.’

Beth watched Ellie go into the house alone, then hurried away. She started to relax as she reached the church. Ellie must have thought her presence a bit odd, but hopefully she hadn’t guessed she’d actually been in Georgia’s workshop.

And then a wave of panic washed over her.

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Beth pictured the door to Georgia's workshop: she hadn't locked it, had she? Had she even shut it properly? If Ellie saw it open, she may well guess Beth had been down there, although what she might imagine Beth would be after she had no idea.

It was a relief to enter her own home and normality. Beth found Jack and Jessica drinking hot chocolate in the kitchen. They looked so cosy, but she was still buzzing with adrenaline. 'Guess where I've been on my way home?' she said.

Jack looked puzzled. 'Not far. You didn't take the car.'

'I didn't need to,' Beth said, then explained she'd been to look in Georgia's workshop.

Jessica sat wide eyed, shocked at what Beth had done. Jack looked horrified. 'Beth, you can't just let yourself into someone else's garden. That's trespassing.'

Beth shrugged. 'No one saw me. I don't think Ellie knew what I'd been up to.'

'Ellie saw you?' exclaimed Jack.

Beth batted the comment away, but she looked worried. 'It was nothing, and she won't notice the workshop door. Why should she?'

'What?' demanded Jack.

‘Oh, nothing. Anyway, it was useful to talk to her. She said the police had been in touch. They think Georgia died sometime after 9.45. Anyway, I was telling you about what I found in the workshop. Some things had definitely been moved around since we visited. Georgia had to have been in there after Sunday morning.’

Jessica was listening intently now. She may not have agreed with Beth going into someone else’s garden, but she was anxious to hear what she’d found.

‘Some of her equipment had been used. I took photos,’ said Beth. ‘I needed to show some things to Jessica. I bet she remembers details much better than me.’

Beth passed her phone to Jessica. ‘See this knife? Now I am sure when we left that had been put away.’

‘You’re right. That was definitely put away.’

‘And look at the grater—’

‘It was all spotless before.’

Beth moved on and opened the photos of the bottles on the shelf, which showed one missing.

‘I also took a photo of the record book. Now, Georgia had not noted that she’d taken another bottle or done any work in there, and that’s odd isn’t it?’

‘It is. She kept meticulous records.’

‘There are more photos, scroll through them,’ said Beth.

Jessica was particularly drawn to the one of the benches.

She looked up, her eyes gleaming. ‘There are extra roots on the board. There was only one before, I’m sure of it.’

Beth shrugged. ‘I hadn’t noticed that. So, what does that mean?’

Jessica screwed up her lips. ‘She had to have been out and picked more… I wonder why?’

‘Maybe the tincture she was using was too weak?’ suggested Jack. ‘Maybe she wanted to add more horseradish or something, I don’t know how these things work.’

‘I’m not sure she would have done that.’ Jessica stared down at the photo; something was wrong there.

‘I took some photos of the vodka as well,’ continued Beth.

Jessica looked at them thoughtfully. ‘So, the top is off one. Why is that? Georgia used it for the first stage of making the tincture, but there are no other signs she was going through that process.’

‘Maybe she had a quick slug,’ said Jack.

Jessica nodded. ‘I think that’s more likely. If she had, well that has implications, doesn’t it? There is something else about that bottle…’ She used her thumb and finger to enlarge the photo of the bottle but shook her head. ‘No, can’t see it yet. It’ll come to me.’ She began to scroll again. ‘It is very strange that Georgia, who was so organised, left everything in such a mess.’

Beth grimaced. ‘Does it mean she was more distressed than we realised?’ She slumped back. ‘I feel guilty thinking about that. You know it felt quite exciting going down there in the dark… but this business is not fun, is it?’

‘No, love. I’m afraid it’s not,’ said Jack. ‘I know you went into the workshop with the best of intentions but it’s better to leave all this to the police. My guess is that they will go over that workshop with a fine-tooth comb and all their forensic tools. They aren’t going to miss anything.’

Beth nodded.

Jessica however was still turning things over in her mind. ‘Could you send those photos to my phone?’ She gave an apologetic smile to Jack. ‘Just a few things I need to think about.’

Beth sent her the photos, and then they settled back to a piece of cake with their chocolate before bed.

Once Jessica had changed, she climbed into bed although thanks to Oscar, she found herself right on the edge. This was stupid. If Oscar objected to moving so much, well, he had a perfectly good cat bed downstairs.

She picked him up, moved the floppy cat to the side, and repositioned herself. Oscar shot her an annoyed look but philosophically settled himself down.

Jessica picked up her book to read, but her mind kept straying back to those photos: had she missed something? Like any other puzzle, she couldn't just ignore it. She had to face it and try and find the solution.

Her eyes focused on the picture of the workbench with those roots on it. There were more than before, but there was something else… they didn't all look the same, did they? Horseradish root? Now where had she been reading about that recently?

She began to trawl through in her mind anything she had read online or in a novel recently that could possibly mention horseradish root. And then it came to her.

Jessica sat up with a jolt and switched the light on, ignoring the glare from Oscar. It was a novel. *Monk's-Hood*, that was it.

The story was about an herbalist monk called Cadfael and a dark, grisly murder that was committed using a toxic root from his store. One of the names used for this root was monkshood because of the appearance of the flowers. Jessica remembered being fascinated and reading all about it online. It resonated loudly now. 'Care must be taken because the root of the plant is very similar in appearance to that of the horseradish plant.'

Jessica felt a sickness deep in her stomach, but she needed to do more research. Back in the Bodleian, she would have consulted some weighty botanic tome. She still loved and trusted books to give her answers, but tonight she had to use what was to hand, and that was the internet.

She began a longer search, read again that the common name for monkshood was aconite. This was the plant Georgia had shown them among her toxic plants, the roots of which had been dug up and placed close to the shed.

Jessica compared photos online of the roots of the horseradish and aconite to those on the workbench in the workshop. Once you looked carefully, they were quite distinct. The horseradish was long, thick, cylindrical, and solid white in colour. The aconite on the other hand tapered, like a carrot, and had a pink, brown colour.

Georgia would normally have known the difference. However, what if she'd been distracted for some reason or had a few too many sips of the vodka? Could that have led to this fatal mistake?

Jessica sat back. It had to be possible. She went back to research more about aconite.

Soon after the ingestion of even a small quantity, a sensation of numbness and a persistent tingling is felt in the tongue and lips, like ants crawling over the body. This leads to respiratory paralysis and heart rhythm abnormalities as well as vomiting and intense pain. If untreated, death usually occurs swiftly.

Jessica felt tears burn her eyes and her stomach muscles twist in knots as she pictured Georgia lying on that cold, damp floor. She could smell the vomit, see the look of terror in her eyes. Jessica was sure that this was how Georgia had died: in terrible pain and agony.

As Jessica wiped the tears off her cheek, Oscar came over to her, sensing her upset. She stroked him.

'Oh, Oscar, some terrible things happen in this world.'

He rubbed up against her, and she slowly closed her laptop.

So, Georgia had, by accident or even purposefully, taken this poison and her life had ended. If Jessica was right, whoever went down to the chapel must have left Georgia before she started showing signs of this poisoning;

no one would have left someone suffering like this. A cold, dark voice added to that thought… not unless they wanted her to die, enjoyed even seeing her suffer. Jessica shook her head; that was nonsense. The group of people she'd met were normal, friendly, caring people. She was being influenced by the novel: that had been a murder, but no one was suggesting that here.

Her head began to swim. She was exhausted. She needed to go to sleep.

And no wonder, after such a day. She turned off the light and lay down. In the morning, she may realise this was all some crazy notion, one that came from an over-tired, frazzled mind.

Of course, it was impossible to just close her eyes and sleep. Jessica had her own way of getting to sleep. Mentally, she took herself to Compton Bay on the Isle of Wight, to a warm evening, walking barefoot on the sand, watching the sun go down. Soon, she felt her body start to relax and began to drift off to sleep.

But her mind kept working and took her back to the chapel. Georgia was lying on the stone-cold floor. But she wasn't still, she was reaching out, pointing at the altar… and then she turned her head, looked straight at Jessica with such urgency and opened her mouth to speak.

Jessica sat bolt upright. Her eyes shot open and she gasped for air. For a moment she was unsure; was she awake now? The dream world had seemed so real.

She felt a warm breath on her hand, heard a gentle mew. Letting go of the duvet cover, she stroked Oscar's head.

'What was all that about?' she whispered to him.

He purred and curled up next to her as she tried to rationalise the dream. Finding Georgia's body had been traumatic. It was easy to see why she would have intrusive thoughts. However, it felt more than that, as if Georgia was trying to tell her something.

Jessica knew as an ex-vicar's wife that she should have a firm belief in the afterlife, but as with so many things in life, she felt it was complex.

She had her doubts that a spirit or ghost had visited her, but she did think at the very least her subconscious was prodding her. Tomorrow she must try and talk to someone about what she'd discovered… starting perhaps with Beth.

Having made a decision, she felt more settled. She lay back and finally fell into a peaceful sleep.

In the next room, Beth was lying down, but her eyes were wide open. Next to her, Jack was gently snoring; nothing would wake him now until the alarm. But she couldn't stop her mind racing around the village, thinking of the people, the friends, affected by this trauma. There was Ellie of course but there were others: Ray, Pippa, Vincent, Tanya… and then she remembered Georgia lying in that cold, empty chapel. Tears rolled down the side of Beth's face, soaking her pillow. She moved closer to Jack, felt the comforting warmth of his back, and slowly she relaxed and fell into a restless sleep.

* * *

Tuesday

Beth left the house early for work. She was about to return home when she noticed a police car draw up outside Georgia's house.

She felt a wave of panic; her mouth went dry. Had Ellie seen the open workshop door and reported her to the police? Beth imagined herself being questioned, trying to explain why she was there… what she'd done… pleading with them to forgive a foolish idea.

Beth quickly walked home. They would come to her soon if that was why they were there. It was a shame Jack would have gone to work; he

would handle this better than her. Maybe Jessica would stick up for her.

Jessica meanwhile had been up for some time. She had showered and then read again the materials online she'd been studying in the night. She'd hoped it was foolishness but in the cold light of day she felt more rather than less certain.

Jessica went soberly down to breakfast, wondering what to do. Was Beth the right person to talk to? She was so excitable, would she even listen to her properly? However who else could she talk to?

Jessica heard the front door, and Beth came into the kitchen. They absently asked each other how their nights had been before Beth slumped into the chair opposite Jessica and confessed she had slept very badly and now she was scared of the police.

'I doubt the police visit has anything to do with you,' Jessica said. 'They will be wanting to look through Georgia's belongings. There will be a lot to look for.'

'Oh yes, of course.'

'I expect they'll have a look in the workshop…'

'Thank God I wore gloves; what an idiot I was to go in there.'

'I wouldn't say that. Look, let's have some coffee. I've an idea I want to try out on you.'

Once they were sat with coffee and toast, Jessica began to explain her theory about the aconite. It was a relief to say things out loud.

'That photo of the horseradish root bothered me… and then I remembered something from a book I'd read, one of these crime books by Ellis Peters about this medieval monk.'

'Oh, I think I've heard of them. They were on TV. A monk who works as an herbalist in some monastery and solves murders? What on earth could that have to do with Georgia's death?'

Jessica explained everything that had gone through her head the night before. 'Don't you see? Both roots were in Georgia's garden; she could

have become confused.’

Beth frowned over her mug. ‘But surely Georgia would know the difference.’

Jessica was relieved that Beth was thinking carefully about what she was saying, it was a good observation.

‘I was thinking about that,’ said Jessica. ‘And maybe there’s a way she could have had an accident here. Imagine, Georgia went to the workshop after the walk and decided to get another bottle of tincture because she didn’t like the taste of the other. Now, she takes down a new bottle, decides to add extra horseradish.’

Beth put her head to one side. ‘I suppose all that is possible.’

‘We know Georgia was having a difficult day, and maybe like Jack said she took a slug of that vodka to cheer herself up, maybe a few more, enough to confuse her. These aconite roots were just outside the workshop, not that far from the pot of horseradish. She made the fatal mistake, took the aconite inside, grated some, added it to the tincture and left. Being slightly drunk, she left the workshop in a mess.’ Jessica sat back. ‘What do you think?’

She was waiting for more questions, but Beth’s eyes lit up and she thumped the table decisively.

‘I think that is brilliant,’ said Beth. ‘You are so clever, and I know exactly what we must do next.’

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‘What are you thinking?’ Jessica asked Beth, alarmed.

‘The police are down at Ellie’s. We must go down there right now and tell them what you’ve thought of.’

‘No, no we can’t do that,’ said Jessica, panicking. ‘It’s only a theory and it doesn’t explain some really important points.’

‘That doesn’t matter. We have to go. Come on, shoes on.’

Jessica found herself being bundled out of the front door and rushed down towards Georgia’s house. She wasn’t at all sure about this and could imagine they would look like the kind of interfering amateurs the police must hate.

They reached the house and Beth rang the doorbell. Ruth, the police officer they had talked to the day before, answered and Jessica felt a wave of relief; maybe they could quietly talk to her, she could politely thank them and then they could get away.

‘Oh, Beth. We were going to come and see how you and Jessica were when we finished with Ellie.’

‘We had to come down. Jessica has worked everything out; she knows the poison that Georgia took.’

Jessica cringed. ‘I’m sorry. It’s just an idea. I wasn’t even sure about coming down.’

Ruth put her head to one side. ‘Why don’t you come in and tell me all about it?’

Jessica felt like Ruth was a teacher talking to some keen but not very competent student.

As they entered the house, she could feel a fresh breeze and saw the back door at the end of the hallway was open.

They sat down and Jessica explained her thought process as concisely and competently as she could. As she did, Ruth’s face changed and the fixed smile melted into something far more serious.

‘I think you should come and tell my DS.’

They followed Ruth out into the garden and then through the door that led into Georgia’s secret garden. They made their way along the winding paths until they approached the workshop.

This was now cordoned off. They could see people in white suits working inside. Jessica couldn’t help feeling a pang of sadness. This had been Georgia’s special, private place and now it was being invaded by strangers. Standing outside was DS Hutching. He looked surprised to see Jessica and Beth.

‘Sir, Jessica has something interesting to tell us.’

He raised a sceptical eyebrow but stood prepared to listen.

Jessica explained. ‘It’s just I saw a photo of the workshop taken last night. It shows the roots hanging on the board. One of them I don’t think is horseradish – it wasn’t there when we visited on Sunday morning.’

‘Hang on, how do you have a photograph taken last night?’

Beth blushed and confessed what she had done. ‘I promise I wore gloves.’

‘You shouldn’t have interfered.’

‘I know, I’m sorry,’ said Beth. ‘Anyway, you should listen to Jessica.’

DS Hutching turned to Jessica. As succinctly as she could she began to explain her reason for suspecting there had been a mix-up of horseradish

and aconite roots.

‘So, basically, you are saying you think Georgia might have taken aconite?’

‘I think so. She might have added it to the new tincture bottle. It would explain why she started a new one, although of course she could have added it to the old one just as effectively. If you look at her board, it’s been used, and it was very clean and tidy when we saw it on Sunday.’

The detective was listening carefully now. He spoke to the officers in the workshop. ‘Be extra careful handling those roots.’

He turned back to Jessica. ‘Thank you for that information. What made you think of it?’

Jessica explained about the books she’d been reading.

‘My wife reads that series.’ He hesitated, then asked, ‘By the way, where were you after quarter to ten on Sunday evening?’

Jessica caught her breath at the accusation. Was she a suspect now? Maybe he thought she had guessed all this too easily.

‘I was with Beth at her home,’ she said.

‘Yes, we were together. I returned from seeing to the animals I care for in the village at around nine, and then we were together with my husband Jack and daughter Rhiannon until we went to bed at eleven,’ said Beth.

Jessica’s mind had returned to the case. ‘I was initially concerned about how Georgia came to make such a drastic error. We know she was upset. We talked about guilt and the anniversary.’

The detective nodded.

‘Well,’ continued Jessica, ‘I was thinking, what if she drank some vodka in the workshop – the top is off a bottle – and this led to her making the mistake, choosing the wrong root, and leaving the mess behind.’

The detective put his head to one side. ‘I can see the way your mind is working; you make some interesting points.’

‘Exactly,’ said Jessica. ‘I know that among all the other possibilities you have to consider you might have been thinking Georgia took her own life, but this shows it could have been an accident.’

Beth suddenly grabbed her arm. ‘I’ve remembered something else. When she was telling us about aconite, Georgia described the terrible death it would cause if ingested. She said it was one she wouldn’t wish on her worst enemy. I don’t see how she could have taken this stuff on purpose; there would have been far less painful methods around. Some medication or something.’

Jessica nodded. ‘That’s right, I’d forgotten that.’

The detective held his hand up as if to hold back this flood of enthusiasm. ‘OK, thank you, that has been helpful. We of course have to act on evidence not speculation, so I’ll bear all you have told me in mind, but I ought to get back now to work.’

‘No, sorry, don’t go yet,’ pleaded Jessica. ‘There are problems with this theory.’

Jessica noticed a short intake of breath. The detective forced a tolerant smile.

‘I realised that,’ he said in a tight, overpolite tone. ‘So what other ideas have you got?’

‘It’s about the pansies,’ stammered Jessica, realising how foolish this sounded.

‘Pansies?’ the detective repeated and she saw a smile playing on his lips.

‘Yes, seriously. I need to explain.’

She told him about the pansies on the altar and how they’d led her to the conclusion someone else must have been down to the chapel.

To give the detective his due, he listened patiently, although with less intensity than he had to her account of the aconite.

When she'd finished, he thanked her politely then added, 'It sounds as if you have done some interesting deduction over this aconite. It's possible you may be right, but we do not know that yet. The police use hard evidence to reach conclusions, not hypotheses. As for the idea someone from the group who went on the walk going to the chapel, well, we have spoken to everyone who was there and no one admits to it. We have absolutely no reason to suspect they are not telling the truth. Speculation is dangerous. Please leave this to us. Now, I think we ought to get on.'

He walked away. Beth rolled her eyes. 'Honestly, he's not very grateful, is he?'

They made their way back along the path into the main garden. They were about to leave when Beth spotted Ellie standing at the open kitchen door and went over to speak to her.

'Do you want to come home with us?' asked Beth. 'This can't be very nice for you.'

'I think I should stay. The police seem to be pulling the place apart. They have no right to do this… Did you see if they were in the pottery?'

'I didn't see anyone in there. I think they're concentrating on Georgia's workshop.'

'If Finn was here, he would know my rights, know where they are allowed to go. No one showed me a search warrant or anything.'

'I think in a case of a sudden death like this, they have a right to do whatever they need to. Anyway, it's good they are investigating properly. I am sure you want to know what really happened to Georgia.'

'Of course. But I wish they'd go, leave me alone.'

Jessica was watching Ellie carefully. She would expect to see a young woman who appeared grief-stricken, even exhausted. However, as she watched Ellie gnawing at the side of her thumb, watchful eyes darting around, she saw someone gripped by some kind of fear and dread. Jessica wondered exactly what was going on in Ellie's mind.

Once they had left Ellie, Beth and Jessica made their way out of the garden.

Outside on the driveway and walking back through the village Beth said, ‘Now, I know this seems an odd time to do this, but there is somewhere I have been dying to show you. I think we deserve a bit of a break. Follow me. It’s down here.’

Jessica bit her lip. She’d been hoping to get home and have time to think, but, seeing the excitement on Beth’s face, she forced on a smile and followed her down the side street.

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Beth’s surprise turned out to be far more welcome than Jessica had anticipated when she found herself in front of a shop she hadn’t even known was there… a bookshop.

‘It’s mainly second-hand. I love it in here. It’s chaos, but like Aladdin’s cave.’

As they pushed open the front door an old-fashioned bell rang and a man of similar age to Jessica looked up from behind a pile of books on the counter.

‘Hi, Marcus,’ said Beth. ‘This is Jack’s mam, Jessica. I’ve been dying to show her your shop.’

Jessica saw an extremely tall man, who she guessed was a few years younger than herself. He had thick white hair and beard, steady warm blue eyes, and was wearing a flannel shirt and jeans.

‘It’s good to meet you, Jess,’ he said.

‘It’s Jessica.’ The words spilt out before she could stop them.

He laughed. ‘Oops. Good to meet you, Jessica.’

A small, orange roan cocker spaniel appeared from behind the counter and, wagging his tail, approached Jessica for a fuss.

‘This is Romeo,’ said Marcus. ‘An apt literary name for a little dog in a bookshop.’

Jessica stroked the little dog, pleased to see how friendly he was.

‘I have two cats as well,’ explained Marcus, ‘but they’re off hunting in the fields.’

Marcus turned to Beth. ‘How is Rhiannon? Not seen her for a while.’

‘She’s fine. I’m sure she’ll be in soon. Now then, Jessica used to work in the Bodleian in Oxford; she’s really into books.’

Marcus gave a huge smile. ‘How wonderful. Mind you, I’m not quite as highbrow as you’re used to. We’re mainly popular fiction. Great for the locals and holidaymakers. When I took this place on, we were overwhelmed with old cookery and gardening books. People just don’t want them now. They go out of fashion so quickly and the youngsters all look up everything online.’

‘I quite understand,’ said Jessica. ‘I’ve helped out at second-hand book sales and those books never seem to sell.’

She looked around and smiled. She loved the smell of old books and was impressed by the amount of stock there appeared to be in quite a small space. It was a real treasure trove.

‘Have a look around,’ invited Marcus. ‘I do have some special earlier editions over there. I usually sell them online now, but if you want me to get any out of the case, let me know.’

Beth was already picking books off the shelf. ‘Gosh, you’ve got the latest Hugh Jackson.’

Jessica froze at the mention of the name, the room began to spin, and she grabbed hold of the shelf to stop herself falling.

Apparently oblivious to Jessica’s reaction, Beth held the book out to Jessica. ‘They have updated his photograph, but he’s kept his red hair and that designer stubble suits him. He’s a good-looking man, don’t you think? Do you read his books, Jessica?’

Jessica took a breath, tried to steady her voice. ‘Um, I can’t remember. I’m just going to look at the children’s books,’ she stammered and walked

blindly down the aisle of books.

‘Grab that book they always sell quickly,’ Marcus called to Beth. ‘I was lucky to get it. An unwanted Christmas present.’

Fortunately for Jessica, Beth left her to go and purchase the book. She could hear Beth and Marcus talking as she composed herself.

Marcus gave a short cough and said seriously, ‘Um, I heard about Georgia. You were the person who found her? That must have been deeply upsetting.’

Beth retold the whole event from the moment she talked to Ellie that morning to finding Georgia in the chapel. On one level Jessica found it rather ghoulish, but then on the other hand it was probably the most exciting thing that had happened here for some time, and Beth did seem to enjoy a drama.

‘I heard it was a heart attack?’ said Marcus. ‘But she looked so healthy and well, and with all that outdoor work.’

‘I expect there will be a post-mortem soon. We’ll know more then. Jack’s paper will be covering it.’

Jessica had found the children’s section and was glad to lose herself in books again. There was a particular book she was hoping to find.

She worked her way along the shelves, then paused. It was here. How wonderful, and it was beautifully illustrated. She took it over to Marcus.

‘*The Secret Garden*, one of my favourite stories,’ said Marcus. ‘I was lucky to lay my hands on an early copy of the book, sold it to Georgia actually. It wasn’t some rare first edition, but a genuinely nice copy all the same. She was thrilled with it.’

‘I see she named her house Misselthwaite Manor after the one in the book. She took us around her secret garden.’

‘She was an amazing gardener. I wonder who will take over the displays in the village. They were always something special with Georgia in charge.’

Jessica was reminded of Vincent talking about a whole village being affected by Georgia's death in all kinds of ways.

Marcus continued, 'I hope that book finds a good home now.' He frowned. 'I can't see Ellie bothering with it. Maybe I should offer to go through the books there for her. I'd make sure she got a decent price for them all. I'd hate to see all those books tossed into a skip when she moves. I must mention it to her.'

'You don't think she'll stay?' asked Beth, coming over.

'No, she always looks miserable and angry. It goes to show: your house can look picture perfect, but it doesn't always make you happy. Ellie asked me about the flat above the shop, but decided she'd rather save the money and stay with Georgia.'

Jessica went back to perusing the books. She tutted to herself as she looked again at the shelves. Although the books were arranged alphabetically according to the surname of the author, there was no sorting beyond the initial letter. She quietly started to rearrange a few.

Marcus looked down at the books Beth was buying.

'You often buy crime books, don't you?' said Marcus. 'But nothing too violent.'

'Oh no, I'd not like that.'

'No. I'd be surprised if you did.'

'It must be interesting to see what people choose.'

'It is.' He laughed. 'When people come in, I try to guess what book they might buy. It's a game I play to pass the time.'

'And are you always right?'

'Goodness, no. You get little old ladies buying violent crime, young men buying romance. Someone like Georgia was far more predictable. Her preference was always plants and gardening, and Georgia loved the old books. She said there was always something new to learn.'

Beth went over to Jessica, who was quietly putting a few books in the correct alphabetical order. ‘How are you doing?’

‘Oh fine.’

‘Shall we go?’

Jessica, although never in a rush to leave a bookshop, could see that Beth was keen to get on.

‘Of course.’

‘It was good to meet you, Jessica,’ said Marcus with a grin. ‘I shall have to employ you. The books need a good sort out.’

Embarrassed that he had spotted her rearranging books, Jessica felt herself blushing but he just laughed and added, ‘Don’t worry. My aunt who owned the shop before me would be horrified at the way I’ve run things. I basically just try to keep the genres together. Anything else is a plus.’

‘Sorry, it’s just a habit,’ said Jessica, ‘but thank you for the book and it was lovely to visit your shop.’

They were about to leave when Marcus called them back.

‘Hang on, I’ve remembered something. I’ve just been brought a copy of a little book you may find interesting, Jessica.’ He walked out from behind the counter followed by Romeo. ‘It’s over here among the local interest books.’ After a quick search he pulled out a small yellow book.

‘It’s only short, based on real events, years ago,’ explained Marcus. ‘It’s called *The Seal Summer* by Nina Warner Hooke and it’s the story of a young woman’s friendship with a wild seal down at Chapman’s Pool. It’s very well told. She named the seal Sammy and he stayed all summer. He grew to love the people, and visitors flocked to see him.’

‘I’m not sure that would be seen as good practice now,’ said Beth. ‘I mean, seals should be left alone. They need to be wild animals.’

‘I realise that, but it’s a great story all the same,’ said Marcus, ‘and the descriptions of this cove are wonderful.’

Jessica smiled, thanked him, and bought the book.

Once they left the bookshop Beth said, ‘It’s a great shop, isn’t it?’ She lifted up the bag with her new book in. ‘I shall look forward to getting into this, a new Hugh Jackson is a real find.’ She looked over and Jessica wondered if she held her gaze for a moment too long. However, Jessica told herself she was imagining things and not to be paranoid.

They left the bookshop and began walking back up the street to the café.

‘Look, let’s go mad and have a coffee and cake before we go home. We deserve a treat. We’re lucky it’s open. They’re closed on Sunday and Monday at the moment.’

They went inside, and Jessica was struck by how busy it was for a Tuesday morning. She thought of all the coffee shops back in Oxford. There were so many cafés to choose from she wondered how they ever made a living, yet, somehow, they all survived.

In this café most of the tables had someone sitting at them. Some people, from their gear and muddy boots, had clearly been walking.

It was functional rather than cosy and certainly nothing like the trendy places in Oxford. There was a strange assortment of table and chairs, a limited selection of homemade cakes, and only a few hot drinks to choose from. One end seemed to function as a corner shop with an eclectic mixture of toilet rolls and milk, holiday goods, postcards, sun cream, alongside expensive specialist delicatessen goods, cheeses, sliced meats, olives. Behind the counter were drinks, with some basic cans of lagers sat next to expensive whisky, vodka, and local gin.

They ordered coffee and scones and sat down. Jessica commented on the interesting mixture of objects on sale and Beth explained.

‘Nowadays no one comes in here for their main shop, not with supermarket deliveries. It’s either used by locals for the odd emergency pint of milk or the richer residents and holidaymakers looking for a treat. So, they are not catering for someone doing a full shop.’

Jessica buttered her scone and bit into it. ‘This is very good.’

‘Yes, we love the scones. I’ll buy some to take home for Jack and Rhiannon. She might want one later… she has a half day today.’

‘Does she have plans?’

‘A group are going over towards Chapman’s Pool, for a picnic and celebration… someone’s birthday I think,’ said Beth with a grin.

‘Does Rhiannon have a boyfriend?’

‘Not that I know of. There have been a few, but she seems to be taking a break at the moment.’

They finished their drinks and went to the counter to buy the scones. Beth chatted to a lady called Judy behind the counter, who also seemed to know about Jessica staying. The main news though of course was about Georgia.

‘I wonder what will happen with the house now. I can’t see Ellie staying there, can you? Let’s hope a family moves in and it doesn’t become another holiday home…’

‘I agree,’ said Beth.

As they chatted about the familiar problem of second homes and the effect they had on village life, Jessica’s eyes were drawn to the bottles on the shelf behind the counter and in particular the bottles of vodka. There were two sorts, one an unbranded basic, but there was another she was amazed to see cost over £40 a bottle. That wasn’t the kind Georgia used for her tinctures. But they were attractive bottles with a smoky glass, and a label with a white goose with blue snowy mountains.

‘Are you wanting to buy something?’ Judy asked.

‘No, thank you. I was just admiring the bottle.’

‘It should be good looking at that price. We only get it in for Ray to be honest, although the odd rich tourist will buy a bottle. Be wasted on me.’

Jessica felt a quiver of excitement but stored the observation away to think about more carefully later.

They left the café and when they arrived back at the house, Beth asked, ‘Are you OK? You’ve gone very quiet.’

‘It was something I saw in the café.’

‘Really?’

‘Let’s go in the conservatory. We’ve got a lot to talk about.’

They sat down. Martha jumped up and curled up next to Jessica.

‘That’s lovely. It’s the first time she’s done that,’ said Beth. ‘Now I think you should tell me what or who you saw in the café while it is fresh in your mind.’

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Jessica looked over at Beth and stroked Martha as she spoke. ‘It was an object, not a person, which caught my eye in the café,’ she explained. ‘In fact, it was an expensive bottle of vodka behind the counter. I’m sure it was the same make as the one that was smashed on the floor in the chapel. I saw the pieces of blue and white paper from the label, and the glass was clouded.’

‘Georgia must have had expensive taste then.’

‘But don’t you remember? She told us she hadn’t bought any expensive vodka since Alistair died… only the cheap stuff she uses for her tinctures. She talked about asking for some for a gift.’

‘Could she have bought a bottle after the walk?’

Beth shook her head. ‘I don’t think so. This place isn’t open on a Sunday. She didn’t have time to drive off to the shops in Swanage. Between gardening, coming home and then going off to meet Freya.’ Beth paused and added, ‘But then Freya said Georgia’s bag was too small to conceal a large bottle of vodka, so I don’t see how she took vodka down there anyway.’

Jessica sat forward. ‘I think it is logical to conclude that the bottle of vodka wasn’t taken to the chapel by Georgia and that further supports the

idea that someone else went down to the chapel after Freya. And also, we know from the ribbon on the pansies that it was someone from our walk.'

'But no one has owned up,' said Beth. 'Why not? Do you think they're scared to talk to the police? Surely, they would want to help.'

Jessica silently agreed. Someone who cared would own up. But of course there were other possibilities. An idea that had started as a whisper was getting louder, more persistent. She wondered if the same idea had visited Beth.

But Beth's reply made her realise it hadn't, not yet.

'Why don't we just ask them? It's time, isn't it? I know they could easily lie, but it has to be worth a try.'

Jessica blinked. 'How? When?'

'Tonight is Pilates and we always go to the pub after. Vincent and Ray often join us. How about we just ask them all outright?'

Jessica smiled. 'Well, OK. You go ahead. I could come and meet you at the pub.'

'No way are you getting out of Pilates. Come on, it will be good for you. It's mixed ability. I'm terrible but it's good fun. I can lend you some leggings. It's great, and Pippa, Tanya and Ellie will be there – see it as part of the investigations.'

Jessica groaned. She'd spent her life avoiding exercise classes, but she realised this was one she was going to have to go to.

* * *

Jessica had a quiet afternoon. She worked her way through some puzzles and got lost in her book while Beth went off to help put up a springtime display at the school. Jessica enjoyed having a bit of time to herself.

She was back in the conservatory when she heard Beth shout that she was home.

Jessica went into the kitchen to greet her. ‘Have a good afternoon at school?’

‘Yes, but such hard work. The display board we were doing was in the hall and the last few users hadn’t removed the staples, so I had to do that before I even started.’

‘They were lucky to have you go in.’

‘I don’t mind. I enjoy it really. Oh, I had a text while I was out. It was from Ray, a round robin with an invitation to this buffet he’s putting on for the relaunch. He said if people didn’t feel able to come because of all that has happened, he quite understood, but I think I’d like to go. It’s next Saturday, so you’ll be able to come as well. Goodness, the week is flying past, and of course not long until Thursday, and “the big reveal”. Of your gift.’ Beth gave an excited grin while Jessica felt a shiver of dread. The postponed Mother’s Day gift had gone from Jessica’s mind what with everything that had happened. But now she realised Beth had certainly not forgotten that it was still happening, and she still had no idea what it was.

‘I will. Yes, thank you.’

‘I just have to persuade Rhiannon now. It would be good for her to go back there.’

At that moment Rhiannon returned and came into the kitchen.

‘Hi all,’ she said.

‘You’re back – good time?’ asked Beth.

‘Drank too much but it was good fun.’ Rhiannon cringed but smiled. ‘Not sure how we all dragged ourselves back up that hill, but we made it. One of the girls wanted to go into the chapel. You know how people are. We didn’t stay long. It’s weird, like nothing happened in there.’

‘So, there weren’t any police?’

‘No, they’ve all gone. Right, I’m off to have a lie down.’

‘Hang on,’ said Beth, and told Rhiannon about the invite to the buffet.

‘I don’t see why I should go,’ Rhiannon was saying.

It was so unlike Rhiannon to complain. Jessica wondered what was wrong.

‘Come on, love. You can’t hold that one evening against him.’

Jessica was intrigued. ‘What had happened?’

Beth turned to her. ‘Rhiannon got a touch of food poisoning at Ray’s restaurant.’

‘It wasn’t a touch. I was very unwell. Alistair had me admitted to hospital. It wasn’t just an iffy tummy.’

‘I know, love, and it was all very worrying, but we don’t even know the restaurant was to blame.’

‘How did you come to be eating there?’ asked Jessica.

‘Rhiannon was at the end of her time working at the restaurant. She covered Christmas and it was early February. The job gave her a bit of money before she started working with Jack. Anyway, Ray was putting on this Galentine’s event—’

‘What’s that?’ interrupted Jessica.

‘The night before Valentine’s,’ explained Rhiannon. ‘A celebration of female friendship. Ray said that he thought it would be nice if Pippa joined in and would I like to have a meal there with her. He also suggested Ellie and Georgia joined us, so that’s what we did.’

‘Unfortunately, as we said, Rhiannon was unwell after the meal,’ said Beth.

‘I’ve never felt so bad. Alistair said he’d have to report it as suspected food poisoning.’

‘Yes, he had to do that legally, but they never found what caused it, did they, even though they tested for the usual bugs, salmonella and the like.’

‘Ray could at least have apologised, but instead he had a go at me, told me I was a drama queen.’

‘It affected his business, love. The report got into the local paper. They lost customers for a while.’

‘Something was wrong in their kitchen and needed sorting out.’

‘Possibly, but like they said, they never did find out what caused it. You could have picked up a tummy bug. Anyway, the main thing is you got better. It’s in the past. I think it would be good to go back there. You could even write a review for the paper.’

‘That would wind up the food and drink editor,’ said Rhiannon, laughing.

‘Invite them as well. I’m sure Ray would be extremely glad of the publicity.’

‘I’ll think about it. Now, I need a big glass of water and I’m off to lie down.’

As Rhiannon left the kitchen she turned to Jessica. ‘Good luck tonight, you’ll need it!’

The time to leave for Pilates arrived, so Jessica borrowed some leggings from Beth and Rhiannon’s yoga mat and reluctantly headed towards the village hall.

As they walked, Jessica noticed a police car outside Ellie’s house.

‘Do you think they have news about Georgia?’ asked Beth. ‘Or is it too soon for them to have any results yet?’

‘I’ve no idea,’ said Jessica. ‘Poor Ellie. It’s a lot to cope with on her own, isn’t it?’

At that moment they spotted Vincent coming down the road. He waved to them but went straight to Ellie’s.

Beth raised her eyebrows. ‘Interesting. Looks like news to me.’

They carried on to the hall. Glancing around at the stacked plastic chairs, the small wooden stage, and notice boards covered in notices for local guides and scouts’ groups, Jessica felt a wave of homesickness. It was so like her local hall back in Oxford. She had attended many talks and Christmas fairs there. She realised what a central part these small halls played in their community.

However, she had always avoided all the exercise classes, and it was with a feeling of trepidation she attended today. She was relieved to see women, and even a few men, of a variety of ages.

Some, like Tanya, really looked the part in the latest gym wear, with matching tank tops and leggings. Others, like Jessica, Beth and Pippa, wore a normal slightly baggy pair of leggings and baggy T-shirt.

Unfortunately, they were some of the last to arrive so all the places to the back of the hall had been taken. Jessica thought it was really bad luck that she, who must be by far the most novice in the class, was going to have to be at the front.

The instructor came over. She was very warm and welcoming and told Jessica to make sure she took things at her own pace. Jessica assured her there was no chance she would do anything else.

The session started off quite simply and Jessica was starting to relax. In fact, stretching her arms and legs and rolling her shoulders felt rather good.

The first embarrassing part was the balance work, walking one foot in front of the other. She was shocked at how wobbly she was and very impressed with Beth, who was walking as if she'd been to finishing school.

They sat down then, which was a relief. She was hoping she was less visible. Then she realised that up until that point they had simply been warming up for the real work.

Jessica lay on her back, trying to scissor her legs, watch the teacher and to remember to exhale or inhale at the right time. The instructor then added circling the arms in opposite directions, which seemed impossible. Jessica was relieved to hear giggles behind her.

As the session went on she glanced around. Everyone was quite serious now trying to do the exercise. The instructor sometimes demonstrated, sometimes came round to help individuals, but Jessica, fortunately, was left alone. She felt she was very much at survival level here.

They were then asked to take a small Pilates ball, lie down and, with the ball between their bent knees, twist side to side. To Jessica's embarrassment her ball popped out and flew across the room. She felt herself burn with shame and she got up to go and recover her ball. But then Beth leant over and handed her a ball and went to find the stray ball, which was rolling right to the other end of the hall. Jessica was incredibly grateful, but also wondered what on earth Beth thought of her, was she regretting bringing her mother-in-law to the class?

Eventually they moved on to what sounded like the final stretches.

Then came the part that Jessica had not expected: the relaxation.

They were told to get comfortable, and quiet music was played. Jessica had no idea what 'get comfortable' meant. She looked around. Some people had blankets that they were laying over themselves, others had rests for their heads. She just lay back, thankful to be ending the class. The instructor talked them through relaxing each part of their body, which Jessica found really difficult.

And then there was peace. They were left to just rest. It was surprisingly calming, and the minute went quickly.

Finally, they were told to sit up, and they started to roll up their yoga mats.

'How did you find it?' asked Beth.

'I was terrible, Beth, really bad. I'm so sorry to show you up.'

Beth looked genuinely astonished. 'Of course you didn't. In my first class my leggings split, and let's not talk about the unfortunate sound effects people let off. You did really well,' said Beth, adding more seriously, 'You should do this every week. Honestly, it's ever so good for you. Anyway, now for the pub. Our reward.'

They were joined by Ellie, Tanya, and Pippa and slowly they made their way up the hill to the pub.

Beth whispered to Jessica, ‘Remember, we ask them all tonight.’ She bit her lip. ‘I’m quite nervous now, I must admit, but I do hope we get some answers.’

Jessica grimaced. She wasn’t at all convinced it was going to be fun. In fact, she had a feeling it could be quite the opposite.

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As Beth and Jessica entered the pub, Jessica looked round in amazement. It was like stepping back in time. There was one large-beamed room with a fire at the end. The ‘bar’ was a single hatch with one person serving and then a smaller area divided by dark wood partitions with seats and tables. There were no slot machines flashing, no large screen, no music. Just subdued chatter.

Jessica ordered two glasses of wine from a young man who served them as if having all the time in the world. She wondered how on earth they coped on a busy summer’s evening.

‘Evening, Orson,’ said Beth. ‘Is Tanya here?’

Jessica took a fresh look at Tanya’s young man. He looked a few years younger than her, with short brown curly hair and a healthy glow on his ruddy cheeks that suggested he spent a lot of time in the fresh air rather than cooped up behind a bar.

‘Tanya’s through there with the others,’ he said. Jessica noticed he blushed as he said her name. He also said it with such a sense of pride. She was sure this was a young man in love.

‘This is Jack’s mum, Jessica,’ said Beth.

‘Good to meet you,’ said Orson. ‘I’d heard you were coming.’

They took their drinks. Beth gestured with hers towards the end of the corridor.

‘Down there is the museum. It’s small, but you’d probably find it interesting. There are lots of fossils from Chapman’s Pool.’

They were about to go down there when Beth noticed Ruth, the detective constable they’d met earlier. She called to Jessica and Beth and took them outside to talk.

‘Just a heads-up: you were right about the aconite. Clever you,’ she said to Beth.

‘It was all Jessica’s work,’ said Beth.

‘The DS was more impressed than he probably let on, rang the lab straight after you left. They really got a move on with the tests. The aconite was in that bottle Georgia was holding. You should get your son to interview you for the paper. “My mum the ace detective”,’ said Ruth.

Jessica was stunned; she’d been right. It felt rather daunting to have discovered something so important. One thing was certain, though, she would not be doing any interviews for her son.

‘Have they found out anything else?’ asked Beth.

‘I can’t tell you any more.’

‘I am guessing the discovery of the aconite is confidential?’ said Jessica.

‘Not really. We informed Ellie earlier.’

‘Ah, we saw the police car at her house.’

‘Yes, well, there is to be a press release about it. The problem is that aconite poisoning is unusual and headline-grabbing so the DS wants us to be in control of it. It will probably be covered in the nationals.’

Beth shook her head. ‘You know I read these kinds of stories in the paper and they seem exciting, but it’s quite different when you know the people involved. It’s a horrible thought that Georgia died in such a painful way. I don’t want it splattered all over the papers.’

‘I know what you mean, and we will do our best to dampen all the speculation.’

Beth thanked Ruth and they all went back inside. Ruth joined her friends while Beth and Jessica found their group. She noticed that Ellie was there as well as Ray and Vincent.

They were all looking very sober, Ellie the centre of attention.

‘Have you heard the news?’ Vincent asked Beth. ‘They now know Georgia died from aconite poisoning.’

She nodded, adding, ‘I’m so sorry, Ellie.’

Ellie took a long sip of her glass of wine. ‘Thanks. They were very kind, tried to explain everything to me.’

Beth and Jessica sat down and Ellie explained, ‘Obviously, they can’t say anything for definite yet, although a preliminary post-mortem investigation has been done. They are thinking it might have been some kind of accident. Georgia had been unhappy and drinking and got in a muddle.’

Jessica listened carefully, realising the police had been giving Ellie the gentlest explanation to hand. No mention of death by suicide, she noticed and maybe they really thought this. It made a lot of sense.

Tanya was sat next to Ellie. She was watching on, nodding sympathetically. Ray and Pippa were doing the same. However, there was also a palpable sense of relief about them as they sipped their drinks. Maybe that was natural; they all needed to know what had happened to Georgia. That despite the horrific cause of death this was as neat and tidy a solution as could be hoped for.

There was one person, however, who remained uptight and that was Vincent. He was scratching his fingers through his beard, and his eyes darted watchfully from side to side. What was still worrying him?

Was it possible he was thinking the same as she was? That there were elements to this that didn’t ring true, some of the puzzle pieces that still

didn’t fit?

Beth sat forward and spoke. ‘As awful as it is, I am sure it helps you to know what happened,’ she said to Ellie. She added, ‘I do think however that whoever went down to see Georgia after Freya left should own up now. Ellie deserves to know everything about Georgia’s final hours.’

The whole group turned to face Beth with mixed looks of confusion and horror on their faces.

‘What are you talking about?’ asked Ray.

Beth explained about the pansies and the vodka. Jessica was impressed at how well she summarised things.

‘None of us went,’ said Pippa. ‘We would have told the police. It had to be someone else.’

Beth told them about the ribbon.

Pippa opened her handbag and produced a gift bag. ‘Here’s mine. And here’s Ray’s.’ She held them up proudly.

‘But there’s no ribbon on them,’ said Tanya.

‘We opened them and ate the chocolate mints. I don’t know what we did with the ribbon, do you, Ray?’

He shrugged. ‘Threw it away, I guess.’

Ellie coughed. ‘Actually, I lost mine. I was looking for it when we got back from the walk. I wanted to eat the mints, but I couldn’t find it anywhere.’

Tanya opened her bag and produced a bookmark. ‘This is my bookmark. I’ve eaten the chocs. The rest I threw away. Sorry, I can’t use scented soap.’

‘I’m not playing this game,’ said Vincent severely. ‘This is not right. Stop it, Beth.’

‘Quite right,’ agreed Ray. ‘This ribbon idea is ludicrous. Like us, most people will have thrown theirs away. Whether we have it now or not doesn’t prove anything.’

‘But the fact that I saw a bunch of pansies at the chapel tied up with the ribbon is still significant,’ insisted Jessica. ‘That ribbon came from a gift bag. We are the only people who had that ribbon, so one of us made up that posy.’

‘The obvious person has to be Beth,’ said Ellie, cringing. ‘Sorry, Beth, but you presumably have a roll of the stuff.’

‘Actually, I used the last of the ribbon for the bags. Jack and Jessica were there when I mentioned I’d have to order some more from Etsy.’ She looked at Jessica, who nodded in agreement. ‘Also, I was at home with Jack and Jessica from around nine until ten, so I couldn’t have been in the chapel.’ Beth took a breath and continued. ‘In any case, the flowers and ribbon aren’t the only proof that someone else was there. Jessica spotted something in the café that proves it as well. Tell them, Jessica.’

Jessica told them about the vodka.

‘How come the police didn’t ask me about any ribbon or the vodka?’ said Ray. ‘Did they ask anyone else?’

They all shook their heads.

‘So, this is just some crazy idea you two have come up with.’

‘It’s not crazy,’ said Beth.

‘I don’t know why everyone is getting so upset,’ said Tanya. ‘I at least have proof of where I was on Sunday evening. Beth and Jessica can ask as many questions as they like.’

‘So, what’s this proof?’ asked Pippa.

Tanya took out her phone. ‘I took this photo in a pub car park in Swanage. I’ll let you work out which one, but I have the parking ticket to prove I was there.’

Beth took the phone and scrutinised the photo, nodding. ‘I think I know where that is.’

‘Can anyone else account for where they were?’ asked Tanya.

‘My car had broken down. I couldn’t have gone,’ said Ellie. ‘I didn’t leave the house until 10.15, when I came to the quiz at the pub.’

‘You know I was in, Beth. We talked to each other,’ said Pippa. ‘I was in my dressing gown.’

‘How convenient,’ said Tanya, flashing a cynical grin at Pippa.

‘We met at half eight. But when I got home, I tried phoning you about book club and you didn’t answer,’ said Beth.

‘Well, she was there, I phoned her from the restaurant, didn’t I, Pippa?’ said Ray.

‘Um, yes. We spoke.’

‘Are you sure you were in the restaurant at that time on a Sunday night, Ray?’ asked Tanya.

‘Of course he was,’ said Pippa. ‘It’s a good time to go over the books.’

‘I’m sure Kit from the restaurant said he locked up promptly at half nine,’ said Tanya.

‘He didn’t know I was in the office. I was on my own.’ Ray turned to Vincent. ‘So, what about you?’

‘I was in the church, but I realise I was alone, so no one can vouch for me.’

‘I know you were there for some of the time. I saw you, before nine,’ said Beth.

Vincent frowned. ‘What do you mean? I didn’t see you come in.’

‘No. You were, um, busy…’

Vincent rubbed his forehead and looked away.

‘What does any of this matter?’ asked Ray. ‘If someone went down to speak to Georgia, so what? Why is it so important that they own up?’

‘I’d like to know who it was,’ interrupted Pippa. ‘I think Jessica and Beth make a convincing argument for someone being down there. So, who was it?’

Jessica was startled by the intervention; did Pippa actually agree with them or was she playing some kind of game?

No one spoke. Pippa continued. ‘You do know where those two are going with this, don’t you? If the person who went down there doesn’t speak up, they will conclude it’s because they have something to hide.’

‘This is crazy,’ said Ray. ‘We all know each other. None of us would hide something like that.’

‘Wouldn’t we?’ said Pippa, locking eyes with him. She turned to Beth and Jessica. ‘I think you believe one of us is implicated in Georgia’s death, don’t you? In fact, I believe you think one of us killed her.’

There was a chorus of objections from the group.

‘Stop this, Pippa,’ said Vincent.

‘Why? You look very scared, Vincent. Are you frightened of what people will find out about you?’ They locked eyes. Neither spoke.

Jessica took a deep intake of breath. She was shocked that Pippa of all people should be so blunt.

Beth, clearly horrified, said, ‘I wasn’t saying any such thing. I just think we all deserve to know what happened to Georgia in her final hours. If someone was there, they should own up.’

Vincent sat forward. ‘You have to realise how deeply offensive all this is, Beth.’ He turned on Jessica. ‘You may be having fun leading Beth on like this, but she is part of our community and will be after you leave. You need to stop this right now.’

‘Well said, Vincent,’ said Ray. ‘Enough of all this. How about we drink a toast to Georgia, which is the right way to be spending this evening. The first round of shots is on me.’

Ray left the table and there was an awkward silence until he returned with a tray of shot glasses.

He raised his glass. ‘To Georgia, we love her and miss her. May she be sorting out heaven’s garden even as we speak.’ He knocked back his shot,

and the others did the same. Jessica felt the liquid burn the back of her throat. It was the first time she had ever had a shot. Her eyes watered, but as they cleared, she looked around.

The group were subdued at such a solemn moment, but Jessica knew there was more than sadness here. She excused herself and went to the toilets.

Meanwhile Beth was feeling increasingly frustrated and upset. She was angry with Vincent for attacking Jessica and insinuating that she was like some easily led child. Knocking back her drink, she went outside and down the pub garden.

She needed fresh air. She took a deep breath, looked up at the sky. Tonight, it was covered in stars, as if someone had spilt silver glitter on a large piece of black velvet. Walking around the garden, Beth slowly began to feel calmer and turned towards the pub door waiting for Jessica to come out.

However, the next people to emerge were Tanya and Orson. They were chatting and laughing and were soon in a passionate embrace.

The next person to leave the pub was Ray. Leaning forward, he took a packet of cigarettes and a lighter from his pocket, lit a cigarette, and took a deep drag, lifting his face to the sky. He closed his eyes, as if feeling the weight of the world slip from his shoulders. Beth was taken aback, as she'd never realised he smoked, but watched as he disappeared around the side of the pub.

Tanya and Orson appeared to be in their own bubble, and were now standing close, smiling, and laughing. Orson gestured with a nod towards the door, but Tanya shook her head. He left her and Tanya waved, blowing him kisses.

Once he had gone inside, however, she went in the direction of Ray and disappeared from view.

Beth was intrigued. She walked over and stood close to where they had gone so that she couldn't be seen but could overhear what they were saying.

'Why the hell did you force me to defend myself about being in the restaurant?' Ray was saying.

'I came to say sorry,' Tanya said. 'Mind you, it was a stupid lie. Everyone in the restaurant knows most nights you are away by half nine.'

'Pippa believes me and that's all that matters. This isn't a game. You heard what Pippa said. I don't want to be accused of something I didn't do.' His voice was shaking; there was real fear there.

'No one thinks anyone killed Georgia,' Tanya said. Her voice changed. 'Look, I'm sorry. Like I said, I was just joking.'

'But you need to think about the repercussions of what you say. It's like Ellie and that stupid remark about me having an affair with Georgia. Pippa took that seriously you know, I had a right time putting her straight.'

'Pippa should trust you.'

'Her imagination runs away with her. She keeps talking about being followed, being watched.' He sighed, 'Anyway that's my problem, just be careful what you say.'

'I will, but everyone is talking about Georgia at the moment and wondering what happened to her. You had that long chat with Georgia on the beach – how did she seem to you then?'

Beth leant in closer, keen to hear what Ray had to say.

'It's hard to remember now. Something about a row with Ellie, oh and she mentioned you.'

'In what way?' Tanya's voice was sharp, defensive.

Ray gave a cursory laugh, 'I don't know, something about being careful around you and then—'

Frustratingly at that moment Beth heard Jessica calling her name. Ray paused, maybe sensing someone was close by, so Beth rushed over to Jessica.

‘Keep your voice down,’ Beth whispered urgently. ‘I was just listening to Ray and Tanya.’

‘Oh, sorry,’ said Jessica. She looked over to where Beth had been standing. There was no one there.

‘They’re round the side of the pub,’ explained Beth. ‘Listen, I’ve had enough. Shall we go home?’

‘Yes, let’s make a move.’

When they reached the duck pond, Beth led Jessica to the seat.

‘Let me tell you what I just overheard.’ Beth described how Ray had admitted to leaving the restaurant earlier.

‘So, he was lying, did he say where he went?’

‘No, but it sounds as if he leaves most evenings around that time and is regularly lying to Pippa.’

Jessica listened intently. ‘So, what was Ray really doing on Sunday evening?’

‘Oh, Ray mentioned that he was angry with Ellie for suggesting him and Georgia had an affair. He sounded pretty adamant that it was rubbish.’ Beth blinked in confusion, ‘But how does that fit in with Ray pleading with Georgia not to break up their relationship?’

Jessica put her head to one side, ‘Maybe he was referring to their professional relationship. Didn’t Pippa say that Georgia did a lot of promotion for them, recommending the restaurant to businesses?’

‘Yes, she said that.’

‘So, if Georgia thought the ethos of the restaurant was changing, she may not be so keen to recommend them.’

Beth nodded, ‘Yes, that may be it. Actually, Tanya asked him about the conversation on the beach. He didn’t mention the restaurant, only that Georgia told him she’d had the row with Ellie, and to be careful of Tanya.’

‘That’s strange, I wonder why she said that. Oh, did Ray talk about Georgia being in any kind of distress?’

‘No, nothing about that.’

‘Don’t you think that is odd? When he was telling us about it, he made out that Georgia’s grief and heartbreak were the main topic of their conversation. He surprised me because watching them from afar, Georgia hadn’t appeared to be upset in any way.’

‘But why lie about it?’

Jessica shook her head, ‘I’m not sure,’ and then she looked at Beth questioningly. ‘By the way, didn’t it seem odd to you that Tanya and Ray should be talking secretly like that? It sounds quite intimate, not exactly employer and employee.’

‘I did wonder, I must admit, but I’m not sure I’d describe it as intimate. She’d been very cosy with Orson a few moments earlier and it was him she said she’d miss if she had to leave. I’d say they are closer than I realised, but they have worked together for a few years now; maybe they just get on well.’

Beth ran her fingers through her hair and looked up at the sky. ‘I can’t say it was much fun in the pub. You know, asking them all what they’d been doing on Sunday.’

‘Did you think it would be?’

‘I suppose so. I never imagined it would turn so nasty. I hated the way everyone was looking at us as if we were the enemy.’

Jessica took a deep breath. ‘They’re bound to react to being asked to account for where they were, and then Pippa really set light to things.’ Jessica paused. ‘I wonder why she did that?’

‘I don’t know. I don’t know if it’s genuinely what she thinks and speaking with unfiltered frankness, or she is just saying things to shock.’

‘She is a complex person, and someone very easy to underestimate,’ said Jessica. ‘I wonder if Ray really understands the person he married.’

Beth hesitated, then added, ‘I’m not sure Ray thinks of much beyond himself.’ She then gave a slight embarrassed cough and added, ‘Vincent and

Pippa did make me think I don't want to fall out with everyone.' She gave a laugh, but Jessica looked closely at Beth. There was no smile in her eyes, in fact there was consternation, and her lips quivered, Beth was close to tears.

'Beth. You don't have to be involved like this any more. Seriously, you can call it a day right now.'

'But we were in this together.'

Jessica smiled, 'We are in quite different positions. People here respect and like you. You are such an asset here, you mustn't ruin that. The police are working hard. You have every right to leave this to them.'

Beth gave a sigh of relief. 'Thank you. I do think that might be best. It started out OK, but it's not a game, is it? No, like you say, we should leave it to the police. Come on, let's go home and have a hot chocolate.'

They walked up through the village. Beth chatted about some of the places they might visit that week. She sounded thankful to have moved on from the tensions of earlier, and who could blame her?

However, Jessica knew there was no turning back for her. As disturbing as the evening had been, it seemed to raise even more questions that needed to be answered.

Once inside, Beth called up to Rhiannon and asked if she wanted a drink.

'Yes, please,' replied Rhiannon, 'and Mam, I've got something to show you.'

'Interesting,' said Beth, smiling. They went into the kitchen.

Beth began making the chocolate but soon they heard Rhiannon running down the stairs. She came into the kitchen clutching a bag.

'Sorry, they're a bit muddy.'

'What are?'

'Remember I said earlier we went into the chapel after the picnic? Well, I noticed the flowers on the altar. Knowing how you like to press them, Mam, I picked a camellia and two pansies and brought them home.'

Jessica sat up. ‘You saw the pansies?’

‘Yes, there were a small bunch on the altar with some camellias. Other bunches had been left by the altar by people with messages of condolence, but these were the only ones on the altar.’

Beth, who was pouring hot milk into mugs, stopped and looked round. She carefully put the saucepan back on the stove and walked over to Rhiannon, taking the flowers.

‘Thank you so much, love.’ She glanced at Jessica, then back at Rhiannon. ‘I know you had been drinking a fair bit, but do you remember if the bunch of pansies was tied up with anything?’

‘Oh yes, it was the pink ribbon you used for the bags. I thought how pretty they looked.’

Jessica was blinking hard, embarrassed to feel tears burning her eyes.

Beth stared at Jessica. ‘Hey, what’s up? This is good news, you were right.’

‘What is all this about?’ asked Rhiannon.

‘It’s a long story love, but Jessica was sure she’d seen a bunch of pansies, and you’ve proved she did. Thank you for the flowers. I’ll put the envelope carefully in the drawer for now.’

‘Right, I’ll take my chocolate up to bed,’ said Rhiannon and, after taking a mug of chocolate, she bid them all good night.

Beth finished pouring drinks for her and Jessica, leant against the sink, blew on her drink, then looked up. ‘Are you all right now? Why did you look upset?’

Jessica fiddled with the handle of her mug. How was she to explain?

‘Um, I was relieved I suppose to find I’d not imagined those flowers after all.’

‘But that was never in doubt, was it? Jack said you have a photographic memory; it’s like a superpower.’

Jessica smiled weakly. ‘I am human, Beth; I have made plenty of mistakes in my life.’

Beth patted her hand. ‘Well, you were dead right about this.’ She took a beat and then added, ‘I don’t think this changes my mind about being involved in the case though.’ Beth sipped her drink, looked over at Jessica. ‘I am just going to have to wait for the police to find a good explanation.’

‘And I quite understand,’ said Jessica gently. ‘Still, I’m pleased to be right about the pansies. Good to know I’m not completely losing my ability to think straight.’ Jessica stood up. ‘I’ll take this up as well, I think. Sleep well, see you tomorrow.’

Once she was in bed, Jessica retreated into her puzzle book and sipped her chocolate but her mind was wandering. She was picturing a place she desperately needed to visit, but it was too late, too dark to go there now. She made a decision. Leaning over, Jessica set her alarm for six in the morning. First thing she would leave the house alone and head off.

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WEDNESDAY

Martha came running over to greet her when Jessica crept downstairs the next morning.

Jessica gave her a cuddle but said quietly, ‘I have to go out. I’m sorry but I can’t just take you without asking Beth. I promise you a good walk later.’

Just as she was unlocking the car, it started to rain heavily. It fell on the dusty stone driveway and beat its way on to the dry earth in the borders.

Jessica ran back to the house to grab a coat and then back to the car. It crossed her mind that maybe she should leave a note for Beth, explain where she’d gone, but she didn’t want Beth following her. This was something she wanted to do on her own.

It didn’t take long to get to the car park, but as Jessica looked towards the small chapel in the distance, the walk seemed considerably further than it had before. She had a spare umbrella in the car, but she doubted it was going to withstand the sea wind and rain.

Part of her was tempted to go home. In fact, now that she looked, it wasn’t simply the rain that put her off revisiting the chapel.

Of course, there should be no dead body to discover. The glass, she guessed, would all be swept away. But surely the building would not have

let go of such a memory so quickly. Jessica spoke to herself firmly; enough, this was something she needed to do.

She battled through the rain, walking as quickly as she could until she finally reached the chapel. Pushing the wooden door, she was glad to get inside and shut the weather out. Jessica carefully took off her wet mac to hang it on the back of one of the wooden chairs and started to make her way to the altar. She paused and looked down. On the floor she saw a small clump of mud. She knelt down, felt it; it was wet.

As she was kneeling, she heard the door bang. Hadn't she shut it properly?

Looking at the mud, she realised this could only have been brought in here very recently. It had only just started to rain. Thinking about the bang of the door, Jessica glanced around nervously. Was someone in here with her?

The chapel was small; there were few hiding places. She walked around looking, but there was nobody there now.

She opened the door, glanced out into the rain but again there was not a soul in sight, and even from here she could see there were no other cars parked. Maybe she was making something out of nothing. She returned to what she'd come to do and walked up to the altar.

Just as Rhiannon had described, there were bunches of flowers at the foot of the altar left by well-wishers. On the altar itself stood the camellias and the candles, but there were no pansies. Jessica couldn't believe it. Where were they? She knelt down and looked amongst the bunches of flowers on the floor in case they had fallen off but no, there were no pansies. She stood up, looked back at the camellias, then she saw them: three pansies, tucked among them.

Jessica stepped back. Could she have got it so wrong? No, she said to herself, no, no, no. Someone was playing with her. She had seen the bunch

and so had Rhiannon. Someone had brought in that wet bit of mud and removed the flowers.

And then she remembered talking about them last night. Had somebody silently realised what an important clue they were and decided to come down early this morning to remove them?

She glanced around again. She must've only just missed them.

Jessica sat down on the wooden seat in front of the altar. She felt the building almost reach out to comfort her. Of course, this building had absorbed what had happened to Georgia but it had seen so many horrors in its past. And so, instead of being overwhelmed by it, it had returned to being a place of refuge and safety. Georgia's death was simply another page in its history.

Her main aim had been to come and check the pansies were there, but now she realised their absence told her more. It convinced her that she had been right in thinking they were important. They showed that somebody in the group had come to the chapel after Freya and after the phone call.

Jessica looked back at the bunch of camellias; it was clever the way those pansies had been placed. This person could have just taken the whole bunch, but no. By leaving a few amongst the camellias they hoped to persuade the police or Jessica herself that she had made a simple error, that she had imagined a bunch when only a few had been there, with the camellias.

Jessica shivered. She felt she had a sudden insight into the mind of this person. Nothing happened by chance; everything was planned.

Jessica looked down at the place where they'd found Georgia's body. The floor had been scrubbed clean. Not so much as a splinter of glass remained but she could remember every detail of the moment they had walked into the chapel on Monday morning.

What was it that Beth had said? *It doesn't look real. I feel like I've wandered into a play.*

And she’d been right, that was exactly what it had looked like, and now Jessica knew why. It had been planned that they would walk in and discover that exact scene. The way Georgia was lying, the smashed glass, the bottle in her hand.

From that very first moment they had been manipulated. The workshop and the chapel had been set up with one aim: for them to conclude the scenario she’d first suggested to Beth.

Georgia had gone to her workshop, drunk some vodka, made a fatal error, come down here, drunk more vodka, then the tincture, and died. The person who had set this up had guessed they would conclude it was an accidental death, although death by suicide would have been just as good. The main point was that no one was to suspect someone else had been here; no one was to suspect murder.

But Jessica knew now. This person had come in here, late that Sunday night when they knew Georgia would be alone. They had come prepared, carrying flowers and vodka. The flowers were a pretence of sympathy, of an offering of condolence, although of course they managed to pick the one flower Georgia hated. Still very few people had known that, not even Beth had realised. And the vodka… to share a drink, toast Alistair together, all with the aim of putting Georgia at her ease. They drank, they talked, all the time the killer was waiting for their chance to administer the poison. What kind of evil person would carry out such a cold, ruthless plan?

And then, to her horror, Jessica suddenly found herself imagining that the killer was there. They were standing in the shadows, and all the more frightening as they were faceless, formless, looking over the place where Georgia’s body had been. She could sense they were smiling. They were glad, yes, pleased Georgia was dead and proud of the way they were responsible.

Jessica felt a cold chill flood her body. It was as if her whole body went numb with terror. She couldn’t even scream. Every part of her body was too

petrified to move.

But then an anger welled up inside her; how dare this person congratulate themselves after committing such a heinous act?

‘You won’t get away with this,’ she whispered.

The figure melted away and slowly the atmosphere began to clear.

Then a ray of sunshine shone through the single archer’s window and Jessica had the strangest feeling. She’d been a vicar’s wife for fifteen years, yet she seldom felt moved spiritually. Her faith had been pragmatic, not exactly cold, but something she often observed from afar.

The sunshine touched her face and she felt its warmth, calming and comforting her.

Taking a deep breath, she stood up. The chapel was at peace with itself again; she could leave. As she did, Jessica noticed a copy of a Celtic blessing on the notice board.

May the sunshine warm your face… and until we meet again,
may God hold you in the palm of his hand.

Jessica blinked back tears. It seemed to her as if this beautiful old building was blessing her and reassuring her. She read the words out loud, then addressed Georgia.

‘I’m so sorry that this happened to you, but I promise you I will do my best to find out who did this.’

She put on her damp coat and left.

It was wonderful to be back in the fresh air.

Outside, she made her way carefully over the wet, slippery grass. Then, as she climbed the incline that led onto the path, she felt a hard push into her back. She was propelled forward and she landed face down in the mud. It took her a few minutes until she came to herself and started to clamber

up. She was soaked through. Her hands, face and coat were all caked in mud.

Jessica looked around, but there was no one to be seen now. She glanced over at the chapel; maybe her attacker was hiding behind it.

Anger surged through her body. She staggered back and searched, but there was no one there. It was only then that she realised how foolish she had been. Her attacker could easily have hurt her again, and this time with far greater force.

Looking around, she realised there were a number of directions this person could have gone… behind the coast watch station, over by the cottages, even along the coastal path. They could be anywhere.

‘You coward,’ she screamed. ‘Come out, face me.’

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Her words were carried away over the cliffs and out to sea. Jessica then broke down, started to sob, and crumpled to the ground. She was wet and exhausted, but no one was coming to save her. She was alone, why hadn't she told Beth where she was going? She was a fool to come here on her own.

Jessica pushed herself off the ground. She couldn't stay here. The only thing to be done was to get back. She began to make her way to the car, her legs heavy with mud. At the car park, she felt a wave of despair; her immaculate car was about to get covered in mud. She threw open the boot. At least she had spare footwear in there. Then she saw another car approaching.

Jessica recognised it as Beth's car. She felt a mixture of relief and embarrassment.

Beth parked, jumped out of the car, and ran over to her. 'My God, Jessica. What has happened to you? Have you had another fall?'

Another time Jessica would have challenged 'another fall' but not today. 'Someone pushed me, Beth.' She could feel emotion welling up again but swallowed her tears.

Beth's face became even more serious. 'What?'

‘I was pushed.’ Then it all became too much again; she exploded into tears.

Beth put her arm around her. ‘Oh no, hey, shush now.’

‘I’m not making it up,’ stammered Jessica, pulling away from Beth. ‘But I don’t know where they are; they ran off.’ She looked around, but Beth grabbed her. ‘Hang on. Your back. There’s a handprint on there. You’re right. Look, let’s get you home. Come in my car. We’ll return for yours later.’

‘I’m covered in mud.’

‘And I am equipped for muddy dogs,’ replied Beth.

She found an enormous old plastic sheet in the boot, covered the passenger seat and helped Jessica into the car.

As Beth drove her Jessica wiped the tears off her cheek, but then realised she’d smeared more mud on her face. The feeling of fear was replaced by acute embarrassment. Whatever must Beth be thinking and what on earth would Jack make of all this? Surely, they would decide she wasn’t safe to be out on her own, a foolish woman who didn’t know her own limitations.

Once home Beth said, ‘You go and shower. I’ll get the kettle on. Good job Jack and Rhiannon have gone to work. They would never forgive me for letting you get in this state.’

Feeling like a child who’d got in a scrap, Jessica went upstairs. It was wonderful to stand in the hot shower and wash away the dirt, but the feeling of shame clung to her.

Jessica got dressed and went downstairs. Beth had already put her coat in the wash. ‘We’ll do the rest of your clothes separately,’ said Beth. ‘I’m an expert with mud.’

Feeling even more childlike Jessica mumbled, ‘I’m so sorry, I can’t believe I let this happen.’

Beth turned and spoke seriously, ‘This is not your fault Jessica. You had every right to go down to the chapel, and I don’t know what bastard did this to you but I’d like to give him a good shove back.’

Jessica gave a weak smile, ‘That is kind, you must think I’m so stupid though.’

‘No, not at all, I think you are very brave.’

Jessica heard the toast pop up in the toaster. Beth buttered it for her and handed her a steaming hot cup of coffee.

‘How did you know where I was?’ asked Jessica quietly.

‘I was up not long after you, saw the car had gone and was pretty sure where you were after everything we talked about. When you were still not back after I returned from the animals, I had a bad feeling. I got worried and decided to come looking.’

‘Well, I’m glad you did. Thank you.’

Beth sat down with coffee and toast herself.

Jessica expected them to continue talking about the events of the morning, but to her surprise she saw Beth bite her lip and run her finger around the rim of her mug. Jessica wondered what was wrong.

Beth swallowed hard and gave an awkward cough. ‘Actually, you make me feel guilty. Last night, in bed, I got to thinking. My friend Georgia is dead, and she died in the most horrible, painful way. If there is any doubt in my mind that she died accidentally, should I be turning my back on her?’

‘And do you have doubts?’

‘I do. I don’t believe in my heart Georgia took her own life or made a mistake when making up the tincture.’

Beth paused, her voice cracked, her lips were trembling as she continued, ‘Someone else must have been involved in her death and we know one of the people who went on that walk with us on Mother’s Day, went to the chapel later and is not owning up.’

Beth gave a deep sigh, ‘I really don’t want to believe this, but I think that person must have had something to do with Georgia’s death.’ Beth paused, her fingers trembled, ‘I knew that deep down and yet I’m ashamed to admit I cared more about being popular than seeing justice for Georgia.’ Beth wiped the tears off her cheek. ‘You must think I am so shallow.’

Jessica could feel a lump of emotion in her throat. ‘Of course not. You are kind, help people and they warm to you in a way I envy.’

Beth blinked, ‘Really?’

‘I do understand and if you want to back off, I understand.’

Beth shook her head, ‘Thank you, but I have to work with you, I have no other choice. I want to do this, Jessica.’

Moved, Jessica reached over and lightly touched the top of Beth’s hands with her fingertips. ‘I think you are very brave and as I proved this morning, I really do need help.’

Their eyes met and they exchanged a gentle smile, acknowledging for the first time a genuine bond of understanding between them.

Beth’s smile broadened, ‘By the way, I thought of something else that indicates it was one of our group there.’

Jessica sat back, ‘What was that?’

‘As far as everyone else was concerned, Georgia was going to be at the quiz after nine. She only changed her mind during the walk. Our group were the only people who knew she was going to be down there that late and on her own.’

‘Of course. I hadn’t worked that out,’ Jessica admitted. She sighed and added, ‘Someone has gone to great pains to set a stage, convince us about what happened to Georgia,’ said Jessica. ‘Someone has been manipulating us. This person plans, and they are clever.’

Beth shuddered. ‘It’s scary, isn’t it? Tell me what happened in the chapel.’

Jessica went through everything: how she had found the pansies, and her experiences after that.

Beth listened intently. ‘So, the bunch of pansies and the ribbon were gone. They were there yesterday when Rhiannon went. Talking about them last night panicked someone, didn’t it? They went down there. This is another pointer to someone in our group. God, they are clever, aren’t they?’

‘They are but they’re making mistakes,’ said Jessica. ‘They should never have taken that bunch of flowers to the chapel in the first place. They should never have pushed me. That has just made me even more sure there is something to find here.’

‘Are you OK, by the way? I’m so sorry I never checked on you. Do you need to see a doctor?’

‘No, seriously, I’m fine, I was just shocked.’

Beth sighed. ‘I can’t believe we’re sitting here in my kitchen talking about a killer. Can we really know better than the police?’

‘It’s difficult, they are the experts, but they have to decide what to prioritise, what is likely, what is plausible. But we do have the advantage of knowing the people involved, of being able to talk to them, and observe them. We were with Georgia all day. We watched her, heard the things she said to the group.’

‘That’s right,’ said Beth. ‘And we have the advantage of being sure that someone went down to the chapel.’ Beth sat back, took a bite of her toast. ‘So where do we go from here?’

‘We need to do this methodically,’ said Jessica. ‘In detective books they talk about the suspect needing means, opportunity and motive. Our suspects are Ellie, Pippa, Ray, Tanya, and Vincent. They were all on the walk, had a gift bag, all knew when Georgia would be alone. Georgia was poisoned. We know that. So, who could get hold of that and somehow administer it?’

‘Any of them could have gone to the workshop after the walk, unobserved, as it is tucked away. It would have taken some nerve, but it’s

possible.’

‘That’s right. They were very cool-headed. They went down, set up the workshop and made up a new tincture with the aconite in it. And then they set the stage to make it appear that Georgia had been drinking and had made the poisoned tincture with the intention of taking her life, or she added the aconite by mistake.’

‘And then they took the tincture down later and poisoned Georgia,’ said Beth. She hesitated and then asked, ‘But how did they make her drink it? They couldn’t have just handed over another bottle; it would have looked very odd.’

‘That’s true,’ said Jessica. ‘And it’s something I can’t work out yet. But we know quite a lot about the means. Any of them could have gone and made up the tincture. So, opportunity: who was able to get down to the chapel at that time of night? Ellie was stuck at home as her car had broken down. Tanya showed us that photograph, but Pippa, Vincent and now Ray don’t have an alibi.’

Beth started. ‘Oh my God. I’ve just remembered something really important.’

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Jessica sat forward. ‘Tell me, Beth. What have you remembered?’

‘I stumbled into a bike around the back of Georgia’s. I bashed my leg. Ellie could have cycled down there, seen Georgia, and then returned in time to go to the pub quiz.’

‘Would there be time?’

‘Definitely. It takes around ten minutes to cycle there. Jack and I did it with Pippa and Ray one day.’

‘I can’t imagine Pippa cycling.’

‘Oh, she’s a good cyclist. The four of us have been on a few trips like that. We did Swanage to the chapel one day. That only took about twenty minutes. Ray would have done it quicker. He’s surprisingly fit.’

‘So now we add Ellie. That leaves Tanya,’ said Jessica. ‘Her alibi seems a bit too convenient to me.’

‘True, she did just pull it out of a hat, as if she had prepared it.’

‘Good, but what about motive?’

Beth rolled her eyes. ‘All this thinking is hurting my brain.’

Jessica smiled. ‘Sorry, it’s a lot. Look, how about we take a break? We could go and pick up my car and then come back, fresh.’

Beth stood up. ‘Good idea.’

At the car park, they both got out of the car. Jessica looked towards the chapel; she'd left it feeling at peace, but all the time the killer had been watching her. Why had they pushed her? Was it simply an act of frustration? Were they fed up with her interfering? That was possible, or maybe it was something darker, a warning, telling her to back off.

Jessica pulled herself upright. They had failed. She was not put off. In fact, they had showed their hand, proved there was a killer, and now she was more determined than ever to track them down.

Even as she thought this, though, a voice inside was whispering, 'But they are still watching you; they will see you are still digging. Maybe next time it won't just be a push.'

Jessica glanced at Beth. Was she putting Beth in danger as well?

'Are you OK?' Beth asked.

'I was thinking… this killer, they're dangerous. I'm worried about you.'

'But if we don't catch them now, they'll still be in the village. You'll go back to Oxford and leave me, Jack and the children living with a killer. We have to do this. We don't have a choice.'

Jessica was impressed with her daughter-in-law's courage. 'OK, then. I'm glad but just be careful.'

They returned to Beth's house and went back to their task of working out the motive of the killer.

'Let's start with Vincent,' said Beth. 'He's the person I'm least comfortable with being our killer. I know he was on the walk and all that, but he is a man of God. He's not going to go around killing people, is he?'

'It's quite frightening how apparently good people can justify evil actions. I believe the phrase "the greater good" is used.'

'Like the end justifies the means. You think Vincent may have some kind of religious mania, that God is telling him to kill people?'

Jessica smiled. 'I wasn't quite thinking that, but he is a man of strong convictions, and it's possible that if he feels something is standing in the

way of him fulfilling what he considers a calling, he might act in a way we would see as extreme.'

Beth let out a long sigh. 'Good grief, that's quite something. So, in what way did Georgia get in his way?'

Jessica shrugged. 'I'm not sure. But when I first spoke to Georgia she talked about something she and Pippa were concerned about which was interfering with the way Vincent did his job. Would you have any idea about that?'

Beth shook her head. 'I'm not really in the inner church loop. There was definitely something going on beneath the surface. Remember Vincent sounded quite upset about them when we talked about Ellie bothering them?'

'Of course. He got quite worked up, but then we had only just told him about Georgia. He was bound to be emotional.'

'It's something more than that,' said Jessica. 'Georgia seemed exasperated about a few things. I know she mentioned about him not taking pain relief for his back, that he needed a wife to look after him, then when she was showing us around her garden on Sunday morning, she talked about his garden. She said something odd, something about the roots of his problems being out there.'

'It's quite something to say, isn't it? It looked a pretty normal garden to me. I suppose there was the shed, which was chaotic, but that was all.'

'Well, Georgia saw something there.'

'True. Georgia seems to have known a lot. Talking of which, I remembered something from that conversation Tanya and Ray had. It was at the end. Ray said Georgia had talked to him about her on the beach and told him to be careful. Something about some seeds.'

'She mentioned them again. I'm assuming they were the same ones she said she'd found in Tanya's shed. She seemed quite obsessed with them.

She mentioned them before we went to the beach, then again on the way back to the car park. And now we know she mentioned them to Ray.'

'I have to say he sounded pretty mystified, but Tanya might have gone on to explain. Who knows.'

'There is also this will business with Ellie,' said Jessica.

'Yes, she had no idea anyone had overheard that row.'

'Did she know what was in the will?'

'She said she hadn't found it and said she didn't need to any more because she trusted Georgia.'

'It didn't sound like she did in the quarry.'

'No, but she was very worked up that day. On reflection, she told me she believed Georgia loved her and would always act in her best interests. Although she said she hadn't found the will, I'm not convinced. If she had found the other will on Sunday after the walk, and felt Georgia had stolen something from her, she'd be even more angry.'

Beth frowned. 'It's frustrating not knowing what was in the will, isn't it?'

'It is.' Jessica screwed her face up. 'Remember Georgia said to Ellie that she could have found it years ago, but not now? It's like a riddle. I wonder what it means.'

Beth grinned. 'There you are: a puzzle for you. I'll be very impressed if you can solve it and find that will.'

'I'll try my best, but we have other things to think about now.'

Beth sighed. 'It's all very confusing, isn't it? So many things to remember.'

'You know what we need?'

Beth shook her head.

'What we need is a list,' said Jessica, her eyes sparkling.

Beth found a notebook and pen and Jessica sat, busily writing. When she finished, she looked up and said, 'I think I have everything.' She read

out what she'd written.

Means:

- *Everyone*

Opportunity:

- *Ellie – Bike*
- *Tanya – Says she was in Swanage.*
- *Ray – Lied, don't know where he was.*
- *Pippa – Didn't answer phone.*
- *Vincent – Didn't see him after 9 p.m.*

Motive:

- *Ellie – Money. She was desperate for the money to go travelling with Finn. She was very angry about the will, assumed the worst. Another motive – hate of Georgia. Note – why was she so scared about the police searching the house and particularly the pottery?*
- *Pippa – Georgia knew about secrets in the garden. What does Pippa have to hide? Why was she so upset that Alistair spoke to Georgia? Did she believe Georgia and Ray were having an affair?*

Jessica looked up. 'We ought to add about those mysterious visits to Poole. I swear I saw her, and Georgia was sure as well.' So, Jessica added:

Why does Pippa make secret visits to Poole?

- *Ray – Georgia had possibly threatened to stop promoting his restaurant. Does Ray's level of concern mean he had financial worries? He was warned about Tanya for some reason.*
- *Vincent – Was he scared of what Georgia was going to do? What are the problems that so concerned her? Was it his health? Was she going to report him?*
- *Tanya – She sounded very worried about Georgia throwing her out of her house. She has a very close attachment to it and the village and also now has a boyfriend. Why was Georgia obsessed with these seeds?*

Jessica looked up. 'You see, we know quite a lot.'

'But how does any of it help us in working out what happened to Georgia?' asked Beth. 'What do we do next?'

'Hang on. I'll make an action list and see what you think.'

When she'd finished, she read it out.

Action:

- *Ellie – Search the pottery. Check what time she was at the quiz. Find the will.*
- *Ray – See what he does on a Sunday night: follow him after 9.30 p.m. Find out the state of the finances at the restaurant.*
- *Pippa – Search reading room and private garden. Find out about her visits to Poole? Also try and work out if she believed Georgia and Ray were having an affair.*
- *Tanya – Check her alibi. Find out about those seeds. Work out why she is a threat to Ray.*

- *Vincent – look in his garden/shed to see if we can find the root of his problems. Why were Georgia and Pippa concerned about him not being able to do his job?*

Jessica looked up and smiled. ‘That’s a good list. Mind you, writing “look in shed”, “look in reading room” is easy. Actually, doing them in real life might not be so simple. I wouldn’t want to be trespassing.’

‘We will have to see what we can do,’ said Beth, grinning. ‘The trouble is, it’s easy for the police. They can wave their ID and go wherever they like. We’ll just have to be inventive.’

Jessica continued. ‘We do need to be careful, though. If we’re right, then someone has killed and, as far as they are concerned, they have got away with it.’

Beth shook her head. ‘You’re right.’ She paused. ‘Gosh, Jessica. This is not at all how I expected your visit to go. But maybe it was meant to be you were sent to us in our hour of need.’

Jessica cringed. ‘That sounds like a lot of responsibility. All I can say is that I will try my best. By the way, have you said anything about this to Jack?’

Beth grimaced. ‘I think I’ll wait. I’m quite sure he wouldn’t want me getting involved and he certainly wouldn’t want you to be. However’ – her eyes were bright – ‘I’ve realised Pippa usually goes to Wareham today. Ray should be at the restaurant. It would be the ideal opportunity to go and search her garden.’

Jessica panicked. Of course, they needed to go and search the garden, but surely it was too risky to go down in daylight? ‘But you have no idea how long Pippa will be,’ she said. ‘What if she comes home early and finds us there? What if someone sees us going into the garden?’

‘It’ll be fine,’ said Beth. ‘Don’t worry.’ She smiled at Jessica. ‘No offence, but I think I should do this on my own.’

‘That doesn’t seem fair on you.’

Beth laughed, ‘We all have different gifts, Jessica. You have many, but I don’t think breaking into someone’s garden in the afternoon is one, while for me it’s fun. Now let’s have lunch, keep me going.’

After they’d eaten, Jessica tried again to dissuade her, but Beth was determined and started to get ready to leave.

Jessica sighed. ‘Well, be careful.’ She looked over at Martha. ‘Would it be OK to take Martha out for a short walk?’

‘Of course, if she’ll go.’ Martha started to wag her tail. ‘She’s looking keen,’ said Beth, smiling.

Beth found the poo bags and attached the lead to Martha’s collar.

‘You ready then?’ Jessica asked Martha, who looked up expectantly.

‘Well, look at that… brilliant. If she sits down and refuses to budge, just turn around and bring her home.’

Jessica took Martha into the first field. She’d never owned a dog, but she realised how much she was enjoying the companionship while she walked.

They were walking around the field when she saw Marcus from the bookshop coming towards her. Her heart sank, not because she had anything against the man, but because she didn’t feel like talking to anyone.

Martha and Romeo greeted each other. Marcus said, ‘Enjoying a peaceful walk?’

‘I am,’ she replied and looked away.

‘Well, I’ll leave you to it,’ Marcus said and started to walk on by.

Jessica was a bit hurt he hadn’t stayed to chat and said, ‘It’s a lovely day to come down here.’

He paused and said, ‘I’m sorry, you sounded as if you would rather be on your own.’

Jessica winced. Julian told her gently she had a habit of sounding abrupt and it could be off-putting, and she’d tried to get out of the habit, but small

talk never came easily to her.

Jessica blinked. ‘Did I? No, I’m happy to chat.’

Marcus grinned. ‘Well, that’s great. You can let Martha off in here,’ he said. ‘She will be quite safe.’

‘I’m not confident enough for that.’

‘Fair enough. I’ll let Romeo off, though.’

Marcus asked her how she was enjoying her holiday, adding that he was sorry she’d got caught up in the tragedy of Georgia’s death.

‘It’s been difficult, but I have still enjoyed being here.’

He looked at her intently. ‘You’ve been busy with Beth, I’m sure. She’s one of the most active social people I know, while you… I’m guessing, are a lot happier in the world of books.’

Jessica smiled. ‘You’re right. Are you the same?’

His answer surprised her. ‘At times, but I haven’t always lived in the rarefied world of literature or a library. My main love is music. I was a music teacher in a large comprehensive for years.’

‘Really? So quite a contrast to be owning a bookshop in a small village,’ said Jessica, fascinated.

They continued around the field, Martha content to walk beside Jessica while Romeo ran around sniffing the grass.

‘It is. I have to admit I probably wasn’t far off burnout. As much as I loved the work, it was exhausting. Budget cuts and the squeezing of music from the timetable made it hard.’

‘I can imagine… What instrument do you play?’

‘Piano is my main instrument, but I play quite a few others too.’

‘How clever. I can’t play anything. I can’t even read music.’

‘You ought to get Beth to teach you – she’s a very accomplished musician.’

‘I’d not realised that. Jack told me she could play, but she never sits down long enough to finish a piece.’

‘I have a feeling Beth feels guilty when she’s not up and doing, which is a shame. Still, we all benefit from everything she does in the village. If it depended on people like me, it would fall apart.’

‘You’re providing a lovely bookshop, which is a wonderful contribution.’

‘Well, thank you,’ he said and smiled. ‘So, Beth said you used to work in a library. What do you do now?’

‘I lost my husband two years ago, and I’ve been in a kind of hibernation. But I do need to decide what to do next. I’d been thinking of moving back to the Isle of Wight where I grew up, tuck myself away in some remote cottage.’

‘As wonderful as that sounds, wouldn’t it be safer to be closer to facilities like doctors and shops? You need to think of the future.’

Jessica bristled. ‘I am perfectly able to live independently.’

‘Of course, but I’m guessing we’re of a similar age. I know I can’t do what I used to.’

‘We’re all different then, aren’t we?’

Marcus laughed. ‘I think I’ve hit a nerve. I’m sorry. You must do whatever you feel is right for you.’

Mollified, Jessica agreed and said she admired him starting a whole new way of life.

Romeo was running around with a large German shepherd which had entered the field with its owner. Marcus waved over in greeting. ‘That’s Ben. We see each other most days. Dogs are such a good way of making friends.’

‘Don’t let me stop you going and talking to him,’ said Jessica quickly.

‘Don’t worry. He’s a funny one. Sometimes he likes to chat; other days he does his own thing. I let him come to me if he’s feeling sociable. Today he looks like he wants his own space.’

Jessica looked down at her watch. ‘I think I should be getting back. I’m not sure what Beth has planned for us today.’

‘Well, have a good time. Nice to catch up, Jessica.’

Jessica made her way back with Martha, refreshed from her walk.

Meanwhile, Beth was having a far more stressful time. She was walking down through the village towards Pippa and Ray’s. Despite her bravado, Beth felt flutters of nerves as she approached their house and realised how much more exposed she was in the daytime. Fortunately, there didn’t appear to be anyone around.

She could see neither car was on the driveway, so she quickly made her way to the side of the house and down into the garden.

The garden wasn’t overlooked but she knew that if someone came along, she had no idea what crazy excuse she would give for being there. She strode down to the reading room and pushed the handle of the door.

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Beth breathed a sigh of relief. The door was unlocked.

Inside, though, she wasn’t sure where to start. She had no idea what she was looking for.

The room was mainly full of books and two comfortable chairs. She could see it was a very pleasant room to escape into and surprisingly cosy.

Along the far wall was an old dresser. The shelves held books rather than crockery, but there were several drawers underneath. Maybe they would contain something interesting.

The drawers were heavy and each seemed to be stuffed with magazines, some gardening, some literary. She flicked through but found nothing of note.

Beth sighed. She felt rather foolish; what had she expected to find anyway?

However, as she pushed the drawers back, one refused to close. She tried to reorganise some of the magazines to help but, as she lifted them, she found something that wasn’t a book or a magazine underneath.

Beth carefully placed the magazines on the floor and eventually she found two calendars: one for the current year and one for the year before. As she flipped through them, she noticed that none of the usual things were recorded such as birthdays, holidays, or casual reminders. Instead, there

were simply crosses on various days with a time and the letter P recorded in each one, usually towards the end of the month. The crosses started in the April of the previous year. At the top of this month Pippa had written an address in Poole and the name Dave. She took a photograph of it.

Beth returned everything to the drawer and continued to look around but suddenly realised she was no longer the only person in the garden. To her horror she looked out of the window and saw a man, who she recognised as one of the people who helped out in the church garden, pushing a wheelbarrow up the centre of the garden.

She ducked down. She was aware of him whistling as he approached. She felt a rising sense of panic and risked a peep out of the window. The gardener was quite close now and had settled to pruning a large bush. What should she do? She couldn’t stay here all afternoon.

Beth took a deep breath. She had no choice: she must leave the room. If the man turned around, then she would have to bluff her way out of this.

Beth crept out and carefully shut the door behind her. He didn’t look up as she circled behind him, and she realised he was wearing headphones and listening to a small radio.

Beth quickly walked down the garden, occasionally checking behind her, but the man remained engrossed in his work.

Finally, Beth was able to escape down the side of the house out of his sight.

In the front garden, she paused, caught her breath, and exited through the front gate and out into the village.

It was a relief to arrive home, where Beth found Jessica curled up reading in the conservatory. She burst in, adrenaline still rushing around her body, and spilled out all that had happened, taking out her phone to show Jessica the photos.

She began by showing her the ones of the calendars and pointed to the name and address on the first one.

‘Who do you think Dave is?’ Beth asked. ‘Do you think Pippa has a secret lover? Is he the man Georgia saw her having coffee with?’

‘I’ve no idea, but she seems to go to Poole a few times a month, presumably meeting up with him each time. I see there’s a cross on here for last Saturday, the day I saw her on the ferry.’ Jessica scratched her forehead. ‘I don’t know, though, she seems so committed to keeping her marriage together.’

‘If she suspects Ray of having affairs, then she may look for comfort or companionship outside her marriage.’

‘She may. So, we have an address in Poole. We could look it up on Google Maps,’ said Jessica, and went to find her laptop.

They entered the address. It appeared to be a row of rather beautiful, large old Victorian houses.

‘Those are expensive,’ said Beth. ‘Dave must be well off.’

Beth picked up the calendar. ‘I see she has another appointment on Saturday, in the morning. We could always go over a bit earlier and then hang around that street.’

‘Just to watch Pippa go in and out of a house?’ asked Jessica.

Beth screwed her mouth up. ‘I think we will have to be more proactive than that. Maybe we could confront her, ask her what she’s doing? She can’t pretend not to be there. She’ll have to say something.’

‘And how do we explain the coincidence of us being there?’

Beth shrugged. ‘We can hope she is too busy trying to explain herself to ask. Come on, Jessica, we have to take some chances here.’

‘Well, I’ll think about it.’

‘And then there’s Ray,’ continued Beth. ‘We really ought to discover what he gets up to when he leaves the restaurant at half nine. He’s not going home according to Pippa, so where does he go?’

‘How do we find that out?’ asked Jessica.

‘They do cocktails out in the pub garden. We could go there towards the end of the evening, have a drink, and then see if we can spot him leave and follow him.’

Jessica was already making a mental list of all the things that could go wrong.

Beth seemed to realise what was going on. ‘Come on, Jessica. What’s the worst that can happen? We miss Ray? Lose sight of the car? See nothing too drastic, and I fancy going out for a cocktail.’ Beth laughed. ‘Well, there I was, going to take you to see the sights, Corfe Castle, and Dancing Ledge and instead I’m taking you back over on the chain ferry, then on a mystery tour following Ray. This may not be what they suggest in the guidebooks, but it is quite exciting for all that.’

Jessica sighed. As much as she’d rather stay and try and solve a mystery in the safety of her own home, Beth had proved they needed to go out, take chances, and dig around. ‘OK, then,’ she agreed reluctantly. ‘We need to start getting through that list and they would be two good things to do.’

Beth grinned. ‘So, you’re agreed about the trip to Poole? Excellent.’

They had a quiet evening, and it was coming up for nine when Beth started putting on her shoes and talking about going down to sort out the animals. Jessica was on edge about Beth going out alone, but would it annoy her if she offered to go with her?

Fortunately, Beth looked at her. ‘Fancy a walk?’

Jessica got up eagerly and joined her.

They set off, firstly going to the elderly retriever and giving him a short walk, then visiting a tabby, and finally went to settle down two rabbits and a guinea pig in someone’s shed.

‘It’s nice to be legitimately in someone’s garden,’ joked Beth as she opened a large shed and switched on the light. ‘You know, Georgia talked so much about secret gardens, but it seems to me most of the secrets we’re discovering are in the sheds and buildings in the gardens.’

Jessica agreed. ‘You’re right. I’m sure a study could be done on why people choose to use these outbuildings for activities rather than a room in their house.’

There was a small sink in the shed and Beth washed out the animals’ bowls and water bottles whilst saying, ‘Some people simply don’t have a spare space.’

‘That’s true, but Pippa said to me that she’d turned down the offer of a library in the house. She liked the feeling of escaping. I can understand that.’

‘Well, I can’t,’ said Beth. ‘Why would I want to go down the bottom of the garden on my own all evening, I like having people around. I suppose it’s partly why I dread Rhiannon leaving. It’ll just be me and Jack and he is always working. But I remember you said you found it a lot having people in and out the vicarage all the time.’

She attached the bottles of water onto the cages and filled the bowls with food.

‘I did,’ said Jessica, ‘although I tried to cope as that was part of the job and Julian loved it.’

‘I remember Jack saying he was quite glad to have left home by then. He’s naturally a lot less sociable than me, if I have people in, he pretends he has work but I know he’s escaping.’

Jessica cringed. ‘Maybe that is my fault. Once Julian was in our lives he tried to encourage Jack to go out more, but when it was the two of us before that, our lives were a lot quieter.’

Beth put the bowls of food in the cages, locked them securely and then turned to Jessica. ‘You know Jack has started talking more than ever about those early days when it was just you and him. You were very close, weren’t you.’ She hesitated and asked gently, ‘I know how much Julian meant to him, and he misses him terribly, but he has mentioned his birth father a few times since then.’

Jessica held her breath, she was not prepared for this. She had no idea how much Beth knew about Jack's real father.

'I'm sorry,' said Beth, 'is it painful to talk about?'

'Not really, but unexpected. I'd not realised Jack gave his father much thought now.'

Beth straightened the water bottle on the rabbit's cage. 'I think he's worried to talk to you about it. You were young and single; it can't have been an easy time for you. Jack said it's the reason you didn't go to university?'

'That's right, but I have no regrets, Jack was the best thing that ever happened to me. His father, well he had other commitments. He provided money and with my parents' support, I was able to have Jack and give him, I hope, everything he needed.'

'I am sure you did. But his birth father, I realise he had his own family—'

Jessica cringed. Even over fifty years on, she still had so many conflicting emotions about the relationship. Memories of that first wild passionate love that had swept her away, but the terrible guilt that went alongside it.

Beth coughed, a habit Jessica was learning came before her approaching a delicate subject. She tried to brace herself, but what came completely confounded her.

'I saw your reaction to that book I picked up at Marcus' shop.'

Jessica froze, so Beth had noticed and she'd not imagined that look outside the bookshop.

Beth continued, 'Later I asked Jack about it. You see, he had only ever told me his birth father was a writer, but never his name, but that photo – the likeness is uncanny.'

Jessica stepped back to support herself. The shelf digging into her back was reassuring in a strange way. 'What did Jack say?' she asked, her voice

trembling.

Beth took a beat. ‘He told me that Hugh Jackson was his birth father.’

Jessica nodded. ‘That is right.’

Beth smiled, ‘I was relieved to find out, it’s not good in a marriage to have big secrets like that. Jack and I both have our pasts and I feel now we have shared them properly. I just wanted you to know, well that I know, and well maybe it might be worth chatting to Jack about it sometime.’

Jessica wasn’t sure. She and Jack didn’t have that many ‘heavy’ talks, they seemed to get by on a quiet understanding with few words. She would take her time over this, bring it up if she felt it was the right time.

‘Right then, let’s get out of this shed and home for a drink.’

They switched off the lights, shut up the shed, and went out into the village. Jessica’s mind was still in a whirl and as she looked towards the street which led to the bookshop, she cringed as she remembered her embarrassment over that book. Had Marcus noticed her reaction as well?

Beth, however, looked down the same street and said, ‘It’s great having a bookshop here, and Marcus is such a great bloke. It’s sad about him and his wife though, it must be a bit lonely for him here.’

Jessica’s curiosity was piqued. ‘What happened?’

Beth had the excited look she showed before sharing gossip. ‘He was very reticent when he arrived. It was all very frustrating. His aunt, who owned the bookshop before him, wasn’t much help either. However, Jack has managed to get more friendly with him than most and he opened up when they’d been drinking.’

‘Um, should you be telling me this?’ asked Jessica.

‘Oh yes. Everyone knows now. So, Marcus was teaching in London, had two teenage kids, when he discovered his wife had been having an affair with his best mate for two years.’

‘How awful.’

‘I know. The marriage ended. He stayed there for a while before moving here. But he was pretty broken up about it. He’s friendly but tends to keep himself to himself. I like him though.’

They had arrived at the duck pond and were about to head home when they heard someone sobbing on the seat close by.

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The light from the telephone box revealed it was Ellie.

‘Oh dear,’ said Beth. ‘I need to go and see what’s the matter.’

Jessica hung back, walking slowly behind Beth.

Beth slipped into the seat next to Ellie. ‘What’s up?’

‘Finn and I have split up… You can’t trust anyone, can you?’

‘What happened?’

‘I decided to test his love for me. I asked him what he’d do if I decided not to use the money to travel but work on my career as a potter instead. I just wanted to see his reaction. He laughed and said of course I was joking. When I said I was serious, that we could wait, he said there was no way… He became quite threatening, told me I’d led him on and that if I really loved him, I would put him first. He also said there were plenty of other people he could go travelling with. And it was like someone switched on a light, and I saw him for the first time.’

She sobbed.

‘I desperately wanted to switch off the light, but it was too late. I’d seen him for what he was. It’s humiliating, isn’t it, to be so wrong about someone? After everything I did for him…’

She started to cry again.

Beth sat next to her silently, waiting for the storm of tears to subside.

‘It’s just all a lot to handle,’ she said more quietly. ‘For the past few years all I have wanted is money, my key to independence, to live the life I want, but it’s not that easy, is it?’

‘No. I’m afraid it’s not.’

Ellie glanced over at Pippa and Ray’s house. ‘God, nothing is going right, is it? It started with Ray coming over first thing this morning having a go at me for what I said on the beach about him and Georgia. I mean, it was a joke and it seems ages ago now.’

‘Pippa was very upset.’

‘Pippa should chill out; it was clearly a joke.’

‘So you never seriously thought Ray had an affair with Georgia?’

‘God, no. She, at least, had more sense than that.’

Jessica picked up on the words ‘at least’ and stepped forward. ‘So, others weren’t as sensible?’

Ellie’s brows shot up, she’d clearly not realised Jessica was there, but she replied, ‘You know how it is.’

‘What about with Tanya?’ persisted Jessica.

Ellie rolled her eyes. ‘You’ve heard about that? Tanya thinks only I know.’

‘When was this, Ellie?’

‘Ages ago. Christmas before last, and it didn’t come to anything. Tanya was pretty keen to begin with, but she broke it off, said he was too old, and too serious.’

‘Did Pippa have any idea?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘So, he might have left Pippa for her?’

‘Tanya was scared it might go that way and said it wasn’t something she wanted. You know she had that problem with the boy in uni? She didn’t want a repeat of that.’

‘But she kept working there?’

‘Oh yeah. She said that in the end Ray saw that splitting up was for the best.’ Ellie sighed. ‘I think he’s just fed up with Pippa, and who can blame him?’

‘You don’t like her?’

‘No, I think she’s sneaky. And I don’t like the way she keeps having a go at Vincent. I don’t go to church, but I think he’s a good man, and he’s always been there for me. He told me she would like to get rid of him. This is his life; we are lucky to have him.’

‘Why is she so against him?’

‘I don’t know exactly, but ages ago, I was waiting to talk to Vincent one Saturday night. It was not long after Dad died, and I just needed someone to talk to. Anyway, Pippa was ahead of me. I heard the vestry door open. She was still talking; in fact, she was shouting at him, “I came here for your support not your judgement. You’re not up to the job, are you? I shall make sure you move on,” and with that she charged down the aisle. Vincent came out. He didn’t chase after her, just looked a bit sad and then listened to me and my problems as if nothing had happened. But I know Pippa is still out to get him. I expect he’s glad to get away from the village for the night.’

‘Where’s he gone?’

‘Some kind of overnight retreat thing. You stay up and pray. Sounds ever so boring.’ Ellie stood up. ‘Thanks for listening, I’ll be off now.’ She walked away.

Beth and Jessica headed back.

‘Wow! So, Ray had an affair with Tanya,’ said Beth. ‘Good guess on your part.’

‘I wondered about that conversation outside the pub; it sounded pretty intimate.’

‘Well, I never guessed. Pippa was right, you can hide things in this village. Gosh I wonder if she has any idea. By the way, Georgia was proved right about Finn wasn’t she, he’s a wrong un. She’s better off without him.’

‘I think she sees that now, but she was completely besotted with him before. It worries me you know, what Ellie meant by saying, “after all I did for him”.’

Beth turned, blinked. ‘You don’t think this has anything to do with Georgia’s death, do you?’

‘I hope not.’

They had reached the church now. Beth slowed and Jessica saw her looking over at the side of the church. Their eyes met, and Jessica shook her head.

‘No way. You can’t go sneaking around at this hour.’

‘But it’s the ideal opportunity. I can climb over the wall and into the garden. It’ll be so easy.’

Before Jessica could stop her, Beth turned on her torch and headed into the churchyard. Reluctantly, Jessica followed her.

‘You keep watch, not that I’d expect anyone at this time, but you never know,’ whispered Beth.

Although traditionally churchyards were seen as scary, haunted places, Jessica usually found them peaceful. Often wildlife flourished, and there was time to think.

However, she felt no sense of calm this evening as she watched Beth clamber over the dry-stone wall.

Beth crept through the long grass, following her torch light. She reached the cherry tree and made her way round it to the shed.

Trying the door, she found it unlocked and went in. It was pitch black in there apart from the glow of a light over some plants. As she shone her torch around the interior she shook her head. Where to start in this chaos? It was such a contrast to Georgia’s immaculate workshop and Pippa’s cosy reading room.

She looked along the workbench and started picking up objects and inspecting them in the torch light. Then there were the jars of dried herbs

and flowers, the camomile that she had tasted.

It was pretty cramped in there with a largely unused lawn mower taking up a lot of floor space, but nothing of interest. She was about to give up when her eyes were drawn to those young plants. Now, what felt off about them? She looked more closely at the leaves: they were like tiny palm leaves and had serrated edges.

Beth's eyes shone with excitement. She took out one of her spare poo bags and carefully picked a few leaves to put in.

Meanwhile Jessica was waiting impatiently in the churchyard. In other circumstances she would have closed her eyes, listened to the tawny owls calling to each other, shone her light among the long grass to discover where that rustling was coming from, maybe a mouse, or even a hedgehog foraging for food.

However, all she could do was stare over into the garden, frantic for Beth to return. She could see the shed from here, and the torch light flashing around. If anyone appeared they would be able to see it too, maybe call the police. What would they do then? Would Beth be arrested for trespass, breaking, and entry? Would Jessica be arrested for aiding and abetting – wasn't that what it was called on those crime programmes?

Fortunately, at that moment Beth began to climb over the wall and grinned at Jessica. 'Mission accomplished. Wait till you see what I've found.'

Unable to share in the excitement, Jessica rushed back through the graveyard until they were back in the street.

'I don't know how you do that,' Jessica said. 'I aged a decade just waiting for you.'

'I do get nervous,' admitted Beth, 'but it pays off, doesn't it?'

Safely back at the house, Beth took out the small bag and took out the leaves with care.

'I am pretty sure I know what this is – don't you?'

Jessica shook her head.

Beth laughed. ‘What a sheltered life you’ve led… and in a student town as well.’

Jessica frowned.

‘These leaves are from a young plant. It will grow fast in the right conditions. Soon it will grow buds; there will be a distinct smell. Eventually the buds will be harvested, dried and treated.’

‘So Vincent can make tea with them?’

‘I don’t think he will make tea. My guess is he will grind them down and add them to butter, make some nice brownies or biscuits…’

Jessica felt she was missing something. Beth was looking at her eagerly, as if egging her on.

‘I’m sorry…’

‘For goodness’ sake, Jessica. Our vicar has been growing cannabis in his shed.’

‘Cannabis? But I thought people smoked that. I know the smell. I’m not completely naive.’

‘But you can also use it to make cakes and things.’ Beth laughed. ‘I’ve just remembered that tub I took out of the fridge. I’d put money on it being butter mixed with cannabis. No wonder Vincent didn’t want me to use it on my scones.’

Jessica gave a look of mock anger. ‘You know an awful lot about this.’

‘I had friends who used to make up brownies to take to parties, not that I ever ate them, of course.’

Jessica picked up the leaf and inspected it. ‘I know everyone treats the subject of cannabis more lightly now, but isn’t it illegal to grow it in this country?’

‘It is,’ said Beth. Her expression became more serious. ‘Growing even one plant is against the law. Vincent is taking a huge risk. My guess is he’s using it for his back pain, but all the same, it’s not legal.’

Jessica nodded. ‘Georgia was concerned about him – and she mentioned finding something in his garden last week.’

‘My God,’ said Beth, ‘is this what Pippa and Georgia were saying was the reason he wasn’t able to do his job? If they reported this, not only would Vincent lose his job here, but he’d be in serious trouble with the police.’

‘And he is determined to keep his job here. This is his calling,’ said Jessica quietly.

Beth grabbed Jessica’s arm. ‘This has to be a strong motive for murder. I mean, this is serious stuff.’

Jessica hesitated. ‘How sure are you that you have identified this leaf correctly?’

Beth shrugged. ‘Pretty sure – I mean, look at it, and it was growing under a light. I’ve seen these cannabis farms with all the lights shining down on them.’ She paused. ‘So, what do we do?’

‘We should report it,’ said Jessica. ‘Although I’d like to be sure first. I can’t face Ruth or her boss if we’ve got this wrong.’

They started to search online but it was surprising how many of the leaves looked alike.

‘I wonder if one of those old-fashioned botanic garden drawings would be better,’ said Jessica. ‘They’re so precise.’

‘Marcus might have a book like that. How about we go down, see what he has?’

Jessica smiled. ‘I don’t think he’s open at this time but, yes, it’s a good idea. We’ll try and get down there.’

‘But we have something to do first,’ said Beth.

Jessica looked at her, confused.

‘Today is the big reveal,’ said Beth. ‘I’m so excited. Honestly, it’s the best thing ever. Like I said, Jack has actually taken time off. I can’t wait.’

Jessica forced a smile, trying to hide her sense of dread. She wished sometimes she could be more like Beth and enjoy surprises and

anticipation, but she just wasn't made like that. Well, she would have to wait and see.

However, in bed, nothing would stop her running through the possibilities. Maybe a pet? No, they wouldn't do that. She hoped it was nothing to do with mobility, a walking stick, or any kind of walking device. Please God, no. It could be they had booked her a holiday, a cruise? Again, she cringed. She wasn't a cruise kind of person, and she didn't want to be flown off somewhere hot. Maybe they thought she needed a new hobby now she was retired? A sewing machine? Or, oh goodness, it could be something for fitness: a treadmill or an exercise bike.

Finally, exhausted by the endless possibilities, Jessica fell asleep.

* * *

Thursday

The next morning, Jessica woke up with an unexplained feeling of dread in her stomach. Then she remembered: it was 'the big reveal' this morning. She told herself to calm down. Beth and Jack were good people, and she must put a brave face on whatever was to come.

She picked up her puzzle book and felt better after completing a crossword. She remembered they would be going to the bookshop and smiled. Now that was something to look forward to. But what they would do once they had identified the leaf, she wasn't sure. They could ruin Vincent's life if they reported it, but wasn't that their duty?

To stop her mind racing on she turned to her small pile of books. Among them was the copy of *The Secret Garden* which she had bought from Marcus's shop. She picked it up and was soon lost in the magical world of Mary Lennox.

Time flew and it was light reading, but Jessica knew she had to stop and face breakfast and the day.

Beth was out seeing to the animals when she went down, so she made herself coffee and toast.

When she returned, Beth was full of excitement. ‘You’re up. Brilliant. We can go any time. I shall go and get Jack: he’s working.’

Jessica heard Beth banging on the study door and shouting, ‘Come on, Jack. It’s time.’

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Jack came out of his study and gave an apologetic grimace which filled Jessica with fear. What was going on?

Beth said that she would drive them. Jessica sat in the back of the car nervously. Jack was trying to chat, but she could tell he was on edge as well.

They were driving down to the coast. It wasn't long until Beth pulled into what appeared to be a small new development of flats overlooking the sea. To her right, further along, she could see Swanage.

Jessica's mind was racing. Had they come out for a meal? But where was the restaurant? Maybe they'd have a picnic?

But to her consternation, Beth led them to the front door of one of the blocks of flats. She took them inside, and across to the lift.

'Are we visiting someone?' Jessica asked.

Beth didn't reply and Jack was looking increasingly worried. They ascended to the second floor and walked along a carpeted hallway. To Jessica's astonishment, Beth took out a key, opened a door and they went into a brand-new flat.

'Isn't it beautiful?' said Beth. 'It has sea views, and two bedrooms.'

'It's very nice,' said Jessica, mystified.

‘I’m so glad you like it. You see… we have put down a deposit. This is your new home, Jessica.’

Jessica felt her head spin. She couldn’t breathe. Jack grabbed her arm.

‘I know it’s a lot to take in,’ said Beth, ‘but we heard about these flats, and then this one came up, and grabbed it, it even has a sea view. It’s wonderful here, and no difficult stairs. Most importantly, there is a warden on call 24 hours a day. Each room has an emergency cord, so if you were to have another fall, someone would be up straight away. The bathroom is all fitted out for someone with limited mobility. A GP practice is linked to the flats and a podiatrist, even a hairdresser comes weekly, oh and a vicar comes to give communion, so you’d never have to go out to church if you didn’t want to.’

Jessica stared as Beth carried on oblivious to the growing horror on her mother-in-law’s face. ‘You will never be lonely, they emphasise being a community. There is a brilliant communal room, where they put on dancing and classes, and there are lots of clubs, a choir, bingo evenings, and a drama group. In one of the blocks there’s a very good restaurant, where they put on buffet evenings.’

Beth looked at Jack. He hadn’t spoken yet.

‘It’s really nice here, Mum, and you know it would mean so much to us to have you close by.’

‘Of course,’ continued Beth, ‘we can come all the time and look after you, and of course you can come to us for meals. We can see you love the area. When you walk down on the beach here you can even see the Isle of Wight.’

Beth finally took a breath, and with her face bright with expectation she looked over at Jessica for a response.

Jessica had so many emotions rushing around her head that she didn’t know quite where to start. She spoke in as measured a tone as she could.

‘I know you mean well, but I’m afraid there’s no way I can live here.’

‘But it’s ideal. You’re not getting any younger Jessica, and we want to look after you.’

‘But I don’t want to live here. I don’t want to be looked after,’ said Jessica, her voice shaking now.

‘We thought—’

‘But you never asked me what I wanted. Jack, you know me. I can’t live like this, hemmed in by people. The idea of a communal lounge and clubs is my idea of a nightmare. What on earth were you thinking?’

Beth frowned. ‘We were thinking of you. This place is gorgeous, and we were incredibly lucky to get it.’

‘But I don’t want it.’ Jessica stood up. ‘We need to leave, right now. I will pay this deposit. You won’t lose out, but I am not, I repeat, not, living here.’

Beth burst into tears. ‘I thought you were going to be so excited.’

‘Then you were wrong.’

Beth scowled. ‘I know what it is, this place isn’t posh enough for you. Nowhere I chose would be good enough for you. I’m not as clever as your family and all your Oxford ways. You have always looked down on me, I saw the way you left my wedding early, horrified at how common it was.’

Jessica was confused; she had no idea what Beth was talking about. She glanced around at the flat. ‘I have to go, I can’t stay here a minute longer.’

Jessica ran out of the door and for a moment glared at the lift, she’d be damned if she was going to use that, she would use the stairs. She went down, ran outside, and ran round the side of the building. Once out of sight, she paused, covered her eyes with her hands, and silently sobbed.

It wasn’t a healing cry of the releasing of emotion. No, this hurt, there were hard rocks in her throat, she felt sick and her head was thumping. These were the raw tears of grief, of loss. ‘Why did you leave me Julian?’ she cried to her late husband. ‘I never asked to grow old without you. Look what’s happening, they all feel sorry for me but have no idea what I need. I

know you would say they mean well, but they've got it so wrong and I feel so horribly alone.'

Slowly the crashing waves calmed, and she quickly wiped her face. She didn't want Jack to see her like this. Like so many women, Jessica chose to shed her deep, heartbreaking tears alone.

Jessica walked to the front of the building and saw Jack walking towards the car with his arm around Beth. She felt so guilty, ruining their gift, their dreams, but she couldn't give in and live in that flat just to keep them happy.

Silently, Jack drove them home.

'I think it's better that I leave,' said Jessica, heading to her room to pack.

She could hear Beth talking quietly downstairs. She couldn't hear the words but could feel the pain in her voice and felt another wave of guilt. It went quiet and then she heard a gentle knock on the door, and Jack came in.

'I'm so sorry, Mum. I should have stopped Beth. I'm not blaming her. I went along with it.'

'But why, Jack?'

'Because I want you living close to me. I miss you, Mum. And Beth, she knows the kids are growing up; she needs someone else to look out for.'

'But I don't need looking after.'

'Not now, but Mum, I'd like you close as we both get older. Listen, the flat was a bad idea, I can see that now, but please think about moving this way. And don't leave today, please, not like this.'

Jessica saw the strain on his face and her heart melted. 'I'm sorry, Beth won't want me here now.' She put down the top she was packing. 'I will go out and get a breath of fresh air, but really love, I think it is best I go.'

Jessica went straight downstairs, walked out of the front door, and turned towards the fields. To her consternation she spotted Marcus, who

waved. As she watched him walking over to her, Jessica knew it was too late to get away.

‘Hiya,’ he said. He stopped. ‘My God, what’s happened? You look awful.’

She raised her eyebrows in surprise at his bluntness but realised from the concern on his face that he was being sincere. Jessica felt her lips tremble, knew she was close to tears, and was desperate not to break down in front of Marcus.

‘Come and have a sit down,’ he said gently and she let him lead her to a raised area of grass.

‘What’s happened?’

Unusually for Jessica she felt the words tumbling out, as she explained the whole embarrassing situation with the flat.

When she finally finished, she looked at him. To her surprise, he was smiling.

‘It’s not funny,’ she said.

‘I know and, yes, I can see Beth has got this very wrong, but it’s come from a good place, Jessica.’

‘I don’t care.’

‘Maybe you should. Beth is one of the most genuine people I know. What you see is the real her, and that is rare. Sometimes you discover people are quite the opposite of how they appear. She really is as caring as she seems to be. If she says she wants to look after you, she means it.’

‘But I don’t want to be looked after – I suppose you think I am very ungrateful.’

‘No. But, as I say, Beth meant well. Look, I can see the flats are not your thing. I would hate them as well but try and make your peace with Beth.’

‘I’m not sure that is possible yet, she was very upset.’ Jessica paused. ‘I think Beth was upset by more than the flat.’ She went on to mention the

references to the wedding. ‘I don’t understand how I offended her there, she had a lovely wedding, but it was so, um, noisy and busy, I could only take so much of it. I didn’t even know she saw me leave.’

Marcus sighed, ‘Beth may appear very confident, but like us all, she has her insecurities. She must see you as very clever, very academic, come on, you worked in the Bodleian Library in Oxford, I mean that’s not exactly your run-of-the-mill job.’

‘But I never went to university—’

‘But I expect you could have.’

Jessica looked away, he was right, of course, but she had no intention of explaining why she’d not gone.

‘Do you think it’s possible Beth finds you a bit intimidating?’ he asked.

Jessica shot him a glance, could see he was trying to be gentle. It was something Julian had told her a few times and although she wasn’t sure why, she guessed it must have an element of truth in it.

‘I don’t mean to be, but I suppose it’s possible,’ said Jessica.

Marcus smiled, ‘You know, I think you and Beth are going to be OK. By the way, was it just the flat or the idea of moving here that concerns you?’

Jessica blinked, ‘Oh it was the flat, the thought of moving here hadn’t crossed my mind. I have my house in Oxford.’

‘And you are happy to stay there now, well for the rest of your life?’

Again, Jessica was thrown by the question. It wasn’t something she’d seriously considered. Her life for the past two years had been lived moment by moment. She glanced around, felt the soft breeze, and saw the sea far ahead, it was beautiful here, she had to admit that, but would she want to live here? Would she want to leave her home, her safe place?

‘It’s worth considering,’ said Marcus adding quickly, ‘I know you don’t want or need looking after, but sometimes a fresh start can be a good thing.’

Jessica put her head to one side, ‘I’d really not thought about it, but maybe, one day I will.’ She took a breath, sat up straight. ‘Thank you, it’s good of you to listen. I’ll go back now, talk to Beth. I still think it’s better I leave but I will try to at least apologise for upsetting her before I go.’

They stood up. Marcus continued on his walk and Jessica returned to the house.

As she rang on the front door, she thought of that first day she’d arrived and the hugs and greeting she received. She didn’t expect that today; in fact, she was guessing Beth wouldn’t even answer.

However, she was wrong. Beth opened the door, and instead of the frosty welcome Jessica expected, she gave her that same warm hug. They went through to the kitchen.

‘I’m so sorry. I really am. It was all me, not Jack, don’t fall out with him.’

‘It’s OK, Beth. Listen, I told you, I am terrible with surprises. I apologise; I reacted very badly.’

‘So, you might think about the flat?’

‘No. I’m really sorry, Beth. That place isn’t for me. As I said, I do want to repay that deposit. Maybe then we could draw a line under this?’

Beth nodded, before she could speak, Jessica added, ‘I think we ought to sort out this business with the wedding.’

Beth cringed and looked down.

Jessica tried to soften her voice, ‘I loved your wedding, it was such a joyful day.’

‘You did?’

‘Yes, but the thing is Beth, I am not good with crowds of people, not for long periods of time. I was so tired and didn’t want to sit around looking miserable and spoil everything. Looking back, I should have spoken to you before leaving, that was a mistake, I just thought it was better to fade away.’

Beth gave a sigh of relief, ‘I am so pleased to hear that – well not about you getting so tired obviously.’ She grinned, ‘Me and you are quite different, aren’t we?’

‘We are,’ said Jessica, ‘but I do hope we can get on.’

‘Of course we can, in fact we make a good team. Look at how far we have got putting together the mystery around Georgia’s death.’

Jessica nodded, ‘You are right, we have complemented each other well.’ She hesitated and then said, ‘But I do think you might need me to leave you all in peace for a while.’

‘Oh no, please don’t go, not now. I can’t abandon this case now, and there is no way I can handle it on my own.’

Jessica recognised an olive branch and an attempt by Beth to move things on, so she grabbed it. ‘Actually, I really would like to see this through, it would be very hard to leave a puzzle half solved.’

‘Exactly, we have a lot to do. You were going to see Marcus and ask him about the leaf; there is no reason not to do that now is there?’

Jessica grimaced, how could she face going to speak to Marcus after breaking down like that?

‘Maybe you could go,’ she suggested.

Beth shook her head, ‘I can’t go now. I have to go over to help out at the school. They’re setting up a book sale, and I said I’d go over this morning and lend a hand. You go; it will be fine.’

Jessica swallowed hard, she was going to have to face Marcus again sometime, she just needed to be brave, ‘Well OK then,’ she agreed.

Beth smiled, and then walked over and gave her a gentle kiss on the forehead. ‘Friends again?’ she asked.

‘We are,’ said Jessica.

‘Good.’

Jessica looked down at Martha and had an idea. Maybe taking her to the shop would give her courage. ‘Could I take Martha with me? She’s good

company,' she asked.

'Of course. She loves going out with you.'

At that moment, Jack walked into the kitchen. Beth looked up. 'We're fine now. You can go to work if you need to. Crisis over.'

Jack looked down at his mother.

'It's OK, Jack.'

'Well, in that case, I'm off to work. See you both later.'

He kissed Beth and then he kissed Jessica on her forehead and left. It was as they were hearing his car drive away, the doorbell rang.

Jessica could hear Beth's greeting the unexpected guest. Although Beth was inviting the person in, her voice sounded strained, and Jessica wondered just who had come to see them.

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Beth came into the kitchen with the visitor. ‘Jessica, it’s DC Clarke.’

The officer entered and with a smile said, ‘I think you can call me Ruth.’ She glanced over at Jessica. ‘This visit is a courtesy rather than anything official.’

Beth offered her coffee and invited her into the living room. She cleared her a seat and the three of them sat down together.

‘My boss asked me to come round. He has appreciated your help and feels like you deserve to be told that a case has been submitted to the coroner. We don’t believe this to be a suspicious death, but the findings are inconclusive as to it being accidental, misadventure or suicide so we expect an open verdict.’

‘You’ve ruled out anyone else being involved?’ checked Jessica.

Ruth nodded.

‘Will there be an inquest?’

Ruth confirmed this. ‘There will, but the wait can be months with the way things stand. Meanwhile we expect the coroner to release the body soon so a funeral can be held.’

‘So, that’s it, the end of the case?’ queried Beth.

‘The investigation is complete, although of course we can always reopen it if new evidence comes to light.’

Beth sat back. ‘Well, I don’t know. You seem to have come to that conclusion very quickly. Jessica and I have all kinds of questions.’

Ruth gave them a gentle smile. ‘I can imagine, but we have to rely on evidence and look at what is the most probable explanation for what has occurred. The evidence that has been collected strongly suggests that Georgia died as a result of accidental or intentional aconite poisoning sometime between 9.45 and 11 p.m.’

Ruth looked up, her face serious. ‘It’s a tragedy, but it’s better to resolve these matters as quickly as possible for the family.’

‘But are you sure you’re right?’ said Jessica. ‘I’m really concerned someone else was at the chapel after Freya, and it’s really worrying that nobody has admitted to being there.’

Ruth said, ‘Your evidence for this is the bunch of pansies? We did listen to you, and I’ve just been down there. There was a vase of camellias with pansies mixed in, but not a separate bunch.’

‘I know that’s how it appears now, I was down there early yesterday morning,’ said Jessica, ‘but on the day Georgia died I definitely saw a separate bunch of pansies tied with a distinctive ribbon.’

‘Yes, and Rhiannon saw them on Tuesday,’ said Beth.

‘Rhiannon went in there?’

‘Yes, with some friends. They’d been having a few drinks down on the beach.’

‘So, she wasn’t entirely sober?’

‘No, but…’

Ruth licked her lips and spoke, choosing her words carefully. ‘I’m sure Rhiannon would want to back up Jessica’s story, and maybe even convinced herself it was true. But we have to think rationally here. Jessica, you were in a heightened state of emotion the day you discovered Georgia. Your mind would have been racing around.’

‘But—’

Ruth held up her hand. ‘It’s not that we believe you are deliberately making something up, but the mind plays tricks on us. You saw the pansies that were in with the camellias. Now you remembered that Georgia had mentioned she didn’t like them particularly. And so mentally you separated them out and then of course, the memories of those gift bags were fresh in your mind. That is how you came to see that bunch of flowers.’

Jessica sat, mesmerised for a moment, could Ruth be right?

‘I took the flowers and the candle away; everything will be checked,’ continued Ruth.

‘And what about the vodka?’ asked Jessica quietly.

‘The fragments of the bottle have been examined. We know the brand now. It was expensive. You say Georgia only kept a much cheaper brand, but we did find a very costly bottle of whisky in her house so she had expensive taste. It may well be she had forgotten buying this particular bottle some while ago.’

‘I don’t think so,’ said Beth.

‘But you can’t be certain. It is certainly not enough to establish that someone else arrived at the chapel. We also have other reasons to doubt the presence of someone else.’

Jessica felt crushed. Listening to Ruth talking about the investigation made her realise how amateurish her and Beth’s attempts had been and how much she had underestimated the expertise and thoroughness of the police.

Ruth continued. ‘Amongst the broken glass were the remains of a single shot glass, not two, just the one. We checked the type of glass. It’s a common type used in pubs and restaurants, and we found a few of this same type in Georgia’s cupboard.’

Jessica bit her lip and Ruth put her head to one side. ‘I can assure you we are a lot more thorough than you give us credit for. We talked to everyone who went on the walk. They all seemed genuinely grief stricken at

the loss of their friend. They are all very insistent they didn't go to the chapel later.'

'They might have their reasons for not wanting to own up.'

'What are you insinuating, Jessica?'

'We think,' said Beth with a hint of defiance in her voice, 'that someone went to the chapel and poisoned Georgia.'

Jessica held her breath. Said out loud like that, it sounded extreme, even to her.

Maybe it was her training, but the statement didn't seem to faze Ruth.

'I had a feeling this was the way your thoughts were going. We have considered every possible scenario, including the possibility of another person being involved here. Remember, our investigations have to be based on evidence, not speculation.'

'So do you have any other reasons for dismissing the idea of someone else being involved?' demanded Beth.

'There are several in addition to the ones I mentioned above. There's no evidence in the workshop of anyone except Georgia preparing a tincture in there. If someone other than Georgia had been in there with some sort of malicious intent, they would have taken care to clear up and cover their tracks.'

Jessica sat up. 'That's because it was staged to look like Georgia took her own life. You were going to discover sooner or later that the cause of death was aconite, so what better than to embrace that, use it as the means to point away from murder?'

Ruth shuddered at the word but continued, 'Furthermore, the workshop was gone over very carefully by forensics. The only fingerprints we found were Georgia's. We checked the inside of the large pair of gloves on the workbench which had been used to chop the root as there were traces of aconite on the outside. However, when we tested inside the gloves, only Georgia's DNA was found.'

Jessica's mind was racing, trying to find answers to the points being raised.

Ruth continued, 'And then we come to the chapel. Remember, only the tincture had traces of aconite in it. Just say someone arrived at the chapel with this second bottle of tincture with the aim of poisoning Georgia. How did they get Georgia to drink it?'

Jessica sat forward, this was one of the big questions she'd been unable to answer.

Ruth continued, 'Georgia would be very suspicious of this person arriving with a bottle of tincture clearly taken, presumably without permission, from her workshop. Why accept it and use it, especially when she already had a supply in her pocket?'

'Maybe they forced her to drink it.'

Ruth shook her head decisively. 'We would have found clear signs if someone had forced Georgia to drink from that bottle. There would have been physical signs of trauma to the mouth, lips or teeth. Also, the post-mortem may well have shown symptoms of choking. I admit we had to stop and think there. You see that the forensic pathologist is able to ascertain how a drug has been administered. In this case, they could tell how Georgia took the aconite.'

'It would be under her tongue with the dropper,' said Beth.

'But we know Georgia didn't take the aconite in that way. You see, if the drug is taken sublingually, then it bypasses the digestive tract.'

'So, what do you think happened?' asked Jessica, intrigued now.

'We found the answer among the smashed shot glass. There were traces of aconite in it.'

'That's all wrong. Georgia always used the dropper.'

'That might have been her usual practice but come back to her making the tincture earlier. She'd been drinking then and after speaking to her

sister, she drank more. She must have taken out the tincture bottle, added it to the glass she was already drinking out of, and was poisoned that way.'

'She had said the dropper was cumbersome to use,' admitted Jessica.

'I see, so that would back this theory up,' said Ruth.

'You're sure about all this?' said Beth, but her voice had none of its earlier certainty.

Ruth nodded. 'The evidence for death by misadventure or suicide is strong. There are no defensive wounds and no evidence of anyone else being in the chapel when she died. We know Georgia talked about feelings of guilt concerning her husband's death and had then chosen to go down to the deserted chapel late at night, drinking, and she'd sent a text saying she was sorry to a friend.'

'You think Georgia took her own life then?'

'On balance, no. That text is ambiguous. We know Georgia left a note for her stepdaughter saying she'd talk to her later. We also know she talked about making amends for the mistakes she'd made and had not seemed in a state of great emotional pain to Freya or her sister, Carolina. We know Georgia was an expert on these plants and would usually not have confused the roots. However, she was disturbed by the day and had been drinking from the open bottle. Both could have impaired her thinking. In conclusion, it seems to us that Georgia's death was a terrible accident.'

Jessica sat back. She had to face the fact the police had all the expertise in this.

Ruth stood up and spoke to them both. 'I must get on. I hope what I've told you has reassured you. It's important now you leave this case alone. Ellie and the community need time to grieve. The body will be released soon, and a funeral can be held. People need closure.'

She turned to Beth and spoke in a much easier, friendly voice. 'Thanks for the coffee. Send my best wishes to Rhiannon. We must meet for a drink soon.'

Beth showed Ruth out while Jessica sat feeling totally dispirited. Ruth had put out a convincing case, and above all had sounded so competent and experienced. She suddenly felt foolish and naive.

When Beth returned, Jessica said, ‘I’m so sorry Beth, I’ve got this all wrong?’

Beth blinked. ‘Rubbish, you’re not persuaded by her, are you?’

‘Of course, she has evidence. And she has answered the one question I couldn’t, how Georgia took the poison.’

Beth tutted and sat down. ‘Come on Jessica. You are meant to be the one of us who is unshakable. You are so clever, you know so much.’

Jessica looked over at Beth and said quietly, ‘I know about books and puzzles but in the real world I often feel inadequate. I read fiction, murders carefully construed and controlled by a writer. But what do I really know about it in the real world?’

‘You know so much. You watch, you listen, you spot inconsistencies, and, I hate to say this, but I think you are prepared to think the worst of people. It’s something I’ve noticed with older people; the problem is you’ve seen it all, nothing surprises you any more and you will call it out. Look how you were prepared to consider each of these people as possibly killers.’ And then she added, laughing, ‘Good God, I meant it when I said I was glad I had a solid alibi.’

Jessica realised that maybe Beth had a point. It may not be a particularly attractive trait, but she had come to realise, particularly as a vicar’s wife, that a lot could be hidden behind a ‘Sunday smile’.

Jessica shrugged. ‘It doesn’t sound a very nice trait, but well, unfortunately people are so often not what they seem, there can be a dark side they become experts at hiding.’ She paused, Marcus had used that expression, it seemed pertinent for some reason, she must think more about it later.

‘And you guessed the murder weapon before the police,’ continued Beth forcefully. ‘You spotted the missing tincture bottle, and you noticed the pansies – which Rhiannon backed you up about. That explanation by Ruth was ridiculous and,’ Beth lowered her voice, ‘you know that you were attacked, you felt that hand push you in the back, hard, and I saw the handprint.’

Jessica shuddered, Beth was right, she could still feel the force and intention behind that shove.

‘Think about it, Jessica. Why would an innocent person attack you?’

Jessica looked over at Beth, and nodded. ‘You’re right. Also, Ruth’s vodka argument was weak wasn’t it, just because they found whiskey, which doesn’t prove anything. We both heard Georgia say she’d not bought any expensive vodka, and I believe her.’ Jessica paused and added, ‘However, the one thing that has thrown me is this business with the shot glass, they have answered something we can’t.’

‘But I know we will find answers.’

Jessica sat up. ‘Of course you are right, we carry on. Starting with me going down to the bookshop,’ said Jessica.

Jessica left the house but before she went to the bookshop, Jessica decided to take a walk around the village.

There was real warmth in the sun today: one of those spring days that reminds you summer is not far away.

The church was closed, but the graveyard with all the spring flowers and birdsong looked welcoming. It was testament to Georgia’s hard work and inspiration, a special legacy to have left the village.

Jessica walked down as far as the pond. She was sitting with Martha watching the ducks when she noticed Tanya in her running gear.

‘Fabulous afternoon, isn’t it?’ said Tanya.

‘You’re being far more energetic than me.’

‘I’ve got the day off, so I thought I’d have a break from my studies and have a good run. I’m about to go back and have coffee. Would you and your dog like to join me?’

‘You’re OK with her in the house? I remember you said you were allergic to cats.’

‘Well remembered. Yes, I am, but I’m fine with dogs, thanks.’

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Tanya’s small Purbeck stone bungalow was tucked away behind Ray and Pippa’s and stood with the front door to one side.

They went inside to the back of the house and entered a cosy living room with wooden beams and comfy floral chairs. There were also beautiful stone lamps, oak side tables, silk peonies tied with a muddy bow in the stone grate, and a beautiful oil painting of a beachside cove in bright sunshine.

‘That’s Chapman’s Pool where we walked to. It was painted by Georgia’s sister, Carolina. It’s very good, isn’t it?’ Tanya glanced around the room proudly. ‘Georgia and Alistair worked hard on this room. They wanted to keep the original features but make it feel lighter.’

‘It’s a lovely room.’

‘Thank you and it’s kept in such pristine condition by Cherry who comes in once a week. Vacuums around, empties the bins, and generally keeps the place clean. I told Georgia I didn’t need a cleaner, but I don’t think she trusted me.’

Jessica scanned a small bookshelf with an interesting assortment of legal textbooks and a few romantic novels.

‘Sorry, nothing highbrow, only escapist fiction.’

‘There is nothing wrong with that,’ said Jessica, smiling.

‘Now, should we have that coffee I promised you? Come into the kitchen.’

This was another light and airy room with large windows. They looked out over the garden and down into neighbours’ houses, including Pippa and Ray’s.

‘We are all so close, aren’t we?’ said Tanya. ‘The cottage behind me can see right into my bedroom, I have to remember to draw the curtains when I’m getting changed. Now, I’ll put the kettle on.’

Jessica noticed a collection of stones on the windowsill, many with fossils in them. ‘Did you collect all of these?’

‘I did.’ Tanya picked one up and caressed it. ‘I collect these from various beaches. It’s a good way to remember special times. This ammonite I found last year at Chapman’s Pool.’ She held it to her face, rubbed it on her cheek, caught Jessica’s eye, and blushed. ‘I love the feel of it.’

‘I understand, fossils are absolutely fascinating; to think you are touching something that was living here millions of years ago.’

‘I know that it’s incredible… have you been to the dinosaur footprints over by Dancing Ledge yet?’

‘Not yet.’

‘You really must.’

Tanya picked up a pair of binoculars that were sitting on the windowsill next to a book about birds.

‘Now, these are for my new hobby, birdwatching. Honestly, I’m becoming so countryfied. There was one bird table when I moved in, but that only had room for two lots of seeds. I wanted to attract all sorts so have gradually increased the feeders and types of food.’

‘I wish I was better at identifying birds,’ said Jessica.

‘I am such an amateur,’ said Tanya, ‘but I am hooked now. You know, when I’m old, I’ll become one of those mad twitchers – do you do that?’

Jessica smiled at the tactless way Tanya had described her as mad and old in one sentence. ‘No, not yet anyway. I like watching them, but I am useless, particularly at birdsong. They all sound the same to me.’

‘And me,’ said Tanya, laughing. ‘Right, let’s make this coffee.’

Tanya made a cafetiere of coffee and put it with two mugs and some milk onto a tray.

‘Come outside and see the garden. I’ll get a bowl of water for Martha. You can let her off the lead now. She’s perfectly safe out there.’

It was a small garden, beautifully set out with a patio, lawn and bedding around the perimeter.

‘Georgia does most of the gardening out here, but an older man comes in sometimes, plants the bedding. Hence the poppies, anemones, and pansies which I think Georgia considers a bit mundane, but I like them, they are nice and colourful.’

Jessica noticed Martha was sniffing at a flower bed close to the shed and was concerned she might start digging. She went down and looked over at the shed. She was surprised to see another opposite it.

Tanya saw her looking at them. ‘Yes, I think two sheds in a small garden is a bit excessive. The one over there just has the family’s rubbish: old deckchairs, a few toys from when Ellie was little, a climbing frame, a broken bike, a pram, an old bird table, and a lawn mower, I think. This one I can use for the garden seats and the like. I have a sunshade for hot days and food for the birds.’

‘Georgia said she’d put some extra food in here.’

Tanya grinned. ‘You have an amazing memory.’

‘I remember odd things, but still manage to forget things like toilet roll when I go to the supermarket,’ Jessica said lightly, adding, ‘Didn’t Georgia also mention something about seeds?’

Tanya’s eyes tightened. ‘She did, but like I said I didn’t have much success with them.’

‘Didn’t Georgia say it was lobelia?’

‘That’s right, but I failed miserably. That coffee should be ready. Let’s go and pour it.’

‘So, do you know what’s going to happen? Will Ellie be letting you stay on here?’

‘We’ve not really discussed it yet. I hope so.’

‘It must be very hard finding places to rent around here at a price you can afford.’

‘A waitress’s wage is pretty low, and don’t think we make it up in tips. You’d be amazed how mean rich people can be. But, still, it’s not a bad place compared to some.’

‘But I heard the restaurant went through some rocky patches… after the food-poisoning incident.’

‘Oh that. I’m aware about it, of course, although I wasn’t working that night. Poor old Rhiannon; not much of a thank you in the end.’

‘She left but you stayed.’

‘I have to pay the bills somehow. And the course fees are high; I don’t get a student loan for them.’

‘No, of course not. I admire what you are doing. Having to leave Oxford must have been devastating.’

Tanya looked confused at the swerve in the conversation but went along with her. ‘It was massive; my parents were so upset. But they supported me. They wanted me away from this boy. He was seriously unwell, couldn’t cope with us breaking up, so possessive. Anyway, his behaviour got worse and I couldn’t take the pressure, so I left.’

‘Didn’t the college support you? He should have been the one to go.’

‘He had a rich family behind him, people who had donated a lot of money to the college. I didn’t stand a chance. In any case, my time there was spoilt. I just wanted out.’

Tanya took a sip of her coffee. Jessica recognised the design on her mug. It was the crest of an Oxford college.

‘You’ve kept your mug from St Anne’s then?’

Tanya nodded. ‘Yes, it wasn’t all bad. I remember standing in that quad when I arrived with Mum and Dad. I couldn’t believe the stone steps up to my room. Poor Dad had to carry my stuff up flights of stairs; no lifts there.’

Jessica nodded. ‘And you had to leave it?’

‘I did, but this mug also reminds me how well I did to get into the place, how bright I was at school. And that I can still succeed. To be honest, my grades are better now, fewer distractions.’

‘I can imagine. I see the students out at night and I can’t see how they get much work done the next day.’

Tanya’s eyes widened. ‘Of course, you live and work there. I should imagine you’re looking forward to getting home. It’s not been a brilliant time for you, has it?’

‘I’ve enjoyed a lot of my stay despite everything that’s happened.’

‘I’d have thought Georgia’s death had overshadowed everything. From what you were saying in the pub the other night, you seem to have become very involved in it all.’

‘I just hate unanswered questions.’

‘But the police have answered them to their satisfaction and they’re the experts.’

‘I just don’t happen to agree with them. I’m sure someone went down to the chapel and the fact they are not admitting it I find extremely worrying.’

‘Tell me, Jessica, do you honestly believe that someone on the walk on Sunday went back to the chapel that evening and killed Georgia?’

Jessica looked directly at her. ‘I’m afraid that’s the only conclusion I can come to.’

Tanya raised her eyebrows. Her eyes were wide. A smile played on her lips. ‘Well, that’s very frank of you. You’re accusing someone in this village

of murder. What does Beth think of all this?'

'You would have to ask Beth that.'

Tanya stared at Jessica as if she was seeing her for the first time. 'Goodness, Jessica, you are quite a scary person, aren't you? And there I was thinking you were some harmless old lady.'

'Funnily enough, a friend was talking to me about this earlier today. No older lady is harmless. We are focused. We miss very little, and we are of an age when people's opinions of us mean far less than they used to. We can speak our minds. It's very freeing. We are also particularly good at picking up on gossip.'

Tanya stood up, walked over and dead-headed some daisies that were growing in a pot.

'Come on then, tell me what you've heard about me.' Tanya said this without looking at Jessica.

Jessica took a sip of her coffee. 'All I know is that you and Ray had a short relationship, about a year ago.'

Tanya sat back down. 'Who told you that?'

'Ellie confirmed something I'd been thinking. I'd heard a few rumours about Ray's flirtations at work.'

Tanya scowled. 'That's not fair. He's not like that. He's a good boss.' She fiddled with the edge of the table. 'Look, it was a brief fling. It was nothing.'

'To you, but it sounds from Ellie like it might have been to him?'

'He got a bit carried away, and to be honest I was scared off. I didn't want anything serious with a man his age. I'd dealt with one obsessive guy. I wasn't going down that road again.'

'But what about Pippa? Didn't either of you feel guilty about her?'

'Pippa has her own problems. I feel sorry for her, but she can't be easy to live with. Anyway, I broke it off. Ray coped pretty well. In fact, we are now good friends, which is great.'

‘And you have your new young man.’

‘Yes, I have Orson, and that is brilliant, not too heavy, but we get on so well.’

Jessica finished her coffee and called Martha over to her. ‘I should let you get back to your studies. Thank you so much for the coffee.’

‘Thanks for coming in,’ said Tanya, leading Jessica to the front door.

While Jessica carried on her way she was churning over the conversation with Tanya. She reached the bookshop.

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Jessica’s heart sank with disappointment as she read the scruffy piece of paper that had been taped to the bookshop door. ‘Closed today.’

Jessica rolled her eyes in frustration; how annoying, and what a way to run a business, just closing up shop whenever you felt like it. ‘Well, that was a waste of time,’ she said to Martha, ‘come on, we might as well go back home.’

Once there Jessica decided to spend the rest of the afternoon finishing her book, *The Secret Garden*.

It didn’t take her long and she sat back, closing her eyes. The writer had managed with words to paint the most vivid pictures. Jessica could imagine the robin showing her the door, leading her into that enchanted garden. It reminded her of Georgia’s. The lovely old brick walls, the meandering paths and stone seats. It was a special place, and one Ellie had loved so much as a child.

Jessica opened her eyes and looked out into the garden. It was a lovely day. A blackbird was rustling in the bushes, a robin sang, high pitched and clear, a crow somehow managing by an incredible feat of acrobatics to eat from the bird feeder designed for much smaller birds. Then in a flash she saw it.

She quickly opened the book and checked. Could she possibly be right? Had she guessed where that will was hidden? She remembered what Georgia had said, that had been a clue and she'd nearly missed it. Jessica felt the glow she always did when she'd finally solved a difficult puzzle.

Before she could really dig further, she heard Beth come home.

'So, how did it go? What about the leaf?' enquired Beth as she rushed in.

'No luck. He was closed,' Jessica replied.

'Oh really? How can he expect people to use him if he closes when he feels like it?'

'I thought that. But, I haven't completely wasted my time.'

Jessica told Beth about her visit to Tanya's and tried hard to give as much detail as she could.

'Goodness, you did well. You were very brave to ask her those things.'

'I was relieved she didn't just chuck me out. I was lucky.' Jessica paused. 'I feel I missed something in the cottage but I'm not sure what.' She shook her head. 'It will come to me.'

'Anyway,' said Beth, 'we learned Tanya collects fossils, loves birds, tried to grow Lobelia seeds, talked about this possessive boy at Oxford, and confirmed the affair with Ray.'

'That's right, I shall look up a few things, about seeds and the birds.'

'While you are on a roll, you can do some more investigating tonight.'

'I'm not creeping into anyone's garden in the dark.'

'There's no need. We have been invited to one, back to Pippa and Ray's for drinks. I was thinking you might get a chance to go down and look in that other garden.'

Jessica groaned but Beth responded, 'Come on, you did so well with Tanya. You're great at spotting things I miss. And to tempt you, Ray will put on really posh booze. Right, I've got chicken and salad for tea. At the most it will be nibbles this evening.'

They ate their tea and then Jessica and Beth made their way with Jack and Rhiannon down to Ray and Pippa's house.

There were a lot more people than Jessica expected and she felt that wave of panic she always had when entering a large group of people. Who was she going to talk to? What would she say? Everyone here knew everyone else. They may be polite, but surely they just wanted to talk to each other.

Despite her trepidation, she had to admire the garden, the rhododendron bushes now ablaze with flowers, and a carpet of snowy blossom covered part of the pristine green lawn.

Ray was busy pouring generous glasses of wine and spirits. Jessica noticed the expensive bottles of vodka she had started to recognise. He was playing the perfect host, all smiles, showing none of the irritation and anger she'd seen that night in the pub.

To Jessica's relief Jack stayed close by her.

'It's OK, Mum. We've got this,' he said with a smile. 'Let's get a drink and something to eat. It looks a decent spread. Pippa has been busy.'

They each took a glass of wine from Ray, who greeted them enthusiastically.

'Welcome all, and Jack, I'll be sending invites to your staff for our evening to celebrate the new chef.'

'Thanks. I'm sure some will come along.'

Jessica was slightly horrified at the size of the glass of wine she'd been given but accepted it graciously.

As they went back to the table, Jack sipped his. 'Wow, even I know this is good stuff. Glad I'm not driving. Now, let's get to the buffet before the best of it goes. This isn't a shy bunch; they will all tuck in.'

Jessica helped herself to some salmon and salad, and they went to find a seat where Beth joined them.

‘Well, that’s a nice surprise,’ said Jack, ‘you don’t usually hang out with me at these events.’

‘I thought I’d spend some time with my husband and his mam,’ she said and grinned at Jessica.

As soon as Jack had gone to get a refill from the buffet, Beth grabbed Jessica’s hand. ‘This is your chance. I’ll tell Jack you needed to stretch your legs. Pippa looks completely caught up. Now is the time. Good luck.’

Jessica felt her mouth go dry; her hand shook as she picked up her glass. She started to wander as nonchalantly as she could down the garden.

She glanced around; nobody seemed to be looking her way. Eventually she was at the little gate that seemed to lead to its own special garden. Jessica opened the gate and entered. It felt rather like a miniature version of Georgia’s secret garden in that there were a lot of bushes with a carefully laid path winding around the garden. Pushing overhanging branches out of her way, she made her way through until she came to a small clearing.

A stone bench was strategically placed in front of a small Japanese-style garden with miniature cherry blossom and magnolia trees, acers, moss-covered stones, and a small water feature where water trickled serenely. A stone Buddha sat cross-legged. She noticed four small flat pieces of slate, stood upright in the earth, and on each was painted a date. She knelt down to read them more carefully. They represented different months, three from last year, but it was the more recent one that caught her attention. It displayed the date Georgia died.

Jessica swallowed hard. What was this garden all about? She didn’t understand, but it felt deeply personal and she felt uncomfortable being here.

She heard a cough, looked up, and found Pippa standing watching her. Jessica caught her breath. Pippa was staring at her, arms hanging stiffly by her sides, her fists opening and closing.

Jessica jumped up. ‘I’m sorry,’ she stammered.

‘No one is allowed in here. It says private on the gate. Not even Ray comes in here.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Jessica repeated, following Pippa out of the garden.

Pippa closed the gate firmly, then she looked over at the reading room.

‘Have you been in there as well?’

‘No, of course not.’

‘What are you doing? Are you just nosy or is this part of your investigation?’

Jessica started to gather herself together. ‘Listen, Pippa, I’m sorry to upset you. I can see that is a very private space.’

But Pippa wasn’t listening. ‘Am I a suspect?’

The directness of Pippa’s questions was disarming. It would be so much easier if she shouted or ranted at her.

‘It’s true that I am trying to find out what happened to Georgia.’

‘But why? You’re nothing to do with this village.’

Jessica hesitated. ‘I didn’t go looking for a case to solve. I’ve never been in this situation before, but when I see something wrong, well I can’t just sit back and do nothing.’

‘But you’re a stranger, an outsider. You will never understand us, you need to leave well alone.’

Jessica felt a shudder of alarm; was she being threatened?

They began to make their way back up the garden and as they did Pippa’s voice softened as she pointed out the flowers and the trees, talking about each one as if they were her family.

Without looking at Jessica, she said, ‘Georgia and I shared this one passion, our gardens.’ Then she looked sideways at Jessica, her eyes harder, her voice sharper again. ‘That is all we shared… We never shared my husband by the way, which was just Ellie showing off.’

‘I’m glad. Ellie shouldn’t have joked about it though. I understood why you looked so upset.’

Pippa nodded. ‘The idea of my husband being with another woman is bound to be deeply disturbing.’ Jessica saw a cold glint in Pippa’s eye as she said, ‘My mother always said to keep something back for yourself, and I agree. As much as I want Ray to succeed, I have told him my money goes nowhere near the restaurant.’

‘I’m sure.’ Jessica looked back down the garden and over to Tanya’s house. She could see the kitchen window and some of the garden. ‘I was up there this afternoon; Tanya invited me in.’

Pippa glared at her, eyes ablaze. ‘You need to be careful getting friendly with her; she’s dangerous. She spies on us, you know. I see her looking through her binoculars. I reckon Georgia had worked her out, and look what happened to her.’

‘You think Tanya could have killed Georgia? But why?’

‘Georgia was talking about evicting her. She probably knew something about her. Georgia was like that, always digging around, trying to find dirt on people.’ Pippa gave a strange smile. ‘Appropriate for a gardener.’ She glanced towards the reading room. ‘I found her in there last week; she had no business to be in there. She knew too much.’ Pippa leant down. She appeared to be inspecting a rather beautiful narcissus. When she stood up, her eyes were full of spite.

‘And you think she knew something about Tanya?’

‘Of course she did. I don’t believe Tanya is studying to be a lawyer. She probably never even went to Oxford.’

‘You don’t think much of Tanya,’ said Jessica.

‘I hate her,’ said Pippa, the words darting out like a snake’s tongue, ‘and I have more reason than most. Her only aim in life is to get hold of a rich man and she doesn’t care who she hurts along the way.’

Jessica saw tears burning in Pippa’s eyes. She knew something for certain.

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Seeing those tears, hearing that passion, convinced Jessica that Pippa knew about Ray and Tanya's affair.

Pippa started to walk more quickly down the garden. However, before they reached the others Pippa turned to Jessica. 'You think you're going round gathering up information and insights into us all, but you haven't even scratched the surface.'

Jessica spotted Ray walking towards them, then watched something quite remarkable. Pippa instantly assumed her usual persona, she appeared to relax her shoulders, and managed to produce a warm, convincing smile. Jessica remembered: of course, Pippa had been an actor, trained to change character at the wave of a hand.

'Jessica and I just went for a walk. I think she could do with another drink.'

'Good. Well come and make your choice.'

Jessica went to the bar area. She decided that after that experience she would choose something a little stronger than an orange juice but was unsure about another gargantuan glass of wine.

'Could I have maybe a smaller glass of wine?'

Ray laughed and found her a much smaller glass. 'You're the only one who has asked for less. Most of the people are only here because they know

they will get decent quality booze in measures they would never get anywhere else.'

He handed her a glass and she took a sip.

'This is very nice wine,' Jessica said. She smiled. 'Sorry, you must hate people using descriptions like that, but I seldom have anything apart from basic house wines and supermarket special offers. I can tell this is different, but I don't have the connoisseur's vocabulary.'

'Well, that's quite an achievement. A lot of people can't even tell that much. Isn't that depressing?'

'Do you miss your time sharing your knowledge about wine? It must have been exciting being on TV, meeting all those famous people?'

'I do; I loved it. I'd have stayed if someone younger and better looking hadn't turned up.'

'Running a restaurant must be incredibly hard work.'

'It is, but we are doing amazingly well. With our new chef I'm expecting to get our first Michelin star soon. I still have contacts. I'd love to get back into TV work… maybe host a cookery programme, be a judge on *MasterChef*… the world's my oyster.' Jessica found his enthusiasm contagious.

'I'm looking forward to visiting the restaurant.'

'Oh yes, I have to email you all the details of the upcoming new chef's night… I shall get that done later.'

As Ray drifted away, Beth appeared at Jessica's shoulder. She glanced around. 'Now, I want to hear about your adventures down the bottom of the garden. Shall we make a move… unless you intend to drink more of this wine?'

Jessica laughed. 'No, it's very good, but I've had enough.'

Beth took a long swig from her own glass. 'Bet it's expensive, but to be honest it all tastes the same to me. Come on then, let's go.'

Beth told Jack and Rhiannon, and they said their thank yous to their hosts.

As soon as they were out of earshot, Beth demanded in earnest, ‘Tell me everything.’

Jessica filled Beth in. ‘It felt very private. I didn’t feel comfortable being in there.’

‘But those slates, what do they mean? Each had a date on from last year and this. Like the calendar, what is going on?’

‘I’m not sure, but I found the one dated for Georgia’s death worrying.’

Beth gripped her arm. ‘You don’t think Pippa is a mass killer, do you? Should we be checking those dates and seeing if anyone in the village died on those days?’

Jessica cringed. It seemed unlikely. ‘Did anyone else die from poisoning in the village last year?’

Beth shook her head.

‘Mind you,’ continued Jessica, ‘Pippa did have a suggestion as to who our killer might be.’

‘Really? Who was that?’

‘Tanya. Mind you, I do think her view is coloured by knowing that Tanya had an affair with her husband.’

‘She knows?’

‘Definitely. She was pretty savage in her assessment of Tanya, was accusing her of all sorts, apart from murder, that is. She claimed she was spying on them, had only come to the village to get at you all, wasn’t even studying for a law degree, might never have been to Oxford.’

‘That is just daft. Alistair knew her uncle. He knew all about her background.’

‘How did Alistair know this uncle?’

‘Now, let me think. Georgia went through it all with me. She and Alistair always loved visiting Oxford. She was excited when I told her you

lived there.’

Beth took a deep breath. ‘Let’s get this right. The uncle was Tanya’s dad’s brother, also a doctor. He’d been at Oxford with Alistair. They’d kept in touch. He was very excited when Tanya got into Oxford. I think Tanya’s dad had never been that academic. Tanya’s uncle was so proud she got on the way she did. He was, of course, upset when it all went wrong and was worried that Tanya would lose her ambition. He had a friend working in the barristers’ chambers in Wareham who offered to mentor Tanya. That led to the uncle asking Alistair if he knew anywhere for Tanya to live.’

‘That’s when he got in touch with Alistair.’ Beth paused for breath. ‘Sorry, that was a long explanation.’

Jessica smiled. ‘It’s OK; you were very thorough.’

‘Oh, there’s more. Tanya came here and I know for a fact she went to court with the barrister. Jack went to follow up on a case, knows this barrister and got talking. The barrister was impressed with Tanya apparently, said she’d make a good criminal barrister if she wanted to take that route.’

Jessica held up her hands. ‘Thanks, that’s all proven and correct. Now, back to Pippa.’

‘Of course. Did you say she thought Tanya was spying on her?’

‘She did, although I’d seen the binoculars and they’re used for bird watching.’

Beth frowned. ‘I’m worried Pippa is getting a bit paranoid, you know. Remember Ray talked about it to Tanya?’

‘She’s an unhappy woman, I can see that. She seems angry at everyone, even Georgia, who she accused of nosing around her reading room.’

Beth grinned. ‘Let’s hope she doesn’t find out about me then. Cocoa and bed, I think. I hope Jack and Rhiannon aren’t too late in. I was thinking I would take you out to see some of the area tomorrow. Would you like that?’

‘Certainly.’

‘I think we’ll head for Durlston Country Park,’ said Beth. ‘We’re promised a lovely day. There are great walks there as well as a good café. We could take both the dogs. They’ll love it.’

It was only once she was in bed that Jessica remembered her epiphany about the whereabouts of the will. However, now it didn’t shine so brightly; maybe she’d made a mistake. The only way to know would be to go into Ellie’s garden, but she was reluctant to do any more trespassing, particularly as she was feeling less and less certain about her new theory.

She managed to put the matter to one side and decided she would reconsider the next day.

* * *

Friday

The next morning, they were ready to set off after a quick breakfast. As they drove, Beth told Jessica about the place they were visiting.

‘Durlston is a fantastic nature reserve, about four hundred acres. I know, it’s huge. There are lots of walks and nature: butterflies, wildflowers, sea birds. It’s a conservation area. I went to a special dark night evening there once. It was incredible. They do loads for kids as well. There’s also the castle. It’s not a real one; no one lives there or anything. It was built by some Victorian as a restaurant, but you get great views from there and very good cake in the café.’

The drive didn’t take long, and they set off taking the dogs for a walk. ‘I thought we’d stick to the woodland walk here with the dogs today, but another time we must do the coastal walk.’

They entered some woods where there was a special kind of calm, as if the trees had absorbed all the noise and were a barrier to the chaos of the world outside.

Beth chatted but Jessica was lost a lot of the time in the sheer beauty of the place with late snowdrops, crocuses and primroses scattered among the trees.

They were just thinking of heading to the café when Beth nudged Jessica and pointed to the distance. ‘That’s Vincent and Cherry, isn’t it?’

‘Gosh, yes.’

Beth shouted their names. They looked round and walked over.

‘Morning,’ said Vincent easily. ‘Fancy meeting you here.’

‘And you,’ said Beth.

‘I told Vincent I’d never been here, not walking, only for a coffee, so we popped over. It’s wonderful, isn’t it?’

‘It is. Talking of the café, we’re going for a drink now. Want to join us?’

Cherry looked at Vincent, but he shook his head. ‘Sorry, I have to get back for a meeting. But Cherry, you can stay if you would like?’

She looked unsure but concluded, ‘Better not, I promised a friend I’d go to a yoga class with her.’ She groaned. ‘I suppose I ought to give it a go.’

They separated. Beth started chatting about what cake she was going to have.

Jessica interrupted. ‘Don’t you think it was odd, Vincent and Cherry being out here together?’

Beth shook her head. ‘Not really. I thought it was nice that they were both having a walk.’

Jessica shrugged. ‘Maybe I’m just getting suspicious of everyone. In any case, Vincent may have a lot more to worry about than a bit of village gossip. I must get into the bookshop later.’

Beth left Jessica while she scouted for seats and checked out the café.

Jessica was a bit nervous at having two dogs to care for, but Martha as always sat quickly and for once so did Roxie, clearly worn out, at least for now, by the walk.

She was able to wander and read the information boards on display. She always loved reading these at places of interest. So many people rushed past them and into the café or gift shop.

However, she enjoyed reading them while she waited for Beth. She read people walking here had identified over five hundred kinds of wildflowers including orchids, thirty-three species of butterflies, and over two hundred and fifty species of birds observed there. It made Jessica feel as if she went round with her eyes half closed, when all she had spotted were a few different birds and a butterfly.

It wasn't long before Beth returned. They were lucky. Beth had found a prime outside table with wonderful views over the sea, so Beth minded the table while Jessica insisted she buy the cake and coffee.

Once they were back at the village, Beth had to check on some of the animals. She wanted to spring clean some rabbit and guinea pig hutches.

'I will get on down to the bookshop. Hopefully, he will be open,' said Jessica.

'Ah, the leaves. Tell you what, take one with you. There may be some big reference books there. You don't want to buy loads. Marcus won't mind you having a look.'

Beth found her the leaves. 'There you are. Just make sure you don't get arrested; Jack would never forgive me!'

Jessica was relieved to find the bookshop open. She entered, loving the warm sound of the old-fashioned bell.

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In the bookshop there were a few people perusing the shelves. Marcus was sitting behind the counter and he smiled over at her.

‘Hi, good to see you. Looking for something to read, or just come to tidy my shelves?’

Jessica grinned. ‘I have actually come in search of information. Have you any books about identifying leaves?’

He raised his eyebrows and then led Jessica to a set of shelves marked non-fiction, further demarcated with stuck-on handwritten labels.

‘Well, this is gardening,’ he said.

‘I was looking for maybe botanical sketches.’

‘Ah, I have an exceptionally beautiful book that would be perfect in that case. Do have a look at it, even if you don’t want to buy it.’

He unlocked a glass case and carried the book carefully to a small wooden table.

Some customers were standing at the counter, an armful of books each.

‘I’ll be there in a minute,’ he said.

Jessica started looking at the botanical illustrations but started to despair; this wasn’t any easier than looking online.

Marcus returned to see how she was getting on.

‘This is the kind of book I thought would help, but it feels hopeless; they are all starting to look the same.’

‘What are you trying to identify?’

Jessica looked furtively around the shop, which was now empty.

‘I’ve brought the leaf with me but it’s a bit delicate.’

Marcus’s eyes were bright with excitement. ‘Sounds even more intriguing. Tell you what, come through here to my flat.’

He carried the book and Jessica followed him down a short hallway. To her right she saw a flight of stairs.

‘Those lead to the flat Ellie thought about renting,’ said Marcus. ‘I live through here.’

He pushed open a door that took her into a large, untidy but bright room. On the chairs sat two cats who eyed them sceptically.

‘It’s OK, we’ve not come to disturb you,’ said Marcus.

Through the window Jessica could see a garden full of trees, bushes, and wildflowers. Marcus grinned. ‘Georgia would have loved to get stuck in out there, but I prefer it left wild. Now, let’s see this leaf. My ex was a botanist. I picked up quite a bit along the way.’

Jessica bit her lip, then took a small bag out and opened it.

Marcus let out a roar of laughter. ‘I wasn’t expecting that! Where did you find that growing, or is it a secret?’

‘I’d rather not say, but what do you think it is?’

‘Hang on.’ From a jar stuffed with all kinds of bits and pieces, Marcus extracted a magnifying glass. He picked up the leaf and scowled. ‘You know, now I am looking at it carefully, I might be wrong. Let me check.’

He went to his laptop and started tapping away. Jessica watched. She saw his face clear.

‘Come and have a look.’

She looked at the screen.

‘This is your leaf. I confess I thought it was something quite different. I would have sworn it was weed, cannabis, but I was wrong. Look, here, you see, this is what you have. It’s called Kenaf, or Hibiscus cannabinus. Sometimes called wild hemp. In the younger stage, like this is, it’s often mistaken for cannabis.’

‘Is it illegal?’

‘No, it’s not going to make you high.’

‘Could it be used for making herbal tea?’

‘I’ve no idea. Let me read what it says. Oh yes, here it is. “A herbal infusion can be made using the leaves, which are high in antioxidants.”’ He looked at her quizzically. ‘Can you tell me now where you found it?’

‘I don’t think—’

‘Was it at Vincent’s?’

‘Well—’

‘It was. I thought so when you asked about the herbal teas. Poor chap, he keeps trying out different things to help with his back. This must be the latest experiment.’

Jessica was surprised. She hadn’t realised Marcus knew Vincent that well.

‘He comes in quite a lot. He likes browsing. Then he gets chatting. It happens in here. I feel like a confessional at times. People pour their hearts out over books. We play chess sometimes now as well.’

‘I’m pleased he is doing something other than church. He leads such a solitary life.’

‘Yes, and I don’t think it really suits him. I told him he should find a wife, but he just looked really sad.’

Jessica looked down at the leaf. ‘Do you think Georgia might have mistaken this for cannabis?’

‘Not if she looked closely, but maybe if she only had a cursory glance.’

Jessica nodded. ‘Well, thank you. That’s been a big help. There is one other botanical question I have. It’s about some seeds.’

‘What are they?’

‘They’re called lobelia. I need to know if there is anything special about them. I don’t suppose you have any idea, do you?’

Marcus scratched his head. ‘Lobelia? I have a feeling my ex grew them from seed.’ He searched online and nodded. ‘That was it. Yes, those are the flowers. Now, there was something she told me about the seeds… what was it?’

Jessica was starting to get frustrated; she could look this up herself.

His face cleared. ‘I remember now. Pukeweed: that’s its nickname. Our dog got hold of some and my wife rushed it to the vet. Fortunately, he’d not had that much but he was very sick.’

‘Would it make humans sick as well?’

‘Oh yes, it’s nasty. The seeds are toxic. Why?’

‘Just something I was thinking about, but I’m a bit confused.’

* * *

That night, Beth took Jessica to Ray’s restaurant for a drink. Jessica was impressed when she saw the building. It was a large old two-storey Purbeck stone cottage, with roses around the porchway and ivy creeping along the stonework. To the side was a more informal beer garden, with tables and chairs.

‘I wonder where Ray parks. It would be helpful to know.’ She cast an eye around the building. ‘Ah, look, staff parking seems to be over there. I think we have time for a drink, then we’ll need to be in my car ready to see him drive off.’

She ordered two mocktails. Jessica checked her watch: ten past nine. If Ray stuck to his routine, he should be leaving soon. She hoped Beth

wouldn’t be long.

From where they sat, she could see into a very smart restaurant, a large room with beams, wooden tables, and chairs. People were dressed smartly, voices subdued.

The waiting staff wore formal black and white, with the white gloves she remembered from the pottery.

Jessica could also see that behind the beer garden there was a large vegetable plot. She went to have a look and saw a gardener digging up what she presumed was vegetables for the next day. On the far side was an old red brick wall with a door. Jessica smiled, it reminded her of the way into Georgia’s secret garden. She walked along some paving slabs which led to the door and was about to raise the metal latch when a voice shouted.

‘Stop. Come away.’

She was startled by the urgency in the voice and stepped back. The gardener was running over.

‘I’m sorry,’ she stammered. ‘I was just going to look.’

‘I’m sorry, it’s a larger vegetable plot, in fact we are extending it, but it’s a restricted area for now. We need to put a sign up.’

Jessica walked away but she glanced back at the door. Now she had been told she couldn’t go in there she was even more curious!

She returned just as Beth was placing their mocktails on the table. There were no miniature umbrellas or cherries on sticks; this was far more exclusive looking. The glass itself was a thing of beauty: cut glass with a gold rim, and on it rested a fresh sprig of pine with fruit threaded through.

‘This is Ray’s Legacy Mocktail, a mix of elderflower, mint and a load of other things I didn’t recognise,’ said Beth. ‘I saw Tanya in there. She nodded but looked busy. It’s so smart in there.’ She took a sip of her mocktail. ‘That is gorgeous but then it should be: twenty-five quid each, two for forty.’

‘Gosh, you can’t pay for these,’ said Jessica.

‘Don’t worry but next time they’re on you,’ said Beth, smiling. ‘I can’t believe we have to neck these down. We should be able to savour these as if they were liquid gold.’

At that moment Tanya came out to see them.

‘I’ll have to be quick; I’m not meant to come out and mix with you peasants sitting out here. You’re late for a drink; we close in ten minutes.’ She glanced at their drinks. ‘You’re splashing out.’

‘We are, but they are very good,’ said Beth. She looked around, ‘It’s a lovely setting for the restaurant.’

‘It is,’ agreed Tanya. ‘Have you seen the vegetable plot? It’s impressive, isn’t it?’

‘I went over but was told off for trying to go through the far door in that wall,’ said Jessica.

Tanya smiled. ‘We’ve all been told not to go through there. It’s a bit odd. I mean, why are they hiding a load of veg from us?’

‘We should ask Ray,’ said Beth. ‘Is he here this evening?’

‘He is, but busy, although I expect he’ll leave soon. He doesn’t like hanging about late. Right, I’d better go. We’re approaching the dreaded bill paying.’ She lowered her voice. ‘Rich people hate parting with their money. Guess that’s why they’re rich.’ Laughing, she left them.

Jessica sat watching her walk away. Something started stirring in her mind. She closed her eyes, tried hard to see if she could remember but, no, she knew from trying to remember answers for her crossword that the harder she tried the more elusive the answer would become. She was amazed how often it happened. She would go off, make a cup of tea, return and see the answer. She would marvel again at how memory worked.

Beth checked her watch. ‘Come on then, back to the car.’

They were only just seated when they saw Ray’s car pulling out.

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‘That’s Ray,’ said Beth excitedly. ‘Let’s go.’

As they sought to follow discreetly, Beth complained, ‘This is harder than they make it seem in films. I have to keep close but not be seen. I do hope we aren’t going too far. We seem to be heading to the seafront.’

Beth was right. Soon Ray parked along the front at Swanage. Beth managed to find a space close by.

As Ray emerged, he was carrying a bag. He waved to a group on the beach and headed towards them.

‘He’s going swimming,’ said Beth, sounding disappointed. ‘Is that it? Why the big secret? Honestly, what a disappointment.’

‘Not necessarily,’ said Jessica. ‘Look, he’s going in. Let’s go down.’

They walked along the beach close to where Ray was swimming.

‘It must be ever so cold in there,’ said Jessica.

She must have been right. No one stayed in long. Soon the swimmers, all men, came out. There was nothing like laughter. All of them seemed very serious.

One man walked up the beach on his own towards a car. He waved back to the others.

‘See you tomorrow. Keep freezing those testicles.’ And he was gone.

Beth stared at Jessica. ‘Did I hear that right?’

Jessica nodded.

‘Oh, my God. I think I know what’s going on here, but it doesn’t quite make sense,’ said Beth and it was at that moment that Ray spotted them. He looked around as if dying to make a run for it, but then he seemed to resign himself. Grabbing a towel, he came over to them.

‘What on earth are you two doing down this end of the beach?’

‘I could ask you what you are doing down here trying to freeze your testicles off, but I have a good idea.’

‘How?’ he asked, looking horrified.

‘I heard something about it on *Woman’s Hour*, believe it or not. What I don’t understand is why you are doing this.’

Jessica interrupted. ‘Hang on, can someone tell me what is going on here?’

Beth explained, ‘Ray is doing something called Spermaxxing, I think the official description is, optimising your reproductive health?’

Ray nodded but looked embarrassed.

‘There’s no shame in it,’ said Beth. ‘I’m not sure if any of this works but I feel sorry for men. We talk about female fertility, but male fertility seldom gets mentioned.’ She paused and added, ‘But I’m still confused. Surely, it’s Pippa who can’t carry children?’

Ray scratched his arm nervously. ‘That’s the official line. To be honest, I am the problem. I have an exceptionally low sperm count and so I have been trying this out: going swimming in really freezing water. We’re a group of men all in the same boat.’

Beth frowned. ‘Maybe you should stop smoking and drinking so much. That could help. It certainly wouldn’t harm.’

Jessica was again taken aback at how blunt Beth was, but Ray seemed to accept it.

‘Don’t I know it. Pippa is always on at me; I think she is chucking away some of the booze, which is really annoying. Look, no one is perfect and

working in a restaurant is incredibly stressful. Lots of people drink and smoke.'

Beth put her head to one side. 'I'm sorry Ray, and you are not a problem. It's just the way it is.' She added, 'It's a bit rough though on Pippa having to cover up for you all the time.'

'I know, but she offered.' He looked away.

Beth took a breath. 'Look, I'm sorry we found this out. We're not going to tell anyone. I think we should let you get back to your friends, and, well, good luck.'

Ray walked quickly away while Beth and Jessica headed back to the car.

'I'd never have guessed that,' said Beth. 'Goodness, you never know what is going on in someone's marriage, do you?'

Jessica's mind, though, had gone off at a tangent. 'Where is that car park Tanya claims she parked in?'

'It's over there next to the pub. We saw the flag in the background. Hang on, I wanted to go and check something.'

They crossed the road and walked to the car park. Beth went straight to the parking machine. 'Interesting, this is one of those car parks where you pay as you leave. A ticket should show the time you depart. Didn't Tanya say she still had hers?'

'She did, but she may well conveniently have lost it by now. Interesting that she was down here at the same time as Ray.' Jessica paused. 'Of course, that's why she said she knew what Ray was doing: she must have seen him on the beach.'

'Does that give them both an alibi?'

Jessica shook her head. 'Definitely not Ray. It's not far to drive, is it? And as for Tanya, if she has her ticket, it will prove how long she was down here. If not, we would only have her word for it.'

They found Beth's car, and Beth drove them home.

Once back, Beth invited Jessica to go and settle the animals down with her. Jessica agreed, she was rather enjoying this new routine. It was very satisfying to see them all comfy and settled in for the night.

They were on their way home when Beth spotted Ellie getting out of her car.

‘I see it’s mended then?’

‘Yes, cost me six hundred pounds though. Cars just eat money, don’t they? Georgia or Dad always paid the bills before.’

Jessica looked at Ellie. A wild idea came to her; well, she could only try it out. Ellie could say no, couldn’t she?

‘I was reading that book Georgia loved so much earlier, *The Secret Garden*.’

‘Oh right,’ said Ellie, but she turned away.

‘Seriously, I think it could be important,’ said Jessica. ‘Georgia gave you a clue when you were arguing in the quarry.’

Ellie looked sceptical. ‘I don’t think I would have missed that.’

‘But you did. She said that when you were younger you would have found the will. Think, Ellie. What did you and she share when you were younger?’

‘I don’t know, sorry.’

‘It was that book you read. You helped Georgia create that beautiful garden because of it.’

Beth looked at her in amazement. ‘You know where the will is?’

‘I think so,’ said Jessica excitedly. She turned back to Ellie. ‘I think the answer is in your own secret garden.’

‘She isn’t going to bury a will in earth. It would be ruined. Or are you thinking of her workshop?’

‘Neither. Look, we can go and check now. If I’m wrong, what have we to lose?’ Jessica paused. ‘I’m sorry. I’m getting carried away. Maybe the

will is something you'd rather not see. If that is what you think then I'll walk away and never talk about it again.'

She noticed Beth glaring at her but said, 'I'm right here. This has to be Ellie's decision.'

Ellie looked at Jessica intently. 'I am very happy to go and look. As I said to Beth, I know that whatever it says, Georgia was acting in my best interests, and I'd like to know what the last will my dad wrote says. Come on, we can look now, assuming you have torches?'

* * *

'This way,' said Ellie, leading Jessica and Beth down the side of the house.

'It's nice not to have to worry about the security lights,' Beth whispered to Jessica.

Ellie took them straight to the gate that led into the garden.

'This is where we stop,' said Jessica, and she shone her torch on the little robin ornament. Jessica knelt down. She tried to pick it up, but it was heavy. She realised that it was standing on a rectangular metal box that had been hidden by the grass.

'I think this is it, but how do we get into the box?'

Beth knelt down. She held the robin statue while Jessica shone her torch down but there were no key holes, no catches to slide open.

'I know what to do,' said Ellie. She took hold of the robin, twisted it, then using the head as a handle, she was able to open it.

Jessica was trembling now. She shone her torch into the box.

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Jessica stared into the box. There it was: the will.

‘It’s here,’ she whispered.

Beth turned to Ellie, who was looking down into the garden. ‘You should be the first to read it.’

Ellie smiled. ‘Thanks, but like I said, whatever it contains, it makes no difference to me.’

Jessica handed her the will and Ellie opened it. She scanned the first part and then took a beat.

‘This is the main part.’

‘And it says?’ asked Beth anxiously.

Ellie handed the will to her. Beth read through it, then looked at Ellie before passing it to Jessica.

Beth shook her head. ‘So your dad, Ellie, had amended the earlier will. You should have received the whole of your inheritance on his death.’

Ellie shrugged. ‘I can see that, but I’m OK with that now. Georgia did what she thought was right.’

Jessica was watching her. Was she really as accepting of this as she was making out?

Ellie took the will. ‘I’ll take it inside, but I don’t care, it means nothing.’

It all felt a bit of an anticlimax, and as if to make up for it, Beth said, ‘You were so clever to work that out, well done, Jessica.’

They closed up the box. Ellie started to lead them back out of the garden.

‘Before we go,’ asked Jessica, ‘could we have a look in your pottery? I’d love to see those models of the animals again.’

Ellie’s eyebrows shot up. ‘Really, at this time?’

‘You have electric in there?’

‘Well, yes. Come on then.’

She walked on ahead of them. Jessica grabbed Beth’s arm. ‘Try and get her out of there so I can look around.’

Beth looked bemused but nodded.

Ellie opened the pottery, turned on the lights and went inside.

‘Oh God,’ exclaimed Beth, ‘I’m so sorry. I need to use your loo. It must be the night air or all the excitement. Can you let me in the back door? I’ll be quick.’

Ellie glanced back at Jessica as if expecting her to leave but Jessica simply smiled and said, ‘I’d love a bit of time to look at these.’

‘Well, OK,’ said Ellie, ‘but be careful what you touch in here.’

Jessica grabbed a pair of clean white gloves and began her search. She checked the bin and some of the vases. She moved to open the fridge.

It was then that she heard voices. ‘Thanks so much. Handy you have a toilet just by the back door,’ said Beth, speaking far too loudly.

Jessica threw open the fridge, grabbed a box, opened, checked, closed it, and then flung the door closed just as Ellie and Beth appeared.

Jessica, shaking, took hold of a model. ‘Beautiful cat,’ she said.

‘It’s a dog,’ said Ellie pointedly and glanced around the pottery.

Beth picked up a few more of the models before they left the garden and said goodnight to Ellie.

Out of earshot, Beth said, ‘I’m sorry I couldn’t take longer. Did you manage to get anything?’

‘I did. It was interesting.’

‘What did you need to look in there for? We’d found the will.’

‘There were a few things to check out. One of the main discoveries was in the fridge.’

‘And that was?’

‘A box containing a few packets of what I reckon were ecstasy tablets. They had an “e” on them but as you know, I am no expert.’

‘My God, drugs. How did you know?’

‘Firstly, there was the none-too-subtle remark by Tanya when Georgia took us on the pottery about Ellie keeping secrets in there. Then Ellie specifically asked if the police were searching for the pottery when they were round there that morning, even though they were concentrating on Georgia’s workshop and the house. I wondered then why she looked so scared.’

‘That’s right and of course that night when Ellie caught me after I’d been to the workshop, the first thing she asked me was if I’d been in there. Well done, Jessica.’

Jessica shrugged but felt herself blush.

Beth continued. ‘What did you make of Ellie and the will? Could she really not be that bothered about it? Georgia had stopped her having access to her money, had decided she should wait. I suppose now she’s seen through Finn, maybe she’s grateful.’

Jessica put her head to one side. ‘But what if she’d come back and found the will on that Sunday? In the state she was, this could have made her really angry.’

‘But even the next day she was saying she trusted Georgia.’

‘She did,’ said Jessica.

‘And, anyway, she’d not seen the will before. It was in the box, and Georgia was sure she’d not know where it was. No, I wouldn’t suspect Ellie, not now.’

When they returned home Beth reminded Jessica they were off to Poole in the morning and then the do at the restaurant in the evening. ‘We’ve got a busy day tomorrow, get a good night’s sleep,’ she said, and Jessica went to bed.

* * *

Saturday

When Jessica woke up the next morning, her first thought was not a startling revelation about the case, not even anxiety over this visit to Poole. It was what on earth she was going to wear that evening. People would be dressed up in very smart clothes, subtly shiny, classy. Back in Oxford she had a dress that she’d had for years, and she pulled out for the odd special occasion, a wedding, a christening. She liked to call it timeless, but she knew it was rather old-fashioned. Anyway, she didn’t have it here. All she had were jeans, a pair of tidy tops and jumpers. As for her feet, well it was trainers or walking boots.

She checked the time, quickly did a puzzle, and went downstairs.

Beth drove herself and Jessica down to the chain ferry.

As they approached, Jessica glanced over at the car park for Shell Bay. It seemed a lifetime ago that she had arrived here and first set foot on the Isle of Purbeck.

As they drove onto the ferry, Beth said, ‘I always feel sad when I leave Purbeck. I suppose you felt the same when you left the Isle of Wight.’

‘I did.’

‘I know that is a proper island but you have to admit, Purbeck is like its own little world.’

‘I agree, and it’s far more beautiful, wild and remote than I expected.’

The part of Poole where they disembarked was on the exclusive peninsula of Sandbanks. Today they drove along the waterfront and Jessica had a chance to see the expensive luxury homes for herself.

‘I’m always reading about how expensive it is around here,’ said Jessica.

‘I know, but I wouldn’t want to live here. Give me Worth Stone and Chapman’s Pool any day. Now, this address, can you put it into the satnav? I really should have done that before we left.’

Jessica held the piece of paper and attempted to put the address in while Beth gave her instructions as to what to press. Eventually, a rather haughty voice started to instruct them where to go.

They headed inland to the old town and found the street they had looked up on Google Maps.

‘What is the house number?’ asked Beth.

Jessica told her and they made their way along the street.

Once there, they looked up at the lovely old building.

‘This isn’t much help, is it?’ said Beth.

‘Not really. Oh, hang on. What is this?’

On the wall was a smart but discreet brass plate with three names on it, one of which was ‘David Place, Private Consultant’.

‘He’s a doctor,’ said Beth. ‘She could be having an affair with a doctor?’

Jessica shook her head. ‘I don’t think so. My guess is she has been coming for monthly private consultations.’

‘But why? What’s wrong with her?’

‘I think it must be something to do with having children, don’t you?’

It was as if the pieces of a jigsaw which had seemed so disparate started fitting together. Jessica said, ‘I think I understand it all now: the calendars,

the crosses. Can’t you see?’

Beth nodded. ‘I think I do. We should go home, shouldn’t we?’

However, they were too late because Pippa was walking towards them.

She stared at them. ‘What the hell?’

She looked far more hurt than angry. To Jessica’s surprise, Beth stepped forward.

‘I’m sorry, Pippa. We should never have come.’

Pippa nodded. ‘I wish you hadn’t, but I can explain. I have an appointment. It’s only quick. How about I meet you down the road in the coffee shop after; it’s the first one you come to.’

Beth nodded. Pippa disappeared into the house.

In the café with their drinks, Jessica looked over at Beth. ‘This is awkward, isn’t it?’

‘It is, but we’re here now.’

Neither really knew what to say but fortunately Pippa was true to her word and arrived soon after.

She got herself a coffee and sat opposite them.

‘So, how did you get this address?’

The question threw Jessica. She hadn’t prepared for that.

Beth however took it in her stride. ‘I looked in your reading room and found the calendars. I’m sorry.’

‘You thought this was all to do with Georgia?’

‘We did. Well, we didn’t know if it was or not. You were worried about Georgia knowing private things about you. She’d said she’d seen you over here with a man.’

Pippa sighed. ‘I was stupid to deny being here, especially to you, Jessica. I was obviously lying but I didn’t know what else to do. So, you found this out and came here.’ She glanced at Jessica. ‘You saw my garden; I’m guessing you have a good idea of what’s happening.’

Jessica nodded. ‘We met Ray the other night, swimming down in Swanage.’

‘Did you? What was he doing down there?’

Jessica explained.

‘Oh, my God,’ said Pippa. ‘He’s trying that as well?’ She hesitated then asked quietly, ‘So he told you the truth, that it’s his sperm count that’s preventing us having children?’

‘He explained it all,’ said Beth.

Pippa shook her head. ‘The problem is that he is in denial. He thinks if he does all these things somehow a miracle is going to happen, that he will magically be able to father children, but it’s not going to happen.’ She glanced at Beth. ‘I don’t have time on my side, so I decided to do something about it. I’ve been going through intrauterine insemination, IUI. It’s what a lot of people try before IVF, as it’s less invasive. The problem, of course, is that I can’t use Ray’s sperm.’

‘So, you’re using a sperm donor?’

Pippa cringed. ‘I am, and that’s why I can’t say anything to Ray: he’d never agree to it.’

‘But if it works…’ said Beth.

‘I shall lie to him,’ said Pippa. ‘I shall tell him it’s a miracle. If he wants to believe something badly enough he will persuade himself into it.’ She spoke more softly. ‘And he will bring up the child thinking they’re his.’ She looked down, her fingers trembling as she touched the side of her mug. ‘I hate all the deceit, I hate the lies, I hate that I am having to go through all the loss on my own.’ Her shoulders started to shake and tears poured down her cheeks. ‘I feel like I’m going mad. David, my consultant, is the only person I can talk to.’ She wiped her face with the back of her hand. ‘My last loss was the day Georgia died.’ She turned to Beth. ‘That’s why I didn’t answer your calls, I was talking to him.’ She gave a wry smile. ‘The joy of

private health care, certainly as expensive as this, is twenty-four-hour support.'

'I'm so sorry,' said Beth.

Pippa sighed. 'It gets worse because every attempt has failed. They're saying I need to move on to IVF, and I can't see how I can do that without Ray knowing.'

'He has no idea you've been going through this?'

'No, none. Ray is basically totally self-absorbed. I think he reckons I'm going mad though. At times it feels like it, to be honest. My hormones have been all over the place. But some things I know, like his affair with Tanya; he's been a fool there, but what can you do?'

They sat talking for some time after that. Jessica listened as Beth shared some of her own heartbreaks when she was trying to have children. It was terrible to think that Beth and Pippa, like so many women, were made to feel they had to carry such pain and devastation alone.

Eventually they all decided it was time to leave.

'Listen, Pippa, I'm here twenty-four hours a day. You can come round, ring me, anything,' said Beth, adding with a smile, 'and I don't charge.'

Pippa smiled back. 'Thank you. I feel better for sharing it all.'

It had been a sobering morning and neither Beth nor Jessica talked much on the way home.

It wasn't until they were back in Worth that Beth looked over at Jessica and said, 'So we can rule out Pippa then.'

Jessica smiled. 'We can.'

'I'm glad,' said Beth. 'It really confirms that you never know what someone might be going through.'

'That's so true, Beth, but Pippa has shared with you now, and she has a true friend she can turn to.'

They returned, had a late lunch, and still had the afternoon ahead of them.

‘I’ve been thinking,’ said Beth, ‘we’ve not checked out Ellie’s alibi at the pub, have we? Could you face going out again, just for a quick drink? I could try and grab Orson – he organises the quiz with Freya – see if we can confirm Ellie’s time at the pub.’

Jessica desperately wanted to sit with her feet up and do some puzzle or read a book, but she recognised this was something they needed to do. However, she didn’t think it would be as straightforward as Beth envisaged.

‘We can’t really just ask him outright what time Ellie was there,’ she said.

‘No, don’t worry, I’ll think of something,’ replied Beth.

Jessica smiled. She loved Beth’s optimism but still wasn’t sure how this was going to work out.

Beth and Jessica walked up to the Square and Compass. They were lucky, the lunch time rush was over, it was relatively quiet and also just warm enough to sit outside.

Beth bought them drinks and fortunately it wasn’t long until Orson came out to clear a table; Beth waved over to him.

Jessica watched and admired the way Beth could so easily chat to anyone. Orson was soon relaxed and, as it was a quiet evening, he perched on the opposite side of the pub bench.

‘You are so good at putting on community events,’ said Beth. ‘Are the quiz evenings going well?’

‘Great. You should get a team together.’

‘We could do with Jessica here,’ said Beth. ‘She could be our secret weapon.’

Orson laughed. ‘Excellent.’

‘It was great you held that quiz for Alistair the other night; I know Georgia appreciated the gesture. I’ve been telling Rhiannon to get into a team. Does Ellie have one?’

‘Not yet. I keep nagging her to get one together, see if she can persuade Tanya to join in.’

‘But Ellie came the night it was a tribute to her dad?’

‘Yeah, she came after the quiz. Just as I was announcing the winner actually, at around 10.15. Shame she missed it, but it was good she came along.’

‘I know it was an important event for Freya; she had been down the chapel with Georgia but had to rush back for it.’

‘She did. She’s usually here early but she rushed in dead on nine. I wasn’t worried, she’s dead reliable.’

‘I think Cherry said she was there that night?’ asked Jessica, and Beth shot her a quizzical look.

‘She was. In fact, her team won that night. The Golden Girls, a group of older ladies from the village, are a force to be reckoned with. Cherry was on fire that night.’

‘Did they stay to celebrate?’

‘They really did. Honestly, that team can drink any of the others under the table. I had to chuck them out at eleven.’ He stood up. ‘Right, I’d better get back to work, and remember, get that team together.’

He walked away.

Beth nodded. ‘Good, so we’ve confirmed Ellie’s timing, 10.15. It means she had time to kill Georgia and cycle back.’ Beth screwed up her eyes. ‘Why did you ask about Cherry by the way?’

Jessica fiddled with the rim of her glass. ‘Because it dawned on me that maybe she should have been in our list of suspects. That text Georgia sent – we only have Cherry’s word that it referred to the will. What if they’d had a falling out about something else, something that had upset and angered Cherry even more?’

‘But she was so upset when I talked to her that day; she was devastated by Georgia’s death.’

‘She could have been acting or even regretting what she had done.’

‘My God Jessica, you don’t trust anyone, do you?’

‘I don’t think we can at this point. However, we have just found out Cherry had an alibi for the evening.’

Beth felt relieved. ‘I’m so pleased about that. Goodness everyone needs checking out don’t they, I’m glad I have an alibi.’

Jessica laughed and they left the pub.

* * *

Once home Jessica was finally able to get the rest she needed before they headed out for the evening.

She went into the bedroom with her puzzle books and novel, but it was no good, her mind kept returning to the case. She went mentally through the list she’d made with Beth. She was impressed; they’d been through a lot of it, but was she any closer to finding Georgia’s killer?

Oscar was sitting on the bed, curled up asleep and she stroked his soft head.

‘I suppose we now know one person who isn’t the killer,’ she said to him, ‘but what about the others?’

Maybe what she needed to do was go back to her first idea and treat this whole event as a puzzle, a jigsaw. She needed to gather all the pieces together. Had she missed some? Was that why she had odd pieces that didn’t seem to fit anywhere?

She took herself back to the Mother’s Day walk and re-trod every step mentally to try and find out what she’d missed.

They had started at Georgia’s in her secret garden, her workshop and of course the greenhouse with all those seeds, then that pointed remark to Tanya.

They’d been to the pottery before they left, Ellie’s secret place, all those pots, the gloves, and those boxes on the floor. Jessica paused, she had to go back there.

Another piece she was holding was the will. What could she do with that?

Jessica continued gathering pieces. The row in the quarry. *Desperate people say and do terrible things*. She’d been so right: what could be more terrible than to take the life of someone else?

Jessica paused. She could see Vincent with his biscuit and he’d had that bottle. She grabbed her laptop. ‘Of course,’ she said to Oscar, who raised his head but, unimpressed, yawned and went back to sleep.

Jessica continued remembering the Mother’s Day walk. So many things said and left unsaid. At the end of it, Georgia, and that terrible weight of guilt she felt for not being with Alistair as he was dying.

Jessica realised there was still a lot to learn but at least she had most of the pieces she needed now. Tonight, she knew was going to be crucial.

She looked down at her pile of clothes. Suddenly, what to wear that evening seemed the least of her worries. However, she did her best with the clothes she’d brought, settling for a blue skirt, blouse and sandals. She checked in the mirror: certainly not glamorous, but tidy. That would have to do.

Jessica went downstairs. Beth was wearing a silver glittery top with black silk skirt, with plenty of sparkly jewellery.

‘I’m sorry,’ said Jessica. ‘These are the smartest clothes I’ve brought.’

‘That’s fine,’ said Beth, adding, ‘I’ve a dramatic zirconia necklace you could borrow. It’s really striking; people always comment on it.’

Jessica searched for the words politely to decline, but Beth seemed to read her mind.

Laughing, she said, ‘It’s OK, leave it. You look lovely as you are.’

Rhiannon came down wearing a short, tight dress with towering heels. It surprised Jessica. Rhiannon usually wore jeans and T-shirts.

‘My going-out gear,’ said Rhiannon, smiling.

‘You look gorgeous,’ said Beth. ‘You didn’t get those legs from me. You’re so lucky. Right, I’ll dig Jack out of the study and we can go.’

Jack was wearing a black suit, white shirt, and tie. ‘I’m not going full dinner suit for anyone,’ he said.

‘You look very handsome,’ said Beth as she kissed him on the cheek. ‘Now, let’s go.’

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They arrived at the restaurant for an early start at six o’clock. As it was a fine evening, everyone was outside with drinks in hand and tiny nibbles, or canapes as Ray was calling them, were being handed round. It was a large gathering, and clearly an important event.

Jessica glanced to the side and saw a gardener working hard in a large kitchen garden, which she thought was odd at this time of the day.

Inside the restaurant looked very smart, with long tables at one end covered in fresh white linen tablecloths, gleaming silver cutlery and sparkling crystal glasses.

‘Is there anyone else from the paper here?’ Beth asked Rhiannon.

‘Yes, the foody lot are over there, already knocking back the free booze; maybe I should be in that line; there are definite perks.’

They were all called to attention by Ray gently tapping the side of his glass with a spoon.

With a broad smile, he began, ‘I just wanted to say a very brief thank you to everyone who has made this evening possible. Some of you have been on this journey with me since the whole madcap idea took seed. So, I’ll start by thanking our investors.’ He raised a glass. ‘Without you putting your trust, and your money, behind this venture we would never have got off the ground.’

He continued thanking individuals who had made various contributions then took a brief pause.

‘Finally, I want to thank someone who has always believed in me, my rock and my one true love, Pippa.’ He gestured for her to join him, and, after some persuasion, she walked to the front. Ray gave her a long hug and stood proudly with his arm around her. She blushed with joy. He looked at her and said, ‘Like a fine wine, our love has grown deeper and stronger every day. As the Bible says, Pippa, your love is more delightful than wine.’ He grinned. ‘And coming from me’ – he shot a glance at the crowd – ‘that is saying something. So, to Pippa, a deep heartfelt thank you. Tomorrow, I am leaving you for one night because I have an incredibly special gift to collect.’ He kissed her again, then turned his attention back to the guests. ‘And so, we look to the future. We have made a brilliant start, but this is only the beginning. Now I ask you all to raise your glasses to Ray’s Restaurant.’

Beth grinned at Jessica and said in a quiet voice, ‘What’s got into Ray? I bet that’s the first time he’s ever done that. It’s like he was making a point; maybe they’d had a row. Anyway, let’s go and help ourselves to this buffet: it looks quite something.’

Rhiannon approached and stood next to them.

‘All right, love?’ Beth asked her.

‘I suppose so. It’s such a shame actually, because we had a good evening before I started throwing up.’ She gave a weak smile.

Jessica put her head to one side. ‘I can’t remember now, who did you say was at your table?’

‘Pippa, Ellie and Georgia.’

‘Not Tanya?’

‘Oh no. She was our waitress, unfortunate thing.’

‘We haven’t got any nearer to this buffet. Let’s go and choose some of this food. It looks amazing,’ said Beth.

There was a very upmarket spread. Everything was beautifully labelled: local sustainably fished Dorset crab, langoustine, roasted home-grown vegetables, local venison, local beef wellington, souffle with local seasonal fruits and local cheeses.

Beth joked, ‘Not a sausage roll in sight.’

‘I suppose it is to show off the new chef’s work,’ said Jessica. ‘It’s impressive.’

They took their food outside where a terrace had been set up with white chairs and tables, and fairy lights strewn around. Jack chose a table well set apart from the others. ‘Look, we have a table all to ourselves.’

It was a lovely setting, the evening warm, the view over fields towards the sea and setting sun breathtaking.

At that point Beth and Rhiannon went in to get more drinks, leaving Jack and Jessica alone.

Jack began to fiddle with his wedding ring, and Jessica immediately knew something was wrong.

‘Are you worried about something?’ she asked.

He tapped his fingertips together in that nervous way she recognised.

‘I’m not sure now is the right time to ask you.’

Jessica laid her hand on his. ‘I’d like to think we can talk anytime. Tell me what it is.’

‘It’s about my birth father, Hugh.’

Jessica sat back, her heart pounding, but the conversation with Beth had prepared her for Jack raising the issue. ‘Beth told me you had been talking more about him.’

‘It was quite a coincidence her picking out one of his books in the bookshop, but then I suppose they are everywhere. It’s strange with this new photo, although he is so much older than me, I look more like him now than when he was a young man.’ Jack smiled wryly. ‘I must be ageing fast.’

He tapped his fingers on the table. ‘Anyway, it kind of confirmed something I’ve been thinking for a while.’

Jessica waited and she had a horrible feeling she knew what was coming. It was something she’d been expecting but dreading for a long time.

‘I was thinking Mum, maybe it’s time I met Hugh. It never felt right when Julian was alive but now, I think it is time. He’s not getting any younger and I’d hate to leave it too late.’

‘He’s only in his late seventies, not ancient.’

‘I know and he looks well, I mean he’s still writing, but I don’t want to leave it too late, I should meet him at least once in my life.’

Jessica tried to still the shaking in her voice. ‘You are a grown man, love. You are free to do whatever you want.’

‘I know that, but I want to do this with your blessing. You don’t have to answer now, give it time.’

Jessica took a deep breath. ‘OK, I promise to think about it.’

She looked over and saw Beth and Rhiannon returning.

‘You know, I think I’ll just go for a little walk.’

‘You’re not upset are you Mum?’ Jack asked anxiously.

Jessica shook her head. ‘No, not at all. I have a feeling you could be right about this, just give me time to think. Is that OK?’

‘Of course.’ She smiled at him, squeezed his hand, and then left.

Jessica decided to head to the vegetable garden. Floodlights had now been switched on, and she could make her way quite easily. She began to breathe more evenly and tried to think calmly about Jack’s request. It was hard; however, it was so emotional for her. She had never planned to meet Hugh again; their lives were completely separate now. He’d not wanted any active involvement but wanted to help financially. And so, he had quietly transferred money into an account for Jack monthly until he was eighteen. However, there had been no contact and Jessica had not touched the money.

Instead, she'd allowed it to accumulate and given it to Jack in a lump sum after university.

Of course, Jack meeting up with Hugh didn't have to involve her at all, but even knowing it was happening brought him back into her life. But surely, she was being selfish, Jack had a right to meet his father. She'd even offered to arrange the meeting when Jack had been older, but he had always refused.

Jessica sighed. Well, he'd changed his mind now, and she must give Jack an answer soon.

Looking at the garden, Jessica realised that despite the hour, the gardener was still there. She could only assume he'd been asked to stay late and talk to the guests about the work being done here.

Further away, she also spotted that wall, and the door. What was behind it?

'I'm just going for a wander,' Jessica said to the others. Without any more explanation, she left, and she wandered over to the garden, avoiding the gardener. Using the light from the floodlights, she followed the paths that wove in and out of the raised beds. Glancing back, she noticed the gardener was still engrossed with the other guests and didn't appear to have noticed her.

She reached the brick wall and found the door to a secret garden, perhaps?

The handle was stiff, but when she pushed it down hard, it opened. This side was not floodlit, so she used the light on her phone to shine around. What she saw surprised her: to one side a board declared the land for sale.

'You're not allowed in there.' The voice startled her. She turned to see Ray, glaring at her.

'Sorry, there was no notice saying it was private.' She shone her torch back over the bare land. 'The gardener told me there were more vegetables here and you were planning to expand. I thought you were assuring Georgia

that you were continuing the ethos of growing as much of your own produce as possible.'

Ray ran his hand through his hair.

'Look, this is a hard business, and I've had some major knocks.'

'All that talk of success and an exciting future in your speech?'

Ray shrugged. 'A big part of business is bluff. Success breeds success. You have to look the part. Some of the other investors have a fair idea of what is going on; fortunately, they're sticking with me for now, but we have to tighten our belts.' He nodded at the sign. 'I am distraught that I have to sell off this land, but I have no option.'

'But what about the idea of land to plate, the customer seeing their produce growing? Georgia cared about that so much.'

'I know, and it's the ideal, but it's not sustainable for us at the moment. I will continue to use local producers as much as possible. That's all I can say.'

'And keep that one piece of land the other side of the wall for show?'

'More or less. We can grow some stuff, but not a lot.'

'And so you are dropping the ethos Georgia was inspired by?'

'No. I promise you I am not. I'm as committed to all this as much as she was. I have dreams, but I have to take it slowly. That's what I was trying to explain to her on the beach.'

'I overheard you pleading with Georgia not to end your relationship, you sounded desperate.'

He dug a hole in the earth with the toe of his shoe. 'I needed her to understand…'

Jessica was observing him; he looked guilty. She glanced over at the 'For Sale' notice again, then she realised.

'I've just realised, Georgia's support was not simply promoting your business, she had a financial stake in it as well. Was she demanding the repayment of a loan?'

Ray glared at her. ‘It was not a loan. It was a gift. I told her she would never be able to prove otherwise.’

‘I have a feeling Georgia may not have agreed. Maybe she was threatening to take you to court. Now, that wouldn’t look good for business, would it?’

Ray kicked a small stone, sent it flying across the surface of the earth. Jessica knew she was right.

But then Ray leant down, his face close to hers. Jessica saw an anger burning in his eyes. She was aware of the darkness and that brick wall between her and the others. Had anyone seen Ray come this way?

‘You need to keep out of this.’ He stood up and his expression changed. He spoke smoothly, persuasively. ‘This is nothing to do with you. Most importantly for you, I am guessing after that carry-on at the pub, this has nothing to do with Georgia’s death. I was devastated when she died. You know where I was; you’ve seen it for yourself.’ He managed a cold smile. ‘I suggest you come back and enjoy my free hospitality a little longer, while I return to my guests.’

With that, he marched away.

Jessica stared ahead. If Georgia had lived, she would have found out about this land, sooner rather than later and from her words on the beach she’d made it clear she was prepared to end their relationship and withdraw her money. The dispute over whether it was a loan or gift could well become the centre of a long-running court battle, something Ray didn’t need. As he said, success in business depended on appearance, how many other investors would start pulling out if they sniffed trouble? And then the business and all Ray’s dreams would have collapsed.

Ray must have been frantic; there was a real possibility that Georgia could ruin him. The question had to be, was he desperate enough to kill?

Jessica quickly retraced her route back through the door and made her way back to Beth and the family.

As she did, she saw Tanya chatting and laughing with them all. Suddenly, Jessica felt an anger rise up inside her. How dare Tanya behave like that after what she had done? The answer came to Jessica. *Because she thinks she got away with it*.

Jessica stormed over and sat down.

‘More champagne?’ asked Tanya.

‘I’d want it checked first,’ said Jessica.

Tanya gave a condescending smile. ‘What on earth are you talking about? Have you had a few too many free glasses of champagne?’

‘I’m sober,’ said Jessica. ‘I know what you did. Are you going to admit it to Rhiannon or not?’

Tanya’s face filled with panic. ‘Hey, lower your voice. What the hell are you talking about?’

‘Jessica, leave it, whatever it is,’ said Rhiannon, looking embarrassed.

‘No, I won’t leave it,’ said Jessica. ‘I know the reason you were so sick last time you came here, and I know who is responsible.’

Tanya looked shaken now. ‘I’d better get back to work.’

‘No, you stay here,’ said Jessica. ‘This is your last chance. Are you going to tell Rhiannon, or am I?’

Tanya stood very still but didn’t speak.

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Jessica checked the other tables out on the terrace. Theirs was well apart, and the other guests were all preoccupied with each other.

‘So, it’s up to me to explain,’ said Jessica. ‘Rhiannon was sick because you put crushed up lobelia seeds, or pukeweed, on her meal that night.’

‘No—’

‘Yes. You were here. And you had the lobelia seeds: only those, no other seeds.’

‘Oh, my God,’ exclaimed Rhiannon. ‘The chia seeds? I asked what the black seeds were on my salad; you said they were chia seeds. I couldn’t see them on the other salads, but you said we all had them, they were just mixed in. I didn’t give them a second thought. But I just ate them and didn’t think any more about it.’

Tanya squirmed but didn’t say anything.

‘You came round the next day, saying you’d heard that Rhiannon had gone to hospital. I remember wondering why you looked so frantic,’ said Beth.

Tanya sat down and spoke in a voice hardly above a whisper. ‘It was all an accident. I didn’t mean any harm; I had no idea how ill the seeds would make you. It was meant to be a joke.’

‘A joke?’ said Rhiannon. ‘You’re not serious.’

‘But it was just a prank. Like we did, me and you.’

‘I nicked the odd pen, I never tried to physically hurt you,’ said Rhiannon.

Jack sat forward. ‘What exactly did you think this would do to Rhiannon?’

‘I thought it would just make you run to the loo, like a laxative. I got it all wrong,’ said Tanya.

‘What an incredibly foolish thing to do,’ asserted Jack.

‘Downright dangerous,’ said Beth. ‘You made Rhiannon desperately ill. You nearly ruined Ray’s business—’

‘Mam, you’re exaggerating now. Before, you were calling it an upset tummy,’ said Rhiannon. ‘I was ill but not dying. And Ray was having a tough time financially anyway.’

‘I know now how deranged it was,’ said Tanya, ‘and I’m so sorry. I should have owned up, but I knew you were out of hospital quickly and were better within a few days. We went out for a drink a week later and you were fine. If I’d confessed, I might have lost my job, and I like it here.’

‘Or the police could have got involved,’ said Beth.

‘Ray wouldn’t have done that unless he really had to. He didn’t need any more publicity,’ said Rhiannon, ‘and I wouldn’t have let it go that far.’

‘I guessed that,’ said Tanya. ‘I should have told you. I’m really sorry.’

Rhiannon put her head to one side and appeared to be relenting. ‘I suppose in the long run no harm was done.’

‘Hang on, you’re just going to let her get away with this?’ Beth demanded of Rhiannon. ‘She’s not safe to be working in a restaurant behaving like that.’ She turned to Jack. ‘Tell her Jack; we can’t leave this here.’

Jack sighed. ‘I think this has to be Rhiannon’s decision.’

‘Thank you,’ said Rhiannon. ‘That’s enough, Mam, really. Tanya has admitted it now. I think this should be it.’

‘I’ve obviously never done anything like that again,’ said Tanya. ‘I never would. Look, I’m really sorry. What can I do to make it up to you?’ She glanced inside. ‘Please don’t tell Ray. I need this work. And I don’t need this getting out. Please Rhiannon, I’ve obviously never done anything as stupid since. I never will.’

Rhiannon smiled. ‘It ends here. It’s over, Tanya.’

‘Thank you so much. I owe you. That offer stands, any time. One day I’ll be a hot shot barrister, and you can call on me for anything.’

‘I’ll keep you to that when someone is trying to sue me over a story.’

‘I’ll be right there by your side,’ said Tanya.

Jack stood up. ‘I think it’s time we made a move. This lot will be drinking into the early hours as it’s on the house, but I need to get home.’

Tanya approached Rhiannon and gave her a hug. ‘Forgiven?’

‘Of course, but I’m holding you to that free advice – and for life.’

‘Done, I promise.’

The family wandered over to the car. Jessica noticed Tanya’s car in the staff car park. ‘Just give me a minute,’ she said.

She rushed over and looked through the windscreen – perfect.

She tried the handle. It was unlocked, thank God. She opened the door and climbed in. There was a pile of parking receipts behind the steering wheel. She gathered them all up, quickly searching through them.

She spotted one in particular, took a photo and scattered them. She glanced around. It was a very smart car, and large for one person. She wondered why Tanya needed such a car; it must cost a fortune to insure. Jessica smiled. *Stop getting distracted,* she told herself and quickly returned to join the others.

‘What on earth were you doing?’ asked Rhiannon.

‘I’ll tell your mam later.’

In the car, Beth returned to the subject of Tanya and the poisoning.

‘I think you let her off lightly.’

‘Mam, it could happen to anyone. I once pushed a friend in the pool as a laugh, and she cracked her head open on the steps. Don’t you remember?’

‘You were thirteen, love.’

‘I know, but she didn’t mean anything. Just drop it, Mam. This is my decision.’

They were home by nine, and Jack suggested they watch some TV.

‘How about *Inspector Morse* – have you seen it, Mum?’ asked Jack.

‘Not for years.’

‘As long as it doesn’t make you homesick, we’ll watch it then,’ said Jack.

They all settled to watch despite it looking a little dated.

Beth went out to see to the animals, never one to sit still for long.

Jessica enjoyed spotting the colleges and the walks around her hometown. It was a beautiful city and had been her home for so long. The colleges, the spires, the bicycles: it was unique.

Beth had returned by the time the programme had finished and as the familiar music played, Jack stood up.

‘I’ll just check my emails,’ he said.

When he’d gone, Beth said, ‘So, well done working all that out about Tanya. Rhiannon has been a lot more magnanimous about it than me.’

‘She’s been very kind.’

‘I think Georgia must have worked it out, don’t you? All that talk about the seeds.’ Beth hesitated, then added, ‘Oh God, was that a motive for Tanya killing her? Was she scared she was going to tell everyone?’

Jessica shrugged. ‘I thought that when the idea first came to me. But Georgia knew all the people involved. She knew Tanya could probably talk Rhiannon round; knew Ray wouldn’t make a fuss. The worst that would have happened is that he’d have quietly sacked her, but she could get another waitressing job. I don’t think there is motive enough there to take such a huge risk as to kill. And there’s another thing.’

Jessica took out her phone and showed Beth the photo. ‘I found the parking ticket; Tanya drove out of the car park at eleven.’

‘Oh, right, that kind of gives her an alibi,’ said Beth. ‘Shame, I think I’d rather it was her than the others. What she did to my Rhiannon was terrible and she also had an affair with my friend’s husband. I’m afraid I have an extremely low opinion of Tanya now. I—’

‘I can understand that, however just because someone is unpleasant doesn’t make them a killer.’

‘I suppose not. Now, tell me, what happened when you went over to the garden? You were gone a long time.’

Jessica explained.

‘Despite that posh do, the business is really struggling? Who’d have thought it?’

‘Yes, he presents one story when quite the opposite is true,’ said Jessica, looking meaningfully at Beth.

Beth caught up. ‘That is what Georgia said, isn’t it?’

‘It is, and it also gives him a motive, a very strong one. And we know he could have driven there.’

Beth winced. ‘Oh, Jessica, this is hard, isn’t it? Trying to imagine someone you know doing something so evil. I don’t want any of them to have done this.’ She gave a weak smile. ‘Not even Tanya.’

‘Well, we have a way to go. We need evidence, and that’s thin on the ground.’

Jessica went up to bed. She remembered the next day was Sunday; she was losing track of the days here.

It would be early morning service. She took a breath; she had to go and talk to Vincent. It was not going to be easy, and she had no idea how he was going to react to what she had to say.

* * *

The next morning Jessica was at the early service. Afterwards she asked Vincent if he had time to talk.

‘For once I have. One of the lay preachers is taking the next service, so I can have a bit of a rest. So how can I help you?’ he asked.

‘Actually, I have a confession to make.’

Jessica began by telling him about her and Beth checking his shed.

‘You broke in?’ he asked, looking stunned rather than angry.

‘Well, we trespassed. I’m really sorry, but we had a reason.’

Jessica inwardly cringed; this was going to be even harder than she thought. She went on to talk about finding the leaf and checking it out.

Vincent shook his head. ‘I don’t know whether to explode or laugh hysterically. Have you any idea how crazy this all sounds? You thought I was growing and using cannabis? I bet Marcus laughed at that.’

‘He did actually and, yes, it does sound mad now. But, you know, Georgia had talked about you finding ways to relieve pain. Plenty of people have made mistakes over that leaf, and we had other reasons to be concerned.’

‘What are they?’

‘To start with, there were the biscuits you refused to share on the Mother’s Day walk, and the butter you told Beth not to take out of the fridge. And actually, Vincent, those things aren’t explained by those leaves. I was concerned, I will admit, but then I remembered that little bottle you used before eating the biscuit.’

He smiled. ‘You make a good detective.’

‘I had an idea, researched it, and now I know. You hadn’t been adding cannabis to them either. No, you’ve been using cannabis oil. It comes from the cannabis plant, but the psychoactive ingredients are removed. It can be added to butter to make biscuits, and it is used, among other things, to relieve chronic pain.’

Vincent let out a long sigh. ‘You worked all that out? Amazing. I’m still not happy about you breaking into my garden but I have to admit you have worked things out well, and at least you didn’t go running to the police with that leaf.’

Jessica smiled to herself. If only he knew how close they had been to doing just that.

‘You seem a bit secretive about it,’ she said. ‘Why didn’t you explain about the butter to Beth?’

‘Because there is a lot of misunderstanding about it. It is a short step from saying the vicar is using cannabis oil to saying he is using cannabis. In this village, by the time it reached the shop, I would be completely hooked on heroin.’

Jessica smiled. ‘I think you have a good point there. One of the reasons I was concerned about you was that I knew Georgia and Pippa were going to make a complaint about you. I wondered if they had got the wrong end of the stick. Your work here means so much to you.’

Vincent was wide eyed now, his voice hoarse with emotion when he spoke. ‘And you thought I killed Georgia to stop her complaining about me?’ His expression was grave now. ‘You thought I would take a life, commit one of the deadliest sins, to save my own skin? I’m sick to my stomach that you could even consider this.’ He shook his head in despair. ‘I honestly don’t know what to say.’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Jessica. ‘But I still believe someone went down to see Georgia at the chapel, and I am more and more convinced someone who was on that walk killed her. I had to consider you in the same way as I looked at all the others.’

She gazed over into the garden and then back at Vincent. ‘Georgia said she found the secret to the root of all your problems in this garden. I thought it was the cannabis, but I was wrong about that. However, the answer is in there, isn’t it? In that poem under the tree?’

Vincent blushed. ‘You’ve worked that out.’

‘I have. You know, Vincent, there is nothing wrong in being happy. When you find love, you need to grab it with both hands. You were not put on this earth to be miserable.’

‘You’re right, I have been struggling, but maybe it’s time to stop.’

‘I do hope so. Maybe you should use your free time to go and talk to someone. She deserves it after all this time.’

With that, Jessica left.

As she walked down the road to the house she felt a spot of rain. Above her, grey-white clouds were gathering. She had only just stepped inside when the rain started to pour down.

‘You just made it,’ said Beth. ‘It might be a quiet day today.’

Jessica smiled. ‘That’s fine with me. I’ve missed my puzzles, and my reading.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry.’

‘No, I didn’t mean it like that, but I am very happy curled up on a wet Sunday.’

‘And we have roast chicken and all the trimmings.’

Jessica took her books into the conservatory. Martha came and cuddled up next to her. She spent the morning reading, then they had a wonderful lunch and a quiet afternoon.

In the evening, they watched TV. Jack put on the next *Inspector Morse* and they watched it together.

Jessica suddenly became distracted as she saw a scene with students on bikes. Of course: that was possible, a vital piece she’d been missing.

She began to sort out pieces for the centre of the puzzle; she was sure she was right. Jessica ran upstairs and opened her laptop. She looked up some famous gardens, then checked some facts about DNA.

Then she remembered a friend, a fellow librarian who could be useful, and she sent her a quick email.

She closed her eyes for a moment; there were still loose ends. What was it? Yes, she'd said to Beth about missing something after seeing someone. She squeezed her eyes shut, forced herself to go over the visit, and then, she saw it. Of course that was all wrong.

Jessica checked her emails; she was lucky this friend had taken her head out of a book and replied. She began to read the email, but she became increasingly worried.

Beth called out that she was off to settle the animals for the night.

'I'm coming with you,' replied Jessica.

Beth looked surprised at her enthusiasm.

As they made their way through the village, Beth implored Jessica to slow down.

'I can't. Don't you see? Someone's life is in danger. Beth, we have to hurry.'

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Beth and Jessica were approaching the duck pond.

Jessica grabbed Beth's arm. 'Ray told everyone at the restaurant that he was leaving Pippa on her own. We have to go there, right now. I just hope we're not too late.'

They rang the doorbell. No reply. Without speaking, Jessica ran down the side of the house. Looking down the garden, she saw a light on in the reading room, but there wasn't just one person in there.

'Quick!' she shouted to Beth as they ran across the grass. Jessica pulled open the door and rushed inside.

Jessica grabbed a glass from Pippa's hand. 'Don't touch that,' she screamed.

'What's happening?' asked Beth.

Jessica looked directly at Tanya. 'I know exactly what you have done.'

'And what would that be?'

'You killed Georgia.'

'That is a ridiculous accusation,' said Tanya. 'You need to be careful; you'll be sued for libel at this rate.'

'I don't think so. I have finally worked out your motive for committing this crime.'

‘That’s rubbish. Don’t tell me you think I did it because Georgia knew about the lobelia seeds? You saw how easily that was sorted. Rhiannon is easy to convince, I was never that worried about her. It was inconvenient the truth about that coming out but I certainly wasn’t going to go to all the effort of killing Georgia to shut her up. No, the food poisoning has nothing to do with Georgia’s death.’

‘Not directly, I agree, but in other ways it was vital to solving this crime. You put on a good act. You said, “I didn’t mean any harm. I had no idea what would happen.” But that’s not true, you knew exactly how those lobelia seeds would affect Rhiannon because you had used them before.’

‘My God, you’re mad.’

Jessica took a deep breath. As she did, in her peripheral vision she saw Beth slip out of the reading room.

‘No, not mad. You see, as hard as everyone tried to hush it up, the story lives on. I emailed a friend who works in the library at Magdalen in Oxford.’

‘I went to St Anne’s.’

‘No. That’s not true. Your memory of your first day at uni, so vivid: the quad. But there’s no quad at St Anne’s. And the mug you bought online to back up your story, that means nothing.’

‘Why would I lie about which college I went to?’

‘Because you didn’t want anyone digging into your past there. But Georgia had started to work things out, hence the hint about Magdalen which you picked up. My friend was able to tell me what the university had tried so hard to cover up.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘You told a story one way when quite the opposite was true. The boy at uni: you didn’t break up with him. He broke up with you and because of him you were forced to leave.’

‘Why ever would that have happened?’

‘Because you were obsessed with him. You couldn’t bear him to leave you. When you split up, things began to happen to him: coursework disappeared, he found his room trashed. He suspected it was you, but it wasn’t until he was terribly ill after a meal he had at the college bar, where you had a part-time job, that he knew something had to be done. He spoke to his parents. He didn’t want it to become a huge matter, so they were able to talk to the right people to hush it up but make sure you left voluntarily and nothing more was done.’

‘Hang on, you think I am obsessed with poisoning people?’

‘I think you become obsessed with holding onto someone. Firstly, it was that boy at university and here it has been Ray.’

‘You’re wrong there,’ said Tanya. ‘I broke off the relationship with Ray.’ She glanced at Pippa. ‘Sorry about that, but it was only a fling.’

‘Oh no, Ray ended the relationship. You were devastated, particularly as he wanted to move on to a different bright, attractive waitress, Rhiannon, who he’d offered a promotion over you. Rhiannon turned it down; she was leaving, but that wasn’t enough. You had to get your revenge. By poisoning her you attacked her and you didn’t care how much you hurt her.’

‘You think I didn’t know about your fling with my husband?’ said Pippa. ‘You were nothing to him; that was my only comfort.’

‘That’s not true,’ shouted Tanya. ‘He loved me and soon he will leave you. He is devoted to me.’

‘You want to believe that, don’t you?’ said Jessica. ‘But it’s not true. You are the one with the obsession. Your interest in bird watching gave you an excuse to have binoculars handy. Pippa was right, she was being watched.’

Tanya blushed and looked away.

Jessica continued, ‘Anyway, you were convinced that in time Ray would leave Pippa. But then he made that speech at the restaurant. He really laid it on thick, didn’t he, how much he loved Pippa. It must have been a

nightmare for you, standing listening to him convince the world of his undying love. In your heart you knew then he was never going to leave her, and so there was only one solution. Pippa had to die.'

'This is all speculation. In any case, what has any of this to do with Georgia?'

'Georgia was getting close to working everything out, and she dropped a number of hints on the Mother's Day walk. Her suspicions started when she found those lobelia seeds. Now a year ago, just before he died, Alistair had told her that he had concerns about you. I don't think he spelt out that he suspected you'd poisoned Rhiannon, he needed more proof, but maybe he dropped some hints that he wasn't sure how much he could trust you. Maybe he even started to look up exactly what had happened in Oxford. Anyway, luckily for you, he died.'

'I have no idea where you've got any of this from,' spat out Tanya but Jessica continued.

'Georgia had dismissed Alistair's concerns until she found the seeds. She knew you never grew plants from seed, but she knew about the reputation of lobelia seeds. Georgia remembered Alistair had started talking about not trusting you around the time of Rhiannon's poisoning, and then she started to dig deeper. From the hints she dropped on the walk it was clear she had built up a really good picture of what was going on. A person who tells one story when quite the opposite is true, the mention of going to visit Magdalen, Georgia was quickly working it all out. Her mistake was warning you that she was planning to go there. In that moment you decided she had to die.'

'Why would I take the risk of killing someone over some nonsense in my past?'

'Because as you pleaded with Rhiannon, this really would end your career, and just as importantly, you were sure it would mean you lost Ray.'

Tanya spoke quietly, as if to herself. ‘He’s so blissfully unaware. He had no idea. He loves me so much but I’m not sure if he’d have forgiven me that.’

Jessica continued, ‘No, he wouldn’t have. If Georgia had revealed the full truth about your past, you would have lost Ray, your career, everything, and that is motive for murder.’

‘You may have scrambled together a motive,’ said Tanya, her lip curling in a sneer. ‘But I have a solid alibi, I can prove I was in Swanage all evening, you have nothing on me. God, you are pathetic.’

‘You like all the others had the opportunity to go to the workshop and make up the tincture, but it is that vital time later in the evening that you claim to have an alibi for.’

‘I do, and there is nothing you can do about it.’

‘Ah but I think I can.’

Tanya rolled her eyes. ‘I’m dying to hear this.’

‘Around half eight, when Beth was talking to Pippa, you drove to Swanage—’

‘And parked until eleven!’ said Tanya triumphantly.

‘You did, but you have a large car. There was plenty of space to stash a bike in the back. You had access to that one in the old shed or even Georgia’s, so you cycled to the chapel with the pansies from your garden and vodka from work and two shot glasses.

‘Georgia was suspicious of you, but you let her open a brand-new bottle of vodka, handed her an empty shot glass. You shared a few drinks, she started to unwind and you added the fatal drops of tincture. It acted quickly. You stayed, stood there, and watched Georgia die in agony, before leaving, cycling back to Swanage and driving home.’

‘You can’t prove any of this.’

‘Well there are the pansies. It’s significant, isn’t it, that flowers play such an important part in tracking down Georgia’s killer.’

‘These bloody flowers. Look they might show someone had been down there, but they don’t prove it was me. Anyone could have taken a bunch of pansies. Pippa had them in her garden, Ellie by her pottery, and in Vincent’s garden, they are even in the graveyard, anyone could have picked them.’

‘That is true. However, you are forgetting something Georgia told us about. Each flower has its own DNA. I have some of the pansies that were put on the altar, and so do the police, they will be able to track those pansies down to this bunch, to this garden.’

Tanya scowled. ‘OK, but then anyone could have come into the garden and pinched them.’

Jessica nodded. ‘That is true, although it’s interesting. Now we move on to the soil they were growing in, some of which was on the stems. Again, forensic botany can trace that soil to your garden, and we still have that evidence intact.’

‘Again, someone came into my garden.’

Jessica nodded. ‘You’re right, it’s only one piece of the puzzle, but there are even more damning ones. There is the ribbon. I kept wondering what was wrong with the arrangement of silk flowers in your living room. And then I remembered the earth on that ribbon tying up the silk flowers in the grate. You’d been down to the chapel to retrieve the flowers, left a few very cleverly with the camellias. Now, the rest of the pansies you threw into the garden, but the ribbon? Cherry would be in to clean, she’d seen it in the bin. So you used the ribbon to tie up the silk flowers. The only problem is that there was earth on the ribbon and there should not have been on a ribbon used to tie up silk flowers. What is more, I am sure when the police test that ribbon, they will find fingerprints.’ She glanced at Tanya, saw the alarm, and smiled, ‘Yes, I wondered if you’d slipped up there.’

Tanya scowled. ‘Is that it? Is that all you have?’

‘The police will find the clues when I point them in the right direction. There will be those gloves in the pottery.’ She paused and saw the look of

panic on Tanya's face. 'You thought you had all the time in the world to get rid of them, didn't you? I saw a pair with stains on which I'm guessing is aconite. Did you know the police can get DNA from inside cotton gloves? How careful were you when handling the glass for the vodka? How careful were you in that workshop?'

Tanya lunged forward. 'You interfering bitch. You have no idea what true love is, any more than Georgia. All those bloody insinuations on the beach; she was playing with me, but I knew how to silence her. I put on a good act down in that chapel. Told her I'd been stupid, but I'd own up, get therapy, give up my career and Ray. She even seemed to believe me. We shared a drink, and then I slipped her the aconite.'

'You knew exactly what that would do, even before Georgia told us,' said Jessica. 'You worked in the gardens at Alnwick which we know have the very famous Poison Garden, small but full of deadly plants that can be seen on very select tours.'

'I used to lead the tours,' admitted Tanya, 'talk every day to people about these incredible plants and poisoners of the past. It was exciting, inspiring.'

Jessica felt sick at the thrill in Tanya's voice. 'But as you watched Georgia die that hideous, painful death, didn't you feel any sense of remorse?'

Tanya thought for a moment and shrugged. 'It wasn't pretty, but justice isn't always, is it, and this was right, I was carrying out an execution of someone who was determined to ruin my life.'

Tanya lunged forward again to grab Jessica, but lights were coming down the garden.

'That is the police,' said Jessica, with more conviction than she felt.

Tanya stood back and they heard voices. Jessica sighed with relief. Yes, Beth had gone to get the police.

They soon came dashing in and arrested Tanya.

Pippa, who had been sitting silently throughout the whole drama, quietly said, ‘I’m so glad you came to stay, Jessica. Thank you, I think you just saved my life. So many secrets. Have you unearthed them all, do you think?’

Jessica shook her head. ‘Oh no, there are always more in a village.’

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The next morning, Beth, Jessica, and Jack were in the garden. They had coffee and croissants and were enjoying a stunning spring morning.

‘I can’t believe what you have both been up to,’ said Jack.

Beth grinned. ‘Never underestimate the women in your life, particularly your mam.’

‘I can’t believe Tanya was capable of such a horrific murder.’

‘As Georgia said, desperate people do terrible things.’

Jack sat back. ‘I’m glad the police have taken her away. Do you really think you’ve provided enough evidence to charge her?’

‘Ruth thinks so. There is hard evidence now.’

‘I’m glad it wasn’t Ellie,’ said Beth. ‘I was getting really worried it could be.’

‘I think Vincent was the same. That’s why I saw fear in his eyes the day we told him about Georgia’s death. When I watched her as we opened the box with the will, it was obvious from her lack of interest she had read it before.’

‘But why pretend she hadn’t?’

‘Because, like I said, if she’d admitted reading it that Sunday, it gave her a motive for murder. It’s so easy to be cynical and not to believe someone when they are just telling you the truth. She and Georgia were

much closer than we realised, she really did accept that Georgia's intentions had been good. As for finding the will? Ellie remembered that childhood story of *The Secret Garden* far better than Georgia realised. And that is why Ellie was able to find that will.'

'And Vincent?'

'He is in love with Cherry and has been torturing himself about it. That's why he was crying in the church. But I'm hopeful that he will choose her over celibacy, even if they have to move parish.'

'I really hope you're right. That leaves Ray and Pippa. Actually, I can fill you in on them,' said Beth. 'I met Pippa when I saw to the animals this morning. She and Ray had a long talk on Saturday before the restaurant do. He'd not realised how desperately unhappy she was but, you know, despite everything, he does love her. He went away to speak to the main investor with the aim of sorting out the money. Part of the way he'll achieve that is for them to sell the house.'

'But Pippa swore she would never leave it.'

'That was because it was her refuge, the place she shared both her happy and her saddest times. But now she has Ray, and he has promised to look into IVF with her. They are going to move to somewhere smaller by the restaurant and start again.'

'I hope it works out for them,' said Jessica.

Jack smiled. 'I can't believe you, Mum. You were meant to come here for a rest, not to go around getting involved with solving a murder. Thank God that is over.' He lifted his mug. 'Here's to a quiet, murder-free future.'

Jessica put down her mug and smiled awkwardly.

'What's up, Mum?'

'Talking of the future, I have something to share with you but I think it is best to show you, rather than tell you.'

'How exciting,' said Beth. 'I do love a surprise.'

Jessica smiled. ‘I won’t inflict a long wait on you. In fact, if you’re ready, I can take you and we can have “the big reveal” now.’

As they left the house and walked down the street, Jessica was secretly enjoying the baffled looks on Jack’s and Beth’s faces. They turned down a side street and arrived at the bookshop. She rang the bell. Marcus answered.

‘Is it OK if I show them?’

‘Of course, come on in.’

They walked through the bookshop and up a flight of stairs to a front door. Jessica turned the handle. It was unlocked. They entered a light, tidy living room with a large window that overlooked the village and the sea in the distance.

‘What is going on, Mum?’ asked Jack.

‘This is to be my new home, well, for a while anyway. Marcus has agreed to let it to me, and it will give me time to see if this is the area I would like to make my permanent home.’ She smiled shyly, adding, ‘If that is OK with you, of course. It will give you the opportunity to see if having me at such close quarters is actually the dream you imagine.’

Beth gave her a hug. ‘I can’t think of anything better.’

Jack grinned. ‘Neither can I.’ He kissed her on her forehead.

Jessica looked up at him and said, ‘And I have given the matter of contacting your father some thought and, yes, I agree. It is time.’

Their eyes met, their bond as strong as ever. ‘Thank you, Mum.’ Jack looked around. ‘This is perfect. To live over a bookshop, what more could you want? But you two must promise me this, no more investigations and no more murder.’

‘I’m not sure we can do that,’ said Beth, grinning as she caught Jessica’s eye. ‘After all, you have to admit we make a formidable team. Who knows what will happen next?’

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We hope you enjoyed reading *A Mother's Day Murder*. If you did, **please leave a review**. If you'd like to gift a copy, this book is available to purchase in paperback, hardback, large print and audio.

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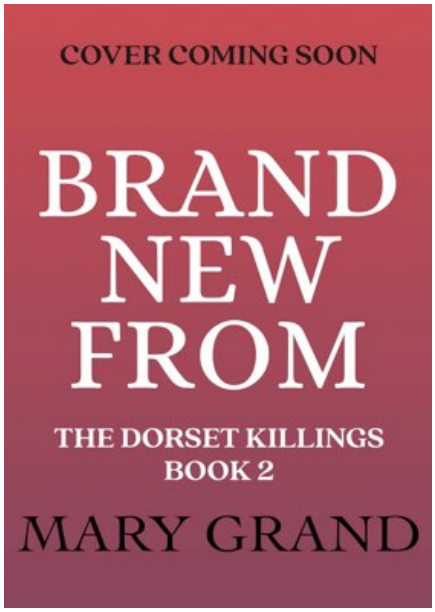

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I admit to feelings of trepidation when it was first suggested that I embark on a new series, setting it away from my home, the Isle of Wight. It didn't take long to decide where I wanted to set this new series. I had holidayed on the Isle of Purbeck in Dorset and always known it to be an incredibly special place. Added to this, I discovered that historically it was physically linked to the Isle of Wight and the two places have many characteristics in common. Although Purbeck is strictly a peninsula, it has that unique island feel. As you step onto Purbeck after travelling on the chain ferry from Poole, you know you are stepping into a place set apart from the 'mainland'. Purbeck is indeed a place of extraordinary beauty, with its Jurassic coast, secluded beaches, heathland, and amazing diversity of wildlife; it is a real privilege to be setting this new series there.

So, I'd like to begin by thanking the people in the village of Worth Matravers who were so kind and welcoming on my first 'research' stay in your beautiful village. I have taken a few liberties adding a bookshop and a small convenience store in the cafe, but I do hope you will recognise many of the very special features of your village.

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Mary Grand writes gripping cosy mystery novels, including the number one bestseller *A Christmas Murder*. She grew up in Wales, was for many years a teacher of deaf children and now lives on the Isle of Wight.

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