

Chapter One

'So what do you think that's all about?' Josie Clark murmured, almost to herself, as she put down the phone.

'All what?' her husband wondered from behind his latest copy of *Exchange and Mart*. It would be a flipping miracle if they could afford a new car, second-hand of course, but there was no harm in looking.

Josie's lively violet eyes flicked in Jeff's direction. Though she couldn't see his face, her own was partially reflected in the mirror hanging over their faux-brick fireplace, and what she could see were small, delicate features, with a pixyish chin and nose that seemed to belong more to a child than a woman of forty-two years. Her crowning glory, as her dad used to say, was the mop of honey-red curls that shone and tumbled about her head as though they had a life all their own.

'That barnet of yours is the envy of half the women I know,' her neighbour, Carly, regularly complained. Not that Carly's hair was bad, it just wasn't naturally blonde, and in truth it didn't have all that much verve in it either. However, on Friday nights when she went out with the girls, her artful handling of it ensured that no one would ever have guessed how many extensions, pieces, pins and lacquer sprays were holding it all up.

At five foot two Josie could never be described as tall, but then neither could Jeff at five-five. What he was though, or certainly in her opinion, was the best-looking bloke in Kesterly-on-Sea. Or on their street, anyway. Probably on the whole estate, because not a single one of the blokes she knew, young or old, looked a bit like Tom Cruise when they smiled, nor could they make her heart skip a beat the

way Jeff sometimes did. That was really saying something after twenty-two years of marriage, which didn't mean they hadn't had their ups and downs along the way, because heaven knew they had. In fact, there had been a time when she'd seriously feared they wouldn't make it, but she didn't allow herself to dwell on that too much now. No point when the other woman, Dawnie Hopkins, had moved up north after it had all come out about her and Jeff. That had happened five years ago this Christmas, and had totally spoiled the holiday, that was for sure. In fact, Christmas had never really been the same since, given all the painful memories that seemed to pour down the chimney instead of seasonal cheer.

Last Christmas had been the worst, though not thanks to Dawnie this time – in the circumstances Josie might have actually preferred it if her ex-best mate had staged an unexpected return. No, the source of their upset last year had been Ryan, their eighteen-year-old son, whose gift for getting into one scrape after another after another had surpassed itself so spectacularly that Jeff would no longer have the boy's name spoken in his hearing.

Oddly, the crisis of Ryan's trial and imprisonment had seemed to bring Josie and Jeff closer together for a while, probably because it had given them more to think about than how much damage the shenanigans with Dawnie had done to their marriage.

She still couldn't help wondering if Jeff ever regretted staying.

She didn't ask, it wouldn't do any good, not only because she was nervous of the answer, but because she herself had banned Dawnie's name from being spoken inside number 31 Greenacre Close. This was their home, a tidy little semi at the far end of a cul-de-sac, next to a lane that ran through to the playing fields behind, and they didn't need to sully its fresh, lemony scent with stinky reminders of a so-called friend's betrayal. (Josie would never admit this to another living soul, but she actually missed Dawnie more than she'd imagined she would, though she supposed it wasn't all that surprising given they'd been best mates practically since birth.)

Just went to show, you could never trust anyone, even those closest to you, which had been a very painful lesson for Josie to learn when she herself was so loyal she didn't even like to change a dental appointment.

The real light of her and Jeff's life was Lily, their twenty-one-year-old angel of a daughter, who was currently at uni doing a BA honours degree in history and politics! Imagine that! No one, from either of their families, had ever done so well, nor, come to that, had anyone else on their street. However, Lily was special; everyone said so, and had been saying it for most of her blessed little life. She sparkled and laughed and made everyone feel so good about themselves that love just came cascading back at her like a rainstorm of stars.

'She's her mother all over,' Dawnie always used to say, but Josie didn't think she'd ever been as lovely as Lily. True, she enjoyed a good laugh, and she wasn't backward in offering a kind word when one was needed, but she didn't have the same inner glow, or the innate belief in goodness that constantly shone out of her daughter.

Maybe she'd had some of it once, but definitely not any more.

Now she had scars on her hopes and shadows over her dreams, though to look at her, or talk to her, no one would ever know it. She simply went about her days in her usual cheery way, with a duster and polish in her hands on Mondays and Wednesdays, a teapot and frying pan on Thursdays and Fridays and, until recently, a telephone headset plastered to her ears while she engaged in a spot of telemarketing at the weekends. (Living where they did, on the notorious Temple Fields council estate, there wasn't much in the way of swearing, cursing and death threats she hadn't heard before, but not until she'd taken this last job had she ever been on the receiving end of it. Honest to God, the things some people said when you rang them up out of the blue . . . She'd never repeat their abuse, not even to Jeff, who, it had to be said, had some choice phrases himself for when his taxi broke down. And best not get him started on the kids who treated his back seat to a tactical chunder after a

skinful on a Friday night, because that really wasn't pretty, for anyone.)

The telemarketing had ended up proving a waste of her time, since she'd never made a red cent out of it, so these last couple of weekends she'd been enjoying a bit of time to herself. Just as well, given the commitment she had for every other Saturday, and nothing was ever to get in the way of that.

She had to wonder if it was why her reflection was showing a woman who was worried, stressed, even drawn. Strange, since she wasn't aware of feeling anything in particular at the moment, apart from mildly intrigued to know what was behind the call she'd just taken.

So, should she run upstairs now to make herself a little more presentable ready for the visit? A quick rub of foundation, brightened by a couple of dabs of blusher and several waves of the magic mascara wand? She didn't usually wear make-up on her cleaning days, and since today was Wednesday she hadn't bothered when she'd got up this morning. Jeff always said, in his usual gruff way, that she didn't need it, she was lovely au naturel. He didn't often lace his compliments with fancy French phrases, mainly because that was the only one he knew, but on the rare occasions he remembered it, it pleased her no end, especially in the light of all they'd been through.

'Have you got any bookings today?' she asked, going through to the kitchen to put the washing machine on for a second spin. One was never enough these days, a warning that the old tub was probably about to break down. Joy! Another expense they couldn't afford.

'Mm?' Jeff grunted.

'That was Lily on the phone,' Josie called out. 'She and Jasper are on their way over.'

Sounding surprised, he said, 'In the middle of the week? To what do we owe the pleasure?'

'She wouldn't say, but she wants to talk to us both, so if you've got any fares . . .'

'Nothing so far,' he admitted despondently. 'I'll go over to the cab office later and check out what's what. Are you putting the kettle on?'

'If you like.' After doing the honours, she went to stand in the doorway between the kitchen and living room, taking a moment to enjoy their new wallpaper with its smart grey stripes and floral border. They'd got it for a third off at the B&Q end-of-season sale, and it didn't really matter that there hadn't been quite enough, because no one ever looked behind the sofa so who cared if there was a bare patch there? What was important to Josie was the fact that it really was quite similar to the paper in the extremely elegant drawing room at John Crover-Keene's. This was one of the big houses on the other side of the hill that faced down over Temple Bay, where she cleaned on Mondays and did the laundry on Wednesdays. She used to do for a couple of his neighbours until they'd asked her to stop coming after the unfortunate business with Ryan last year. Mr Crover-Keene wasn't like them. He was sweet and considerate and understood completely that she wasn't to blame (actually she probably was, in a way, but it was really good of him to take such a kindly view). Sadly, he was hardly ever at home, since the Close, as his house was called, was really only a weekend place for him, so it was usually empty when she went flitting about with feather dusters and vacs.

Imagine having all those bedrooms – six in total all with their own bathrooms – a separate laundry room, a kitchen as big as the downstairs of her whole house, acres of landscaped garden with a tennis court, pool and fabulous view of the bay, and the place wasn't lived in all the time. What it must be like to be that rich and single. She didn't really envy him though, because he always seemed quite lonely to her in spite of all the friends who came for weekends. She often thought of this when money was tight for her and Jeff, which was most of the time these days; at least they had their health, and their kids, and each other.

Well, they certainly had Lily anyway, who'd rung a few minutes ago to say she was on her way home to have a chat with them. And Jasper was coming too. Josie liked that name, it made him sound as though he came from a classy family, which actually he did. Jeff thought it was a bit pansyish, though he was fond enough of the boy.

Jasper and Lily had been going out together since their first year at UWE – University of the West of England – and as far as Josie knew Jasper’s Kent-based family were as smitten with Lily as their youngest son clearly was. She just hoped Lily didn’t end up going over to the south-east to live once she graduated, though of course she’d never say that to her. After all, she couldn’t be tying her to the West Country for ever, though if they were able to find some work in Bristol or Exeter, the nearest big cities, that would be lovely. Neither was too far away, about an hour on the train, a bit longer in the car, and they were really happening places, as Lily kept telling her.

Actually, Josie had been spending a little more time in Bristol these last few months. After going to see Ryan at the prison she and Lily shopped and chatted, drank wine in harbour-front cafés and took in all the culture Lily could cram in before Josie had to catch a train home. It was just how Josie imagined her life might have been had she been able to go to uni, though back then she’d never even considered it an option. Certainly it wasn’t something her parents had encouraged. Actually, her dad might have if he’d lived long enough to see her scoop up five As and four Bs in her GCSEs, but he’d had a heart attack one Saturday afternoon at the football when she was fourteen, and hadn’t even made it to emergency. By then her parents had been divorced for almost ten years, so her mother, Eileen, hadn’t felt the loss anywhere near as deeply as Josie had. In fact, she’d uttered something horrible like ‘good bloody riddance’ when she’d heard the news, and hadn’t even bothered coming to the funeral. Jeff had been there, of course, and loads of her dad’s mates from around the estate, who’d all expressed how sorry they were that old Bill had gone and popped off at such a young age.

It was quite typical of her mother to make herself scarce at such a harrowing time, since she’d always been more about Eileen than she had about anyone else. Her dad hadn’t been like that. When he wasn’t drunk, which admittedly wasn’t often, he always showed an interest in her education, and every time she earned herself some good grades he’d taken her for a pizza to celebrate.

'Bet you'll be a high-powered lawyer, or even Prime Minister, one of these days,' he used to tease her.

'Well done, it's what school's for, to keep you out of trouble,' was about the most Eileen could manage as she got ready for a hot night out, or to work a double shift at Tesco.

Since there was often a lot of trouble on the north side of the Temple Fields estate, it was a constant worry for those on the south side that the druggies, thugs and hoodies who kept Kesterly police in business would surge over the border formed by the busy high street on some sort of teenage recruitment drive. It rarely happened that way, mainly because the south-side youths all too often took themselves north in search of adventure.

Josie herself never went much further into the estate than the high street, and if Jeff was ever called to an address in the Zone, as they sometimes called it, he made sure he kept all his doors and windows locked until he was safely out again. In his opinion taxi drivers should be allowed to carry guns into those streets, which Josie calmly agreed with since it could never happen. Her mother, was forever telling Jeff he should arm himself with a baseball bat at the very least, since he never knew what sort of lowlife he might be picking up, whether on the estate, or anywhere else come to that.

Eileen for mayor!

Deciding the impromptu visit from Lily and Jasper called for a change out of her cleaning clothes at least, Josie was heading for the stairs when Jeff's mobile started to ring.

'If that's a call-out,' she said, 'can you try to be back within the hour? Lily should be here by then.'

Signalling that he'd heard, he clicked on the line and sang out a cheery 'Hello, Jeff's Taxis, any time, anywhere.'

Wondering why that still made her smile when she'd heard it a thousand times, Josie continued up to their bedroom, trying not to notice that the stairwell and landing could do with a lick of paint, or that the hem was hanging loose on one of the curtains. She'd been asking Jeff for weeks to get it down so she could sort it, but he still hadn't got round to it, and even if she were able to brave the

ladder, which she wasn't due to the awkward position of the window, she still wouldn't be able to reach the rail.

That was Jeff Clark for you, heart of gold, do anything for anyone, any time, anywhere, but he never seemed to get round to things at home. Unless it was for Lily, of course. He'd climb mountains, swim rivers and play the clown for his precious girl – indeed he'd done all three over the years in a bid to help her raise money for various causes, and Josie was sure Lily hadn't finished with him yet. It could well be the reason she and Jasper were on their way here, to try and talk Jeff into joining a sponsored cycle ride to Land's End, or cross-dressing for a jog along the Somerset-Devon coast road. There was no end to the schemes Lily and Jasper got involved in, or to the charities they seemed to support, and Josie only wished she and Jeff could afford to back them with a bit more than a fiver or a tenner a time.

'Pickup from a works Christmas do tomorrow,' Jeff informed her as he came into their bedroom, the *Kesterly Gazette* in one hand, a pen in the other. Josie knew he was on the lookout for a new car to replace their Opel Estate, which was spending more time in the garage lately than it was on the road. She wouldn't ask how they were going to afford it, since she knew already it'd have to be on the never-never, and he'd be no happier than she was about getting any further into debt.

Still, when needs must, and thank goodness he'd found a way of earning a living after the builders' merchants where he'd worked for the past fifteen years driving a forklift truck had closed. Jobs were in short supply around these parts, and he'd hated being on the dole – it had really brought him down having to live off the state. He was a man with a lot of pride, and the fact that he'd always paid his taxes and was entitled to some help when times were hard hadn't made him feel any better. His redundancy would have come in handy, if it hadn't all gone along with their savings – and their son.

'Are you going back to Crover-Keene's later?' Jeff asked, plonking himself down on the bed and stretching out his legs. Since the room wouldn't fit a king-size it was only a

double, but with neither of them being exactly big they managed just fine. Josie wouldn't have minded a bit more wardrobe space though, or a second dressing table so Jeff could have one to himself, but there was barely enough room to edge round the bed as it was, so definitely no chance of fitting anything else in.

'No, I've finished for today,' she replied, kicking off her baggy old trackies and fishing out a pair of George jeans. Eight pounds ninety-nine at Asda, a real bargain and they didn't make her bum look big. Not that it was, particularly, but she was definitely wider in that department than she'd like, and it seemed no amount of exercise or dieting would shift it.

Liposuction.

Dream on.

'Does your boss know you're skimping on your hours?' Jeff teased, putting his hands behind his head as he watched her change.

'Actually, he told me to,' she replied, zipping up the jeans and tugging off the thick woolly jumper she'd had for a birthday, or was it Christmas, about ten years ago. It still did perfectly well for when she was cleaning, or working a shift at the Seafront Caff, especially at this time of year. 'He's hosting a drinks party on Saturday night, he said, so he'd rather I went in before to make sure everything's ready for his guests. *And,*' she continued meaningfully, 'he's asked me to help serve and clean up after, so that should give me an extra couple of hours.'

'That's good, and you know where to call if anyone's looking for a taxi. Except I don't expect that posh lot would want to get into anything less than a Merc.'

'Your Opel is a shining example of its breed,' she assured him. 'No one could keep it cleaner, or take more pride in its luggage space.'

Jeff's expression was wry as he said, 'Or want to kick its ass harder when the bloody thing breaks down. Anyway, what's all this about with Lily, do you reckon?'

'She just said they were on their way and they'd tell us everything when they got here.'

He frowned. 'Everything?'

'That's what she said.'

'I hope they're not about to announce he's got her up the duff,' he commented, as Josie headed off for the bathroom for a quick lick and promise. 'He'll have me to answer to if he has.'

'He'd be so scared if he could hear you,' she mocked.

'So he should be, because they're way too young to be tying themselves down with kids. If you ask me they shouldn't even be living together, but no one ever bothers asking me.'

Josie laughed. 'I don't recall you objecting when we went up there to help them move,' she reminded him.

'I'm sure I said something, but as usual no one was listening. They haven't even graduated yet,' he rambled on, as she came back into the bedroom, 'and how are they ever going to get themselves top jobs if they've got a baby at home?'

'If their jobs are that good they could probably afford a nanny,' Josie pointed out. 'Anyway, I can't imagine it's going to be about that. Lily's as keen to travel and see the world before settling down as he is, and she's on the pill.'

He scowled. 'Do I need to have the reason for that in my head?' he demanded.

Knowing he was roasting her, she tossed a towel at him and pulled on a pale blue turtleneck that she quickly decided was too tight, and abandoned in favour of a black velveteen tracksuit top. 'My guess is,' she said, bundling the laundry into the basket, 'they're either wanting to involve us in some new charity stunt, or they've come up with some sort of plan for Christmas. Maybe Jasper's family are going to invite us over there for the day, so we can all be together.'

Jeff's eyes widened. 'Do you reckon?' he responded, sounding dubious and impressed. 'I'd be up for it if they did, wouldn't you?'

No, actually, she didn't think she would, she liked doing Christmas here in their home, but what she said was, 'Let's wait to find out before we start getting our hopes up, shall we?'

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'Mum! Dad!' Lily cried, bounding down the garden path as radiant as a sunbeam in her white fur jacket and red woollen hat. 'You're both here, great! Especially you, Dad.'

Smiling wryly as Lily embraced her father so hard it might have been a year rather than a week since they'd last clapped eyes on each other, Josie turned to Jasper and pulled him into a hug. 'How are you?' she asked warmly. She had no problem understanding what Lily saw in this lad, since he was, as Carly next door would put it, the complete package. Tall, dark, with the looks of a rock star, and from a dead posh family, he had the kind of drive and personality Josie could only dream of for Ryan.

'Come in, come in,' Jeff was insisting. 'We don't want to be letting the heat out. What's all this?' he asked, as Lily thrust a Sainsbury's bag into his hand.

'You'll find out,' she informed him, going to hug her mother. 'Are you OK?' she asked, frowning. 'You look a bit tired.'

'I knew I should have put some make-up on,' Josie sighed. 'Go on through. Fire's on, make yourselves cosy. Can I take your coat, Jasper?'

Shrugging off his Barbour, he handed it to her and went to stand over the three brightly burning gas bars, rubbing his hands to warm them. 'You know, I so love this room,' he announced, as though he didn't say it every time he came. 'It feels just like home.'

Considering how different it must be to his parents' place, Josie was, as ever, touched by the compliment. 'Well, you're always very welcome,' she assured him.

'As long as you're treating my girl right,' Jeff added as a warning.

Rolling her eyes as Lily poked her father, Josie took the coats back into the hall and hung them over hers and Jeff's. No overnight bags had come in, so they presumably weren't staying, unless they hadn't completely unloaded Jasper's Audi Roadster yet. Not the kind of car that found its way into this little cul-de-sac very often, and Josie knew that part of Jeff was proud as Punch for it to be outside their garden gate. The other part never stopped worrying that the wheels might be missing by the time Jasper went out again.

‘Shall I make some tea?’ she offered, going back into the room to find Jeff in his usual chair and Lily perched on the arm.

‘I’ll help,’ Lily cried, springing up. ‘You stay here, Jaz, and have a nice little chat with Dad.’

‘Bossy or what?’ Jeff commented as Lily hooked her mother’s arm and walked her into the kitchen.

Eyeing her daughter as she closed the door and put an ear against it, Josie said, ‘What are you up to?’

‘Ssh,’ Lily responded softly, putting a finger to her lips. ‘I want to hear this.’

‘Hear what?’

Beckoning her over, Lily cracked the door an inch and made room for her mother to join in the eavesdrop.

‘What are they saying?’ Josie asked, moving Lily’s strawberry-blond curls out of her face.

‘Nothing yet,’ Lily whispered. She turned to her mother, eyes so bright she might just burst into some sort of rapture. ‘He’s about to ask Dad . . .’

‘What the bloody hell?’ Jeff suddenly blurted.

Alarmed, Lily spun back to the door and peeked through. ‘Blimey,’ she muttered, and sailing back into the room, she exclaimed, ‘You’re not supposed to go down on one knee to *him*, Jasper!’

Jasper’s cheeks were crimson. His eyes went to Josie who was trying not to laugh, then back to Jeff who was having a job containing himself too. With a sheepish grin, he said, ‘Seems I’ve screwed it, and now I feel a total prat.’

Trying to be helpful, Josie suggested, ‘Shall we go out and come in again?’

Clambering to his feet, Jasper glanced at Lily as he replied, ‘I know you were listening anyway, so you might as well stay.’

Clearly thrilled, Lily went to perch on the chair opposite her father’s and reached for Jasper’s hand as he came to stand next to her. At six foot one he was the tallest person they’d had in the room for a while, and hoping he wasn’t able to see over the back of the sofa to the bare patch, Josie positioned herself strategically, watching as he fixed solemn dark eyes on Jeff.

'Mr Clark,' he began earnestly, 'I'm sure you've guessed what this is about already, but just so's we're clear, I've come here today to ask your permission for Lily's hand in marriage.'

Though it had been obvious where this was going, Josie couldn't stop a gasp of elation, and as Jeff cleared his throat, attempting to sound grave, she could tell he was brimming with pride.

'Well, first of all I thought we'd done away with the Mr and Mrs business back in the summer. We're Josie and Jeff to you, son . . .'

'Or Mum and Dad?' Lily piped up mischievously.

Jeff narrowed her a look. 'Josie and Jeff will do for now,' he informed her. 'I haven't given my permission yet . . .'

'But we know you're going to.'

'Oh do we?' he retorted archly. 'You shouldn't take so much for granted, young lady. I need to find out what this lad's prospects are, if he can keep you in the style to which you've become accustomed . . .'

'Dad! This is Jasper you're talking to.'

'I'm aware of that, but he needs to know that you have certain standards . . .'

'Mum!' Lily cried. 'You have to stop him.'

'I only wish I knew how,' Josie replied, stifling a laugh – and everything else she was feeling that she'd never dream of revealing in this joyous moment.

'I think I know what you mean, Jeff,' Jasper interrupted hastily. 'Lily's always been loved and fantastically well taken care of and treated to nothing but the best, so I want to assure you that I'm ready to pick up the mantle.'

Jeff flicked a glance at the fireplace. 'Is that necessary?' he asked.

Groaning at the joke, Josie said, 'Take no notice of him, Jasper. Of course you have our permission . . .'

'What?' Jeff protested. 'It was me he asked, not you, and what I want to know, my lad, is this: Have you got her up the duff, because if you haven't I don't understand what all the rush is. Mind you, if you have, I shall be showing you the door.'

'What is he like?' Lily complained, dropping her head

in her hands. 'No Dad, I'm not pregnant, and there isn't any rush. It's just that we know we want to spend the rest of our lives together . . .'

'You're twenty-one!' Jeff expostulated. 'How can you possibly know anything? You haven't even been out into the big wide world yet . . .'

'Excuse me, who's at uni in this room?' Lily challenged. 'And exactly how old were you and Mum when you got married?'

'That's not the point . . .'

'It's absolutely the point. You knew your minds when you were our age, so why should it be any different for us?'

'What I'm telling you is that we thought we knew a lot of things back then that time has proved us wrong about. Isn't that right?' he challenged Josie.

Though it was on the tip of her tongue to ask if Dawnie Hopkins might feature in his thinking somewhere, Josie said, 'I think we've always been certain of how we feel about each other, haven't we?'

The flush that crept up from his collar showed that he'd got her meaning. 'OK, we've never been in any doubt about that,' he conceded, 'but maybe we wouldn't have had children so young if we'd known what hard work you can be.'

Lily broke into one of her more dazzling smiles. 'You know very well that your life wasn't complete until I came along,' she informed him playfully.

'And my pockets weren't empty either, nor was my hair grey or the bags under my eyes big enough to bring the groceries home in.'

'You still wouldn't be without me.'

Jeff regarded Jasper helplessly. 'Are you sure about this?' he asked, as though he really couldn't believe he'd be so insane.

Grinning all over his face, Jasper nodded. 'I'm sure,' he replied, tightening his hold on Lily's hand. 'More than sure, if that's possible.'

Jeff sighed. 'Then I wish you good luck, son, because you're getting yourself a handful there, take it from me.' His tone softened as he added, 'You've also got a star prize and I should know, because I got one of my own when I was

your age, and Lily's nothing if not her mother's daughter.'

'Oh Dad,' Lily gushed, throwing her arms around him. 'That's such a lovely thing to say, about me, and about Mum.'

Relieved no one was paying her too much attention, Josie joined in the hugs and tried to make herself think only of what she needed to say next.

Thank goodness for tea.

'No, no,' Lily objected. 'We've brought champagne. That's what's in the bag.'

Jeff's eyes widened.

'Well, it's a special occasion,' Lily pointed out. 'So I thought we should toast it properly.'

Shaking his head, as if such extravagance was beyond his comprehension, Jeff looked to Josie for some sort of guidance.

'I'll get the glasses,' she declared, and finding herself keen for a sip of something she didn't have very often, she headed for the dresser where they kept the flutes they'd won at bingo on holiday in Dawlish when Lily was ten and Ryan was seven.

'So, here's to you two and a happy future together,' Jeff declared when the glasses were full. 'I still don't know why you have to do it . . .'

'Dad!'

'Jeff!'

'All right, all right, I was just saying, that's all.'

Taking over, Josie said, 'Congratulations to you both. I think you're very lucky to have found each other, and we're lucky too, because we'll get to have Jasper as a son-in-law.'

Apparently thrilled with the toast, Jasper and Lily clinked her glass, did the same to Jeff's and drank.

'So when's the big day?' Jeff wanted to know. 'Not too soon, I hope.'

'Actually,' Lily replied, glancing at her beloved, 'we were thinking of next summer.'

Jeff's eyes went straight to Josie's. 'And they're not rushing?' he queried ironically.

Concerned, Josie said, 'This is your final year. Wouldn't you rather wait until you've graduated and perhaps

decided what you want to do after . . . ?'

'Whatever we do,' Lily interrupted, 'we know we want to do it together, so what difference does it make when we tie the knot?'

A lot, if your father and I have to pay for it, Josie managed not to say, while knowing it was exactly what Jeff was thinking.

'We thought we could have the ceremony at St Mark's where you and Dad got married,' Lily ran on eagerly, 'and the reception at Kesterly Golf Club in that huge room overlooking the sea. Jaz is going to ask his brother to be best man, and Dad you'll give me away, but you're not allowed to cry or it'll make me cry too and I don't want to turn up at the church with mascara down my face. Oh Mum, just think how wonderful it's going to be, shopping for dresses, choosing the flowers and the menus. We're up to about eighty people so far, but I know you and Dad'll want to invite lots of your friends too, so you can decide how many we should be.'

Still taking care not to blurt out her biggest concern, Josie said, 'Well, it sounds as though you two really have been making plans. And what about your parents, Jasper? Have you broken the happy news to them yet?'

'No, we're planning to drive over there at the weekend,' he told her. 'We wanted to share it with you first, so I could ask for Lily's hand – and make a total prat of myself in doing so – and be sure you were cool with it all.'

Josie looked at Jeff. 'I think we're cool, don't you?' she prompted.

'Very cool,' he agreed, in a way that told her he was probably in need of a lie-down now the potential cost of it was starting to sink in. 'And your parents,' he went on, 'do you think they'll be . . .'

Please don't let him say willing to pay.

. . . happy to hear you're getting married?'

Jasper didn't look in any doubt of it as he turned his lovestruck eyes to his equally lovestruck sweetheart. 'They're going to be thrilled,' he assured them.

Looking slightly less than, Jeff asked, 'And what if they want you to get married over near them?'

Knowing this was a desperate hope that the Cunninghams might weigh in for at least part of the bill if it was happening on their doorstep, Josie said, 'We don't have to make any concrete decisions now. We can . . .'

'Oh, but we ought to go and see the vicar to find out what dates are available,' Lily jumped in quickly. 'You know how booked up they get at St Mark's with it being in such a pretty location, and at the golf club. We might find out they can't fit us in until the year after next anyway, but at least we'll be able to make plans once we have dates.'

Feeling Jeff grasping the straw with her, Josie said, 'This is true, you might indeed have to wait until the year after next, which wouldn't actually be such a bad thing. We'll have had plenty of time to track down the right dress by then, maybe even to have it specially made . . .'

'I'm going to do that anyway,' Lily chipped in. 'There's this brilliant designer who was featured in the *Bristol* magazine. You should see her stuff, Mum. Talk about Jenny Packham stand aside.'

'Who?' Jeff wanted to know.

'Let's hope she's not charging Jenny Packham prices,' Josie quipped.

'Oh, I don't think so,' Lily responded dismissively. 'Anyway, do you want to come and see the vicar with us?'

Josie blinked. 'Now?'

'Why not now? We're here, he's there, or presumably he is . . .'

'What about talking to Jasper's parents first?' Jeff put in. 'They might not take too kindly to being cut out of all the decisions.'

'Oh, they won't mind,' Jasper promised, in a way that reminded Josie of Ryan. What was it with kids that they assumed everything they did was OK with their parents?

'Do you think we should ring first, or just turn up?' Lily wondered, looking at her mother. 'What did you do when you booked your wedding?'

'Oh God, I can't remember that far back,' Josie protested.

'Maybe we should send an email,' Jasper suggested.

'Yeah, if we want to wait a week for a reply,' Lily countered.

'We can't all fit into that car,' Josie pointed out.

'Dad can take us in the taxi.'

Knowing what Lily was like once her mind was made up, Josie threw out her hands as she said, 'OK, let me run upstairs and put a face on first. I don't want the vicar thinking we're there to sort out my funeral.'

'Not funny,' Lily called after her as she ran up the stairs.

No, it wasn't funny actually, but Jeff had always been better with the jokes than she had.

She'd got no further than rubbing in a spot of foundation when Lily appeared in the doorway. When she didn't speak, Josie glanced at her reflection in the mirror. 'Everything OK?' she asked.

Lily frowned in a way that Josie wasn't expecting. 'What is it, Mum?' she asked. 'And before you say nothing, remember how well I know you.'

Though Josie's heart twisted, she couldn't help but smile. 'Would that be as well as I know you?'

Lily nodded. 'Something's not right,' she said bluntly, 'and I want to know what it is. It's Ryan, isn't it? You're wondering how we can invite him.'

'Ryan's definitely a concern,' Josie admitted. 'Surely you want him to be there?'

'Of course we do, and he will be if they let him out early.'

Josie regarded her with fond despair. 'You know that's not very likely,' she said.

'You have to look on the positive side,' Lily insisted. 'I'm definitely not giving up hope of him coming home sooner than we think. After all, anything can happen between now and then.'

Josie's gaze drifted. Yes, indeed anything could happen between now and then.

'There's something else, isn't there?' Lily said, coming to sit on the end of the bed so she could see her mother's reflection more clearly. 'I'm guessing you're worried about how much it's going to cost.'

Josie's eyebrows rose. She couldn't lie about that, any more than she could magic the funds out of thin air. In fact, part of her could feel quite angry with Lily for not considering how difficult it would be for her parents to

throw a lavish wedding at any time over the next couple of years, when she knew very well that all their savings, and Jeff's redundancy, had been used up on trying to help Ryan.

All the more reason for Lily to have everything she wanted; after all, it had never been their practice to give to one and not the other. So maybe her anger was more towards Ryan.

Lily was nodding knowledgeably. 'I told Jaz you'd see it as your responsibility,' she declared, 'but it's not, Mum, it's ours. We're the ones who want to do this, so we're the ones who should pay.'

Josie regarded her in astonishment. 'And where exactly are you going to get the money from?' she demanded, knowing very well that Lily was no better at existing on her meagre allowance than she and Jeff were on their equally meagre wages. 'The kind of wedding you're proposing could set you back fifteen grand or more.'

'I know, but Jaz came into some money on his twenty-first that will more than cover it. So, you see, it's all sorted. You don't have to worry about a thing, apart from what you're going to wear, and helping me organise it all.'

Avoiding her eyes, Josie smiled past the lump in her throat.

Turning her round so she could see into her mother's eyes, Lily said, 'Why do I still have the feeling that you're keeping something back?'

Because I am, Josie couldn't say. And I have to, because there's no way in the world I'm going to spoil this special day for you. Or any other day, come to that. 'You're imagining things,' Josie told her with a smile.

Maybe she was too. It could be that the sore swelling in her left breast that had been there for a while now wasn't the onset of something terrible. There was every chance it was just a boil that wouldn't break, or an inflamed cyst. She'd had cysts before, so there was no reason for this one to be any different, apart from the fact that it was all red and angry. She hadn't found anything online to tell her what it might be, but now she was perimenopausal, as they liked to call it, her hormones were no doubt up to all sorts of tricks that she didn't begin to

understand. So she wasn't worried, really. She probably wouldn't even be thinking about it if she hadn't read a piece in the paper this morning about how many women's lives could be saved if they'd only get tested as soon as something unusual showed up.

She wasn't going to ignore it any longer. She'd ring the surgery tomorrow to make an appointment, which she probably wouldn't get for a week or more, and by then the swelling would no doubt have gone down of its own accord. If it had, she'd cancel her session to make room for someone who really needed it.

'I'm not hiding anything,' she told Lily firmly. 'Now let me get ready, will you? We've got a vicar to see and a wedding to start arranging.'

Chapter Two

'This one! This one! Please Auntie Bel, can we have this one?'

Isabella Monkton looked down at her niece and nephew's upturned faces, and so much love surged into her smile that it broke into a laugh. 'But it's huge,' she protested. 'It'll take us a week to decorate it.'

'That's all right, we'll help,' seven-year-old Oscar promised, turning to his five-year-old sister for support.

'Yes, we will,' Nell agreed earnestly. Her adorable blue eyes were so like her mother's, Isabella's twin sister, that Bel sometimes felt Natalia was looking back at her from wherever she was now. Nell had her mother's silky blonde hair too, and her rosebud mouth. In fact she was a little replica of Natalia, or Isabella, depending which of the twins you were looking at. Whether Nell had also inherited something of her mother's character, only time would tell, Bel guessed, though she was certainly starting to show early signs of it. 'And if we have a really big tree,' Nell was explaining knowledgeably, 'Father Christmas will definitely be able to find us.'

'Mm,' Bel responded, as though assessing the merit of this. 'And I suppose there'll be more room for him to leave presents underneath it, as well?'

Oscar's face lit up as Nell jumped up and down in glee.

Turning to the young lad who'd been wandering up and down the rows of Christmas trees with them, helping to make the choice, Bel said, 'It seems we're going to have this one. Can you deliver?'

'Of course,' he replied, giving Oscar a wink. 'I'll bring it in my sleigh, shall I?'

Nell gasped excitedly. 'Have you got a sleigh?' she cried. 'Auntie Bel, he's got a sleigh!'

'Don't you need snow to drive a sleigh?' Oscar pointed out.

The lad looked perplexed. 'You're right,' he decided. 'So if we haven't had any by the time I'm ready to bring this, I'll put it on the lorry. How does that sound?'

'Good idea,' Oscar agreed. 'Can you bring it today? We don't live very far from here, do we Auntie Bel?'

Loving that they considered her home theirs, and why wouldn't they when they spent so much time there, she said, 'Just a couple of miles. We're on Bay View Road, at the Westleigh end. Do you know it?'

'I sure do,' he responded in his broad West Country burr. 'We've got a few more deliveries scheduled to go up that way today, so I'd say it should be with you by five, six at the latest. Will you be home by then?'

The children's anxious eyes came to Bel.

'We'll make sure we are,' she told them. 'Now, I guess we'd better pay for this eight-foot monster and choose some more ornaments, because I'm sure we don't have enough to fill it.'

'Yes, yes, yes,' Nell cried, already skipping back towards the garden centre's Christmas grotto.

'And you said we could have a hot chocolate,' Oscar reminded her, as they followed.

'And you were going to decide whether you want one here, or down on Kesterly seafront,' she reminded them.

'Here,' they echoed together.

After filling a small trolley with dozens of glittering stars, baubles, angels and lights, and handing over almost two hundred pounds at the checkout, Bel steered her little charges into the crowded cafeteria. Being the first weekend of December, it seemed half the families of Kesterly had decided to brave the chill wind to choose their trees. There was a time when they used to come here to visit Santa in his grotto, but since the scandal that had rocked this small coastal town a year or so ago, the custom had been dropped. Not that anyone believed every man in Kesterly was a potential paedophile, it was simply that sending small

children to sit on a strange man's lap no longer felt appropriate to the townsfolk, after the deputy head of a primary school had been arrested and imprisoned for the abuse of his own child.

Coming from the kind of background she did, Bel could only feel thankful that she didn't have to try and talk her niece and nephew out of describing their hearts' desires for Father Christmas. She invariably became fussed when having to explain about possible dangers, particularly of that variety, and her sister, their mother, had never found it any easier. Fortunately the children's father, Nick, was much better at dealing with the sort of questions that generally arose when they were warned that not everyone was good.

'What do bad men do?'

'Where do they live?'

'How do we know if they're bad?'

'What do they look like?'

'Why do they want to hurt us?'

Unanswerable questions, every one of them, as far as Bel was concerned, yet somehow Nick managed.

Spotting a couple leaving the café, Bel made a rapid dash for their table, but wasn't quite fast enough. A plump young woman with a pushchair and three children in muddy anoraks and wellies beat her to it, plonking herself down heavily to make sure Bel knew she'd lost.

'Sorry,' the young woman grimaced, not appearing sorry at all.

Bel smiled thinly and turned away.

'That was rude,' Oscar whispered, slipping a hand into Bel's.

'Maybe she was here before us,' Bel whispered back.

'Oi, you want to teach that kid of yours some manners,' the plump woman shouted after her.

Bel turned round, certain the woman couldn't have heard Oscar's remark, so what was her problem?

'Her,' the woman cried, pointing at Nell. 'Poked her bloody tongue out at me, she did. What kind of way's that for your kids to carry on?'

Bel looked down at Nell's guilty face and had to suppress

a smile as she took her hand and led her away. She probably ought to have made her apologise, but the woman had the table, didn't she? She couldn't have everything.

And why not? Bel could hear Natalia enquiring. *Some people do, so why can't we?* Back then it had seemed that they did.

'There's a table,' Oscar cried, and diving for it, he hit the chair so fast that he skidded straight across it and landed on the floor the other side.

Chuckling, an old man helped him up, while Nell screeched with laughter, and Bel, laughing too, settled her shopping under the table and gave him a hug.

'Our hero,' she declared, unbuttoning his coat. 'He found us a table and made us all feel jolly again. So, what's it to be? Two hot chocolates and two mince pies?'

'Three,' Nell piped up. 'You have to have one too.'

Bel started to protest.

'Please!' Nell implored. 'Please, please, please.'

Smoothing her silky blonde hair, Bel said, 'Even though I'm not hungry?'

'I'll eat it if you don't want it,' Oscar offered helpfully.

'He would,' Nell assured her.

'I have no doubt of it,' Bel laughed. 'OK, three mince pies coming up. Wait here, don't move, don't take your eyes off me, and don't poke your tongues out at anyone else.'

With sheepish giggles they watched her go to join the line at the counter, until 'Away in a Manger' began playing on the music system and much to the amusement of those closest to them they broke into song.

Smiling and shaking her head, Bel felt their happiness lighting her world in a way only they ever could. She absolutely adored them, and was fairly sure they felt the same about her. Certainly they always loved coming to stay, and when they were with her she made sure to clear her diary so she could spend every minute of every day with them. It was no less than they deserved, and considering how much she enjoyed their company it was certainly no hardship to put her own life on hold. Not that she had much of a life these days, but that was hardly the point.

By the time they'd downed their drinks and devoured the mince pies (she managed half of hers before passing the rest to Oscar) there was no time to stop and view the Christmas lights on the seafront, as promised. They simply drove underneath them, Oscar and Nell squealing and cheering in excitement and waving to children in other cars, before joining Bay View Road which wound up and around the southerly headland, past Kesterly Park and the Aquarium. Their route took them along the stretch known as Fisherman's Walk, where a dozen or more colourful cottages had seen a couple of centuries come and go, until they finally arrived at the more exclusive end of the road. Here properties were mainly gated at the front and enjoyed panoramic views of Westleigh Bay at the back.

Stillwater, Bel's black and white Victorian villa, was no exception. Though it wasn't quite as large as some of the mansions further along the street, it was still far too big for one person, but Bel had no plans to move out any time soon. In truth, she'd never had plans to move in, since she'd bought it as a renovation project, but by the time most of the work had been carried out it had become clear that she needed to stay in Kesterly for the foreseeable future. Her sister, who lived a few miles away in Senway village and who had found Stillwater for Bel in the first place, was sick. She needed help, and being as close as they were there was no way Bel would ever have let her down.

So with her newly renovated property not yet sold, she'd moved everything down from London in order to be closer to her sister and brother-in-law, and of course the children. Now, three years on, she was still in the house, and unless she wanted to make her life even more complicated than it already was, it was where she was going to stay.

Empty, but complicated, that was her world, which should have been a contradiction in terms, but in her case it wasn't.

'Where are we going to put the tree?' Nell cried, as they piled in through the glossy black front door. 'I know! It can go here, in the hall, because it's very, very tall and the ceiling is right up there so there'll be plenty of room.'

'But then you'll only be able to see it from the window

in the roof,' Oscar complained, gazing up at the magnificent glass dome that Bel had designed and installed to flood the ebony staircase and whitewashed landings with light.

'That's where Father Christmas lands,' Nell reminded him.

'Yes, but you have to see it through the window, don't you, Auntie Bel?' he objected, 'or people will think we haven't got one.'

'Well, not necessarily,' Bel responded, dropping her bags next to an ornate limestone fireplace where a real fire could burn to welcome guests as they arrived. 'We can always put some lights around the porch to show we're nice and Christmassy,' she suggested, 'and I was thinking perhaps the tree could go in the sitting room, next to the fireplace so Santa won't have a problem finding it when he comes down the chimney.'

'Yes, yes, yes,' they cheered.

'But is the ceiling high enough in there?' Oscar worried.

'If it isn't, we'll just chop a little bit off the top of the tree,' Bel replied. 'I expect we'll have to do that anyway, or the fairy'll be swaying around on the end of a stalk like a silly old drunk.'

Shouting with laughter, they charged across the hall and into the room that Bel loved best in the house. By knocking down several walls she'd created an open-plan kitchen-cum-sitting room that occupied the whole of the back of the property, and installed no less than six arch-topped French windows, each opening on to a spacious flagstone deck and vast flat lawn. At the far end of the lawn was a gate into a wild-flower meadow, and beyond that a ragged cluster of coastal rocks sloped gently down to a pebbled beach. Even on a gloomy winter's day the views from the house were spectacular, taking in a magnificent sweep of the estuary, along with Kesterly's southerly headland and the notorious Vagabond Cliffs.

The room's interior had a wonderfully friendly feel to it, with a grand marble fireplace dominating one end of the room, and a custom-built farmhouse-style kitchen seeming so settled into the other that it might always have been there. In between was a truly eclectic mix of tables,

sofas, deep-pile rugs and squishy pouffes that made a perfect rough-and-tumble space for the kids, while a niche close to the fireplace gave room for Bel's desk.

She'd only just got the fire lit, ably assisted by the log-carriers Oscar and Nell, when the bell rang from the front gate. Since they were only expecting the tree Oscar and Nell leapt up and dashed into the hall, and had already pushed the button to release the gates by the time Bel joined them at the front door, surprised by how still they were.

'It's the police,' Oscar stated in perplexity as a marked car drove in through the gates.

Bel's heart turned over. Something had happened to Nick, the children's father. It didn't occur to her to think of her own father.

'What do they want?' Nell whispered.

'I don't know,' Bel replied, watching the car pull up at the bottom of the front steps. *Please don't let it be Nick, please, please*, she begged inwardly. 'Go back in the warm,' she told the children. 'They've probably got the wrong house.'

They simply pressed in closer to her as a young male officer came round from the driver's side, while a woman in a padded coat, who appeared equally young and slightly harassed, climbed out of the passenger seat.

'Can I help you?' Bel asked, as they started up the steps.

'I'm Detective Constable Lisa Peters,' the young woman told her, displaying her ID. 'And this is PC Brad Lowman. We're looking for Natalia Lambert.'

Bel's shock felt physical. Surely she hadn't heard right. 'I . . . um,' she faltered, as the children closed in more tightly. 'Can I ask what this is about?' she managed.

'Are you Natalia Lambert?' the detective enquired.

'No, I'm her sister. Natalia . . .'

 Bel's arms went round the children. 'Natalia died fifteen months ago.'

The detective's eyebrows rose skywards, but before she could respond her mobile rang. Without excusing herself she clicked on and turned back to the car.

Bel glanced at the uniformed officer, who merely shrugged.

'I'm going to take the children inside,' she told him, and

without waiting for his agreement she led them back to the sitting room.

'Why are they looking for Mummy?' Oscar wanted to know, his tender young face pale with concern.

'I'm not sure yet,' Bel answered, 'but obviously there's been some sort of mistake.' *Or something had happened to Nick and Talia was still assumed to be his next of kin. Please God don't let it be that.*

'Is Mummy still alive?' Oscar asked fearfully.

'I want to see her,' Nell said, starting to cry.

'Sssh, ssh,' Bel soothed. 'We'll get this sorted out, don't worry. You just wait here . . . Tell you what, why don't you finish off your notes to Santa?'

Feeling terrible for abandoning them when they were understandably distressed and confused, she went back to the front door where Lisa Peters had now apparently finished her call.

'Is this about my brother-in-law?' Bel asked, terrified, but needing to know. 'Is he all right?'

Lisa Peters raised a hand, palm forward. 'I don't know anything about your brother-in-law,' she told her, 'but I do need to speak to your sister.'

Finding it hard to think straight through so much confusion and relief, Bel said, 'I've just told you, she died fifteen months ago – and the children inside are hers, so I'd appreciate it if you don't do any more to upset them.'

Lisa Peters had the grace to flush. 'I'm sorry,' she apologised. She glanced at her fellow officer. 'I guess that's that then,' she said, and to Bel's amazement she started back to the car.

'Just a minute,' Bel called after them. 'I need to know what this is about.'

Turning round, Lisa Peters said, 'You might have heard on the news that a girl was found dead in the early hours of yesterday morning.'

Certain the world was going slightly mad, Bel asked, 'What does that have to do with my sister?'

Peters held out a crumpled card. 'We found this in the victim's coat pocket.'

Taking it, Bel's mouth dried as she recognised Talia's

writing, her own name and Bel's address. 'Who is the girl?' she asked hoarsely.

'We haven't been able to identify her yet,' Lisa Peters told her. 'We were hoping your sister might be able to help.'

Bel could only look at her. 'Where . . . How did she die?' she finally managed.

'She was found under the viaduct out past Temple Fields,' Peters replied. 'We'll know more about the cause after the autopsy.'

Imagining the rat-infested, syringe-littered netherworld of Kesterly's down and outs, Bel said, 'Have you tried talking to anyone at the Wayfarer Centre?'

Peters seemed interested. 'One of my colleagues is there now,' she informed her. 'Do you have a connection with the place?'

'My sister used to help out on occasion. It could be that this girl was one of the homeless and Talia told her to be in touch if she needed to.'

'But you say your sister's been dead for fifteen months.'

'Do you know how long the girl had the card?' Bel countered.

Peters's face tightened, showing she didn't. 'Out of interest,' she said, 'how did your sister die?'

Thrown by the insinuation that it might in some way be linked to these enquiries, Bel said, 'She had cancer.'

'I see. I'm sorry. Well, thanks for your help, Mrs . . . ?'

'Miss,' Bel corrected. 'Monkton.'

'We'll be in touch if we need to speak to you again.'

Suddenly stupidly wanting to cry, Bel closed the door and stood against it, listening as the police car drove away. For a few wildly insane moments she'd actually found herself wondering if Talia was still alive, if the nightmare of her illness, the heartbreak of her death had been some cruel figment of her imagination.

Tensing as the bell at the gates sounded again, she pulled open the door, expecting to find the police had come back. It turned out to be the Christmas tree. A godsend, since it would help to distract the children from the shock of wondering if their mother was still alive.

Half an hour later, with no repeat visit from the police

and the deliverymen gone, the tree was proudly positioned next to the hearth, and Bel was pouring herself a large glass of wine.

'Once it's lit,' she told the children, who were gazing up at it in awe, 'it's going to be the loveliest tree in Kesterly.'

'No, in England,' Oscar cried.

'The whole wide world,' Nell insisted.

'The universe,' Oscar one-upped.

'Whatever, we're going to love it,' Bel assured them, 'and that's all that matters. So, who's ready to help me bring down the other ornaments?'

'They're already here, silly,' Nell reminded her. 'We did it this morning. Can I be the first one to hang something up?'

'You're always first,' Oscar argued.

'I'm not, am I, Auntie Bel? You are, because you're the oldest, but I think I should be this time, or it's not fair.'

'Tell you what, why don't we toss a coin?' Bel suggested. 'Winner hangs the first ornament; loser switches on the lights.'

Seeming happy with that they set about unpacking the old ornaments, while Bel, still inwardly shocked and shaken by the police visit, began removing labels and price tags from their day's purchases. She could think of a dozen questions she wanted to ask now, and only wished she'd had the wit to at the time, but it had all happened so quickly.

Maybe she should contact Lisa Peters tomorrow to find out more. Or maybe she should try getting hold of Nick in Peru. But what could he do, apart from share in her shock? And would he really want to be bothered with it while on honeymoon?

Whatever she decided, she wasn't going to let anything spoil this day for the children. They were so happy and excited, and ready now to start filling up on the shepherd's pie they'd helped her to prepare this morning. After that, they were going to cosy into one of the sofas to watch *The Polar Express*.

This evening had to be about them, at least until they went to bed. After that, well, perhaps by then she'd be

able to think more clearly about what, if anything, she should do.

'Bel! Can you hear me?'

'Yes, I can hear you,' Bel answered, struggling awake. 'What time is it, for heaven's sake?'

'Uh, it's just after midnight with me, so it must be . . . Eight in the morning with you?'

'Five,' she corrected, glancing at the clock. Wasn't it just like Nick to get the time difference wrong?

'Oh no, sorry. Go back to sleep. I'll call again . . .'

'It's OK, I'm awake now. How are you?'

'Yeah, we're great. Fascinating place. How about you? Are the kids behaving themselves?'

Picturing them snuggled up in their own rooms across the landing, Bel smiled as she said, 'Of course. We got a Christmas tree yesterday.'

'A tree! I bet they loved that. We'll have to get another as soon as I'm back.'

Of course, it mattered much more that they should have one at their own home than it did having one here. 'We can arrange for it to be delivered,' she offered, 'to make sure you don't miss out. Anyway, let me go and get them . . .'

'No, no. Leave them to sleep. I'll catch up with them later. Tell me about you. What's been happening over there?'

'Actually,' she said, more awake now the memory of the police visit had kicked in, 'you're not going to believe this. The police were here yesterday looking for Talia.'

'What!' he exclaimed. 'How can that be?'

After explaining about Talia's name and Bel's address being found on a dead girl, she said, 'They don't know who she is yet, but I'm sure she must be someone Talia met at the homeless shelter. It would explain why she had Talia's name but my address. Do you remember how Talia used to do that to prevent anyone turning up at your place in case the children were there?'

'Yeah, I guess that makes sense,' he concurred, 'but for the girl to still have Talia's details after all this time . . . It

could be as long as two years or more since Talia last saw her.'

'True, but if Talia was kind to her at a time when she was at her lowest, it's likely she'd hold on to the details like some sort of lifeline.'

'Indeed, though it still doesn't help explain who she is. How did she die?'

'I don't know, but she was found under the viaduct.'

'Mm, so probably drug-related, and now they're trying to trace her family?'

'I guess so. I'm going to get in touch with the police again later, see if there's any more news. Anyway, tell me about you. How's it going over there?'

He gave an ecstatic-sounding sigh. 'Where to begin?' he responded. 'Actually, I ought to put Kristina on, she's better with the words than I am and I know she'd love to talk to you.'

Wishing he wouldn't, but unable to stop him without causing offence, Bel waited for his new wife to come on the line.

'Bel!' Kristina cried, as though she was Bel's best friend. 'How are you? Have you seen any of the wedding photos yet?'

'Yes, they're lovely,' Bel assured her, because they were. 'Did you get the link? Have you seen them yourself?'

'Yes, we're so happy with them. Aren't they gorgeous of the kids? And there are some beautiful shots of you.'

Nick suddenly came back on the line. 'I promise you, I'll never . . .' he called out laughingly, but whatever he went on to say was lost as the connection failed.

Putting the phone back on the nightstand, Bel lay in the darkness listening to the rain beating the windows, while trying to imagine where Nick and Kristina were now. It wasn't easy to picture their surroundings, since the Sacred Valley of the Incas didn't feature amongst the many places in the world Bel had visited. Nick and Kristina, archaeologists both, had joined a dig for their honeymoon. This was how they'd met, on a project somewhere in Israel, where Nick had gone in an effort to escape his grief after Natalia's death.

Try as Bel might, she simply couldn't understand how Nick had found himself able to marry again so soon. It didn't make any sense to her, when he'd always been so crazy about Talia. How had he got over the loss so quickly, when so much of Talia was still all around them? He hadn't even emptied her wardrobes or cleared away the photographs by the time he'd brought Kristina home to meet Oscar and Nell.

Five months after that, he and Kristina had tied the knot, and now there they were, in the depths of Peru, probably not thinking about Talia at all, while Bel hardly ever stopped. How on earth was she going to accept Kristina into the family when everything about her presence felt wrong? It wasn't that she disliked the woman – under any other circumstances she was sure they'd get along well. Kristina had apparently been good friends with Talia when they'd spent time in Egypt together during their uni days, though Bel had no recollection of Talia ever mentioning anyone of that name back then.

It didn't mean anything; she and Talia had made plenty of friends and acquaintances over the years that the other knew nothing about. They hadn't gone to the same uni, or chosen the same subjects, nor had they shared a home after graduating and moving to London. By then Talia had been with Nick, so they had found a place together, while she, Bel, all fired up about winning an internship at Tate Modern, had splashed out on a studio close to the river at Limehouse.

Though she and Talia had inherited a small fortune from their beloved mother after her untimely death while they were still in their teens, their father had tried to pay for everything back then, because that was what their father did, try to throw money at his daughters. Or, put more accurately, at his guilt. Presumably he thought he was buying off his conscience, or perhaps buying their silence, and Bel supposed that in a way he'd acquired the latter. They never talked about him to anyone; as far as they were concerned, it was as if he was dead. The tragedy of it, at least to Bel and Talia, was that their mother had seemed to love him in spite of his violence. She'd even considered

him a doting father, or as doting as he could be given his own torturous past. Bel didn't know too much about that, nor did she want to. She only felt relieved that after their mother's death their father, a prolific and highly regarded artist, had taken himself off to some Pacific island where he could, presumably, indulge his passions more freely without ever having contact with his daughters again.

He hadn't even returned for Talia's funeral, and Bel was profoundly glad of that, since she knew he was the last person on earth Talia would have wanted there.

Her eyes closed as the pain of her sister's loss surged through her in a relentless wave of longing.

Was a day ever going to dawn when she didn't wish for Talia to be alive again, when she wouldn't imagine how happy she'd feel if she could go downstairs and find her preparing breakfast in her usual way?

'Morning Bel,' she'd say, her tousled blonde hair flattened in a whorl at the crown of her head, her blue eyes sparkling with both mischief and empathy. 'Are you OK? Did you sleep well?'

'I think so,' Bel would answer, 'apart from a terrible dream in which one of us had to die and it ended up being you.'

Knowing Talia she'd find that funny, or accuse her of having drunk too much wine the night before, and minutes later it would be forgotten. The past three and a half years would be compressed into nothing; the shock, the fear, the loss of everything that mattered would never have happened.

Why had death reached out for someone so young and passionate as Natalia? What possible good could ever come out of using cancer to take a mother from her small children? No more good than had been achieved by giving her and Talia the father they'd had.

Talia had always been the quieter of the twins, the most thoughtful and probably the easiest to love. Their mother would have denied that, of course, but by the time it had occurred to Bel that Talia possessed qualities she didn't have, their mother had no longer been with them. And she, Bel, was to blame for that.

Since losing them both Bel had become a shadow, an inwardly tormented version of the woman she used to be,

unless the children were with her. She loved it when they were around. Life felt worth living then, since they gave her a sense of purpose, a hope and desperately needed feeling that Talia was still close. She knew how selfish that was, that she shouldn't put such a burden on their tender shoulders, but she was careful never to talk about their mother unless they asked her to, nor to let them know how wretched she felt every time their father came to take them home.

Thankfully they only lived ten minutes away by car, and of course she was welcome to visit at any time. Even Kristina was at pains to assure her that the door was always open. Bel couldn't help but admire her for that, since she wasn't sure she'd be quite as generous in Kristina's shoes. On the other hand, it clearly suited Kristina – and Nick – to have a devoted aunt on tap. It allowed them to travel at the drop of a hat, as Nick had done with Talia before the children came along. Bel would always be there, the children were safe and happy with her, so they could focus on raking up the past in far-flung corners of the globe while Bel tried to deal with today, and tomorrow.

Feeling a horrible sinking sensation at the prospect of what her tomorrows might bring, she drew the duvet up over her head and closed her eyes.

'I promise you,' Nick had said just now, but whatever the promise was she knew it would never be the forgiveness she craved; nor the ability to undo what she had done, since it wasn't in anyone's power to change the past.