

THE PERFECT  
MARRIAGE?  
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# BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

B A PARIS

## **BEHIND CLOSED DOORS**

**B A PARIS**

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# Behind Closed Doors

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[www.myfreekindle.blogspot.com](http://www.myfreekindle.blogspot.com)

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# Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Begin Reading](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

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## PRESENT

The champagne bottle knocks against the marble kitchen counter, making me jump. I glance at Jack, hoping he won't have noticed how nervous I am. He catches me looking and smiles.

'Perfect,' he says softly.

Taking my hand, he leads me to where our guests are waiting. As we go through the hall, I see the flowering lily Diane and Adam brought us for our garden. It's such a beautiful pink that I hope Jack will plant it where I'll be able to see it from the bedroom window. Just thinking of the garden makes tears well up from deep inside me and I swallow them down quickly. With so much at stake tonight, I need to concentrate on the here and now.

In the sitting room, a fire burns steadily in the antique grate. We're well into March but there's still a nip in the air and Jack likes our guests to be as comfortable as possible.

'Your house is really something, Jack,' Rufus says admiringly. 'Don't you think so, Esther?'

I don't know Rufus or Esther. They are new to the area and tonight is the first time we've met, which makes me feel more nervous than I already am. But I can't afford to let Jack down, so I fix a smile on my face, praying that they'll like me. Esther doesn't smile back, so I guess she's reserving judgement. But I can't blame her. Since joining our circle of friends a month ago, I'm sure she's been told over and over again that Grace Angel, wife of brilliant lawyer Jack Angel, is a perfect example of a woman who has it all—the perfect house, the perfect husband, the perfect life. If I were Esther, I'd be wary of me too.

My eyes fall on the box of expensive chocolates she has just taken out of her bag and I feel a flicker of excitement. Not wanting her to give them to Jack, I move smoothly towards her and she instinctively holds them out to me.

'Thank you, they look wonderful,' I say gratefully, placing them on the coffee table so that I can open them later, when we serve coffee.

Esther intrigues me. She's the complete opposite of Diane—tall, blonde, slim, reserved—and I can't help respecting her for being the first person to

step into our house and not go on about how beautiful it is. Jack insisted on choosing the house himself, telling me it was to be my wedding present, so I saw it for the first time when we came back from our honeymoon. Even though he'd told me it was perfect for us I didn't fully realise what he meant until I saw it. Set in large grounds at the far end of the village, it gives Jack the privacy he craves, as well as the privilege of owning the most beautiful house in Spring Eaton. And the most secure. There is a complicated alarm system, with steel shutters to protect the windows on the ground floor. It must seem strange that these are often kept shut during the day, but as Jack tells anyone who asks, with a job like his, good security is one of his priorities.

We have a lot of paintings on the walls of our sitting room but people are usually drawn towards the large red canvas that hangs above the fireplace. Diane and Adam, who have already seen it, can't help going over to have another look, and Rufus joins them, while Esther sits down on one of the cream leather sofas.

'It's amazing,' Rufus says, looking in fascination at the hundreds of tiny markings that make up most of the painting.

'It's called *Fireflies*,' Jack offers, untwisting the wire from the bottle of champagne.

'I've never seen anything quite like it.'

'Grace painted it,' Diane tells him. 'Can you believe it?'

'You should see Grace's other paintings.' Jack eases the cork from the bottle with only the slightest of sounds. 'They really are quite something.'

Rufus looks around the room with interest. 'Are they here?'

'No, I'm afraid they're hanging elsewhere in the house.'

'For Jack's eyes only,' Adam jokes.

'And Grace's. Isn't that right, darling?' Jack says, smiling over at me. 'For our eyes only.'

'Yes, they are,' I agree, turning my head away.

We join Esther on the sofa and Diane exclaims in pleasure as Jack pours the champagne into tall glasses. She looks across at me.

'Are you feeling better now?' she asks. 'Grace couldn't make lunch with me yesterday because she was ill,' she explains, turning to Esther.

'It was only a migraine,' I protest.

'Unfortunately, Grace is prone to them.' Jack looks over at me

sympathetically. 'But they never last long, thank goodness.'

'It's the second time you've stood me up,' Diane points out.

'I'm sorry,' I apologise.

'Well, at least you didn't just forget this time,' she teases. 'Why don't we meet up next Friday to make up for it? Would you be free, Grace? No dental appointments for you to suddenly remember at the last minute?'

'No, and no migraines either, I hope.'

Diane turns to Esther. 'Would you like to join us? It would have to be at a restaurant in town because I work.'

'Thank you, I'd like that.' She glances over at me, maybe to check that I don't mind her coming along and, as I smile back at her, I feel horribly guilty, because I already know I won't be going.

Calling everyone to attention, Jack offers a toast to Esther and Rufus, welcoming them to the area. I raise my glass and take a sip of champagne. The bubbles dance in my mouth and I feel a sudden flash of happiness, which I try to hang on to. But it disappears as quickly as it came.

I look over to where Jack is talking animatedly to Rufus. He and Adam met Rufus at the golf club a couple of weeks ago and invited him to join them in a game. On finding Rufus to be an excellent golfer, but not quite excellent enough to beat him, Jack invited him and Esther around for dinner. Watching them together, it's obvious that Jack is out to impress Rufus, which means it's important I win Esther round. But it won't be easy; whereas Diane is simply admiring, Esther seems more complicated.

Excusing myself, I go through to the kitchen to fetch the canapés I made earlier, and to put the last touches to the dinner. Etiquette—Jack is pedantic about it—means I can't be gone for long, so I quickly whisk the egg whites that are waiting in a bowl into peaks, and add them to the soufflé base I made earlier.

As I spoon the mixture into individual dishes, I glance nervously at the clock, then put the dishes into a bain-marie and place it in the oven, noting the exact time. I feel a momentary wave of panic that I might not be able to pull everything off, but reminding myself that fear is my enemy I try to remain calm and return to the sitting room with the tray of canapés. I pass them around, accepting everybody's compliments gratefully, because Jack will have heard them too. Sure enough, with a kiss to the top of my head, he agrees with Diane that I am indeed a superb cook, and I breathe a silent sigh of relief.

Determined to make some headway with Esther, I sit down next to her. Seeing this, Jack relieves me of the canapés.

‘You deserve a rest, darling, after all the hard work you’ve done today,’ he says, balancing the tray on his long elegant fingers.

‘It wasn’t hard work at all,’ I protest, which is a lie, and Jack knows it, because he chose the menu.

I begin to ask Esther all the right questions: if she has settled into the area, if she was sorry to leave Kent behind, if her two children have settled into their new school. For some reason, the fact that I am well informed seems to irk her, so I make a point of asking the names of her son and daughter, even though I know they are called Sebastian and Aisling. I even know their ages, seven and five, but I pretend that I don’t. Aware of Jack listening to my every word, I know he’ll wonder what I’m playing at.

‘You don’t have children, do you,’ Esther says, making it a statement rather than a question.

‘No, not yet. We thought we’d enjoy a couple of years on our own first.’

‘Why, how long have you been married?’ Her voice registers surprise.

‘A year,’ I admit.

‘It was their anniversary last week,’ Diane chips in.

‘And I’m still not ready to share my beautiful wife with anyone else,’ Jack says, refilling her glass.

I watch, momentarily distracted, as a tiny splash of champagne misses the glass and lands on the knee of his pristine chinos.

‘I hope you don’t mind me asking,’ Esther begins, her curiosity getting the better of her, ‘but were either of you married before?’

She sounds as if she wants the answer to be yes, as if to find a disgruntled ex-husband or wife lurking in the background would be proof that we’re less than perfect.

‘No, neither of us were,’ I say.

She glances at Jack and I know she’s wondering how someone so good-looking managed to stay unattached for so long. Sensing her eyes on him, Jack smiles good-naturedly.

‘I must admit that at forty years old, I’d begun to despair of ever finding the perfect woman. But as soon as I saw Grace, I knew she was the one I’d been waiting for.’

‘So romantic,’ sighs Diane, who already knows the story of how Jack and I met. ‘I’ve lost count of the number of women I tried to set Jack up with but no one would do until he met Grace.’

‘What about you, Grace?’ Esther asks. ‘Was it love at first sight for you too?’

‘Yes,’ I say, remembering. ‘It was.’

Overwhelmed by the memory, I stand up a little too quickly and Jack’s head swivels towards me. ‘The soufflés,’ I explain calmly. ‘They should be done now. Are you all ready to sit down?’

Spurred on by Diane, who tells them that soufflés wait for no one, they drain their glasses and make for the table. Esther, however, stops on the way for a closer look at *Fireflies* and, when Jack joins her rather than urge her to sit down, I breathe a sigh of relief that the soufflés are no way near ready. If they were, I would be near to tears with stress at the delay, especially when he starts explaining some of the different techniques I used to create the painting.

When they eventually sit down five minutes later, the soufflés are cooked to perfection. As Diane expresses her amazement, Jack smiles at me from the other end of the table and tells everyone that I am very clever indeed.

It’s during evenings like this that I’m reminded of why I fell in love with Jack. Charming, amusing and intelligent, he knows exactly what to say and how to say it. Because Esther and Rufus are newcomers, he makes sure that the conversation as we eat our soufflés is for their benefit. He prompts Diane and Adam into revealing information about themselves that will help our new friends, such as where they shop and the sports they play. Although Esther listens politely to their list of leisure activities, the names of their gardeners and babysitters, the best place to buy fish, I know that I am the one who interests her, and I know she’s going to return to the fact that Jack and I have come relatively late to marriage, hoping to find something—anything—to tell her it is not as perfect as it seems. Unfortunately for her, she’s going to be disappointed.

She waits until Jack has carved the beef Wellington and served it with a gratin of potatoes, and carrots lightly glazed with honey. There are also tiny sugar peas, which I plunged into boiling water just before taking the beef from the oven. Diane marvels that I’ve managed to get everything ready at the same time, and admits she always chooses a main course like curry, which can be prepared earlier and heated through at the last minute. I’d like to tell her that I’d much rather do as she does, that painstaking calculations and sleepless nights

are the currency I pay to serve such a perfect dinner. But the alternative—serving anything that is less than perfect—isn't an option.

Esther looks at me from across the table. 'So where did you and Jack meet?'

'In Regent's Park,' I say. 'One Sunday afternoon.'

'Tell her what happened,' urges Diane, her pale skin flushed from the champagne.

I hesitate a moment, because it's a story I have told before. But it's one that Jack loves to hear me tell, so it's in my interest to repeat it. Luckily, Esther comes to my rescue. Mistaking my pause for reticence, she pounces.

'Please do,' she urges.

'Well, at the risk of boring those who have already heard it before,' I begin, with an apologetic smile, 'I was in the park with my sister Millie. We often go there on a Sunday afternoon and that Sunday there happened to be a band playing. Millie loves music and she was enjoying herself so much that she got up from her seat and began to dance in front of the bandstand. She had recently learnt to waltz and, as she danced, she stretched her arms out in front of her, as if she was dancing with someone.' I find myself smiling at the memory and wish desperately that life was still as simple, still as innocent. 'Although people were generally indulgent, happy to see Millie enjoying herself,' I go on, 'I could see that one or two were uncomfortable and I knew I should do something, call her back to her seat perhaps. But there was a part of me that was loath to because—'

'How old is your sister?' Esther interrupts.

'Seventeen.' I pause a moment, unwilling to face reality. 'Nearly eighteen.'

Esther raises her eyebrows. 'She's something of an attention seeker, then.'

'No, she's not, it's just that ...'

'Well, she must be. I mean, people don't usually get up and dance in a park, do they?' She looks around the table triumphantly and when everyone avoids her eye I can't help feeling sorry for her.

'Millie has Down's syndrome.' Jack's voice breaks the awkward silence that has descended on the table. 'It means she's often wonderfully spontaneous.'

Confusion floods Esther's face and I feel annoyed that the people who told her everything else about me didn't mention Millie.

'Anyway, before I could decide what to do,' I say, coming to her rescue, 'this perfect gentleman got up from his seat, went over to where Millie was dancing,

bowed and held out his hand to her. Well, Millie was delighted and, as they began to waltz, everybody started applauding and then other couples got up from their seats and started to dance too. It was a very, very special moment. And, of course, I fell immediately in love with Jack for having made it happen.'

'What Grace didn't know at the time was that I had seen her and Millie in the park the week before and had immediately fallen in love with her. She was so attentive to Millie, so utterly selfless. I had never seen that sort of devotion in anybody before and I was determined to get to know her.'

'And what Jack didn't know at the time,' I say in turn, 'was that I had noticed him the week before but never thought he would be interested in someone like me.'

It amuses me when everybody nods their head in agreement. Even though I am attractive, Jack's film-star good looks mean that people think I'm lucky he wanted to marry me. But that isn't what I meant.

'Grace doesn't have any other brothers and sisters so she thought the fact that Millie will one day be her sole responsibility would discourage me,' Jack explains.

'As it had others,' I point out.

Jack shakes his head. 'On the contrary, it was the knowledge that Grace would do anything for Millie that made me realise she was the woman I'd been looking for all my life. In my line of work, it's easy to become demoralised with the human race.'

'I saw from the paper yesterday that congratulations are in order again,' Rufus says, raising his glass in Jack's direction.

'Yes, well done.' Adam, who is a lawyer in the same firm as Jack, joins in. 'Another conviction under your belt.'

'It was a fairly cut-and-dried case,' Jack says modestly. 'Although proving that my client hadn't inflicted the wounds herself, given that she had a penchant for self-harm, made it a little more difficult.'

'But, generally speaking, aren't cases of abuse usually easy to prove?' Rufus asks, while Diane tells Esther, in case she doesn't already know, that Jack champions the underdog—more specifically, battered wives. 'I don't want to detract from the wonderful work you do, but there is often physical evidence, or witnesses, are there not?'

'Jack's forte is getting the victims to trust him enough to tell him what has

been going on,' Diane, who I suspect of being a little in love with Jack, explains. 'Many women don't have anybody to turn to and are scared they won't be believed.'

'He also makes sure that the perpetrators go down for a very long time,' adds Adam.

'I have nothing but contempt for men who are found to be violent towards their wives,' Jack says firmly. 'They deserve everything they get.'

'I'll drink to that.' Rufus raises his glass again.

'He's never lost a case yet, have you, Jack?' says Diane.

'No, and I don't intend to.'

'An unbroken track record—that's quite something,' muses Rufus, impressed.

Esther looks over at me. 'Your sister—Millie—is quite a bit younger than you,' she remarks, bringing the conversation back to where we left off.

'Yes, there are seventeen years between us. Millie didn't come along until my mother was forty-six. It didn't occur to her she was pregnant at first so it was a bit of a shock to find she was going to be a mother again.'

'Does Millie live with your parents?'

'No, she boards at a wonderful school in North London. But she'll be eighteen in April, so she'll have to leave it this summer, which is a shame because she loves it there.'

'So where will she go? To your parents?'

'No.' I pause for a moment, because I know that what I am about to say will shock her. 'They live in New Zealand.'

Esther does a double take. 'New Zealand?'

'Yes. They retired there last year, just after our wedding.'

'I see,' she says. But I know she doesn't.

'Millie will be moving in with us,' Jack explains. He smiles over at me. 'I knew it would be a condition to Grace accepting to marry me and it was one that I was more than happy to comply with.'

'That's very generous of you,' Esther says.

'Not at all—I'm delighted that Millie will be living here. It will add another dimension to our lives, won't it, darling?'

I lift my glass and take a sip of my wine so that I don't have to answer.



‘You obviously get on well with her,’ Esther remarks.

‘Well, I hope she’s as fond of me as I am of her—although it did take her a while once Grace and I were actually married.’

‘Why was that?’

‘I think the reality of our marriage was a shock to her,’ I tell her. ‘She had adored Jack from the beginning, but when we came back from our honeymoon and she realised that he was going to be with me the whole time, she became jealous. She’s fine now, though. Jack is once again her favourite person.’

‘Thankfully George Clooney has taken my place as Millie’s object of dislike,’ Jack laughs.

‘George Clooney?’ Esther queries.

‘Yes.’ I nod, glad that Jack has brought it up. ‘I had this thing about him ...’

‘Don’t we all?’ murmurs Diane.

‘... and Millie was so jealous that when some friends gave me a George Clooney calendar for Christmas one year, she scrawled on it “I don’t like George Clooney”, except that she spelt it phonetically—J-O-R-J K-O-O-N-Y—she has a bit of trouble with the “L”,’ I explain. ‘It was so sweet.’

Everyone laughs.

‘And now she never stops telling everyone that she likes me but she doesn’t like him. It’s become a bit of a mantra—“I like you, Jack, but I don’t like George Cooney”.’ Jack smiles. ‘I must admit that I’m quite flattered at being mentioned in the same breath,’ he adds modestly.

Esther looks at him. ‘You know, you do look a bit like him.’

‘Except that Jack is much better looking.’ Adam grins. ‘You can’t believe how relieved we all were when he married Grace. At least it stopped the women in the office fantasising about him—and some of the men too,’ he adds laughingly.

Jack sighs good-naturedly. ‘That’s enough, Adam.’

‘You don’t work, do you?’ Esther says, turning back to me. I detect in her voice the thinly veiled scorn that working women reserve for those who don’t, and feel compelled to defend myself.

‘I used to, but I gave up my job just before Jack and I got married.’

‘Really?’ Esther frowns. ‘Why?’

‘She didn’t want to,’ Jack intervenes. ‘But she had a high-powered job and I didn’t want to come home exhausted and find that Grace was just as exhausted

as I was. It was perhaps selfish of me to ask her to give up her job but I wanted to be able to come home and offload the stress of my day rather than be offloaded onto. She also travelled quite a lot and I didn't want to come home to an empty house, as I already had done for many years.'

'What was your job?' Esther asks, fixing me with her pale-blue eyes.

'I was a buyer for Harrods.'

The flicker in her eyes tells me she's impressed. The fact that she doesn't ask me to expand tells me that she's not going to show it yet.

'She used to travel all over the world first class,' Diane says breathlessly.

'Not all over the world,' I correct. 'Just to South America. I sourced their fruit, mainly from Chile and Argentina,' I add, largely for Esther's benefit.

Rufus looks at me admiringly. 'That must have been interesting.'

'It was.' I nod. 'I loved every minute of it.'

'You must miss it, then.' Another statement from Esther.

'No, not really,' I lie. 'I have plenty here to keep me occupied.'

'And soon you'll have Millie to look after.'

'Millie is very independent and anyway, she'll be working most of the time at Meadow Gate.'

'The garden centre?'

'Yes. She loves plants and flowers so she's very lucky to have been offered the perfect job.'

'So what will you do all day long?'

'Much the same as I do now—you know, cooking, cleaning, gardening—when the weather permits.'

'You'll have to come for Sunday lunch next time and see the garden,' says Jack. 'Grace has green fingers.'

'Goodness,' says Esther lightly. 'So many talents. I'm so glad I was offered a post at St Polycarp's. I was getting quite bored being at home all day.'

'When do you start?'

'Next month. I'm replacing a teacher on maternity leave.'

I turn to Rufus. 'Jack tells me you have a huge garden,' I prompt and, while I serve more of the beef Wellington, which, along with the vegetables, has been keeping warm on a hotplate, the conversation around the table revolves around landscaping rather than me. As everyone laughs and talks together, I find

myself looking wistfully at the other women and wondering what it must be like to be Diane, or Esther, to not have someone like Millie to consider. I immediately feel guilty because I love Millie more than life itself and wouldn't change her for the world. Just thinking about her gives me new resolve and I get purposefully to my feet.

'Is everyone ready for dessert?' I ask.

Jack and I clear the table and he follows me through to the kitchen, where I place the plates neatly in the sink to be rinsed off later while he tidies the carving knife away. The dessert I've made is a masterpiece—a perfect uncracked meringue nest three inches high, filled with whipped Devon cream. I fetch the fruit I prepared earlier and place slices of mango, pineapple, papaya and kiwi carefully onto the cream and then add strawberries, raspberries and blueberries.

As I pick up a pomegranate, the feel of it in my hand transports me back to another time, another place, where the warmth of the sun on my face and the chatter of excited voices were things I took for granted. I close my eyes briefly, remembering the life I used to have.

Conscious of Jack waiting, his hand outstretched, I hand the fruit to him. He slices it in half and then I scoop out the seeds with a spoon and sprinkle them over the rest of the fruit. The dessert complete, I carry it through to the dining room, where the exclamations that greet its arrival confirm that Jack was right to choose it over the chestnut and chocolate gateau I would have preferred to make.

'Would you believe that Grace has never done a cookery course?' Diane says to Esther, picking up her spoon. 'I'm in awe of such perfection, aren't you? Although I'm never going to get into the bikini I bought,' she adds, groaning and patting her stomach through her navy linen dress. 'I shouldn't really be eating this considering that we've just booked to go away this summer but it's so delicious I can't resist!'

'Where are you going?' Rufus asks.

'Thailand,' Adam tells him. 'We were going to go to Vietnam but when we saw the photos of Jack and Grace's latest holiday in Thailand, we decided to keep Vietnam for next year.' He looks over at Diane and grins. 'Once Diane had seen the hotel they stayed in, that was it.'

'So are you going to the same hotel, then?'

'No, it was fully booked. Unfortunately, we don't have the luxury of being able to go on holiday out of term-time.'

‘Make the most of it while you can,’ Esther says, turning to me.

‘I intend to.’

‘Are you going back to Thailand this year?’ Adam asks.

‘Only if we can go before June, which isn’t likely with the Tomasin case coming up,’ says Jack. He looks meaningfully across the table at me. ‘After that, well, Millie will be with us.’

I hold my breath, hoping no one will suggest that if we wait, we’ll be able to take Millie along too.

‘Tomasin?’ Rufus raises his eyebrows. ‘I heard something about that. Is his wife one of your clients?’

‘Yes, she is.’

‘Dena Anderson,’ he muses. ‘That must be an interesting case.’

‘It is,’ Jack agrees. He turns to me. ‘Darling, if everyone’s finished, why don’t you show Esther the photos of our last holiday in Thailand?’

My heart sinks. ‘I’m sure she doesn’t want to see our holiday snaps,’ I say, keeping my voice purposefully light. But even that slight suggestion of discord between the two of us is enough for Esther.

‘I would love to see them!’ she exclaims.

Jack pushes his chair back and stands up. He takes the photo album from the drawer and hands it to Esther. ‘Then Grace and I will make coffee while you look at the photographs. Why don’t you go through to the sitting room—you’ll be more comfortable there.’

By the time we come back from the kitchen with a tray of coffee, Diane is exclaiming over the photos, although Esther doesn’t say much.

I have to admit that the photos are stunning and, in those where I can be seen, I am shown to my advantage: beautifully tanned, as slim as I was in my twenties, and wearing one of my many bikinis. In most of the photos, I’m standing in front of a luxurious hotel, or lying on its private beach, or sitting in a bar or restaurant with a colourful cocktail and a plate of exotic food in front of me. In each one I am smiling up at the camera, the epitome of a relaxed and pampered woman very much in love with her husband. Jack is something of a perfectionist when it comes to taking photographs and takes the same shot over and over again until he is happy with the result, so I have learnt to get it right the first time. There are also some photographs of the two of us, taken by amenable strangers. It is Diane who points out teasingly that in those photographs, Jack and I are often gazing adoringly at each other rather than at

the camera.

Jack pours the coffee.

‘Would anyone like a chocolate?’ I ask, reaching as casually as I can for the box that Esther brought.

‘I’m sure we’ve all had quite enough to eat,’ Jack suggests, looking around at everyone for confirmation.

‘Definitely,’ says Rufus.

‘I couldn’t eat another thing,’ Adam groans.

‘Then I’ll put them away for another day.’ Jack holds his hand out for the box and I’m just resigning myself to never tasting them when Diane comes to the rescue.

‘Don’t you dare—I’m sure I can fit in a chocolate or two.’

‘I suppose there’s no point mentioning your bikini,’ Adam sighs, shaking his head in mock despair at his wife.

‘Absolutely no point at all,’ Diane agrees, taking a chocolate from the box Jack has handed her and passing it to me. I take one, pop it in my mouth and offer the box to Esther. When she declines to take one, I take another before passing the box back to Diane.

‘How do you do it?’ Diane asks, looking at me in wonder.

‘Sorry?’

‘Eat so much and never put on weight.’

‘Luck,’ I say, reaching over and taking another chocolate. ‘And control.’

It’s only when the clock strikes half-twelve that Esther suggests making a move. In the hall, Jack hands out the coats and, while he helps Diane and Esther on with theirs, I agree to meet them in town the following Friday at ‘Chez Louis’ for lunch at twelve-thirty. Diane hugs me goodbye and when I shake Esther’s hand I tell her that I’m looking forward to seeing her again at the lunch. The men kiss me goodbye and, as they leave, everybody thanks us for a perfect evening. In fact, there are so many ‘perfects’ ringing round the hall as Jack closes the door behind them that I know I’ve triumphed. But I need to make sure that Jack knows I have.

‘We need to leave at eleven tomorrow,’ I say, turning to him. ‘To get there in time to take Millie for lunch.’

## PAST

My life became perfect eighteen months ago, the day Jack danced with Millie in the park. Some of what I told Esther was true—I'd seen Jack in the park the previous Sunday but hadn't thought he'd be interested in someone like me. First of all, he was exceptionally good-looking and back then I didn't look as good as I do now. And then there was Millie.

Sometimes I told my boyfriends about her from the beginning, sometimes—if I liked them a lot—I said that I had a younger sister who was away at school but only mentioned that she had Down's syndrome a few weeks into the relationship. Some, when I told them, didn't know what to say and didn't stay around long enough to say anything much at all. Others were interested, supportive even, until they met Millie and were unable to classify her spontaneity as wonderful, as Jack did. Two of the best were still there long after they met her, but even they had trouble accepting what a huge part of my life Millie was.

The clincher was always the same; I'd told Millie from the beginning that when the time came for her to leave her wonderful but highly expensive school she would come and live with me, and I had no intention of letting her down. It meant that six months previously I'd had to let go of Alex, the man I thought I would spend the rest of my life with, the man who I'd lived very happily with for two years. But when Millie had turned sixteen, the imminence of her arrival began to weigh heavily on him—which is why I found myself, at thirty-two years old, single once again and seriously doubting that I would ever find a man who would accept both Millie and me.

In the park that day, I wasn't the only one who noticed Jack, although I was probably the most discreet. Some—mainly the younger women—smiled at him openly, trying to catch his attention, while teenage girls giggled behind their hands and whispered excitedly that he had to be a film star. The older women looked at him appreciatively and then, more often than not, at the man walking beside them, as if they found him wanting. Even the men looked at Jack as he walked through the park, as there was a casual elegance about him that couldn't be ignored. The only one who remained oblivious to him was Millie.

Engrossed in the card game we were playing, there was only one thought in her mind—winning.

Like many others that day in late August, we were picnicking on the grass not far from the bandstand. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Jack head for a nearby bench and, when he took a book from his pocket, I turned my attention back to Millie, determined not to let him see me looking at him. As Millie dealt the cards for yet another game, I decided he was probably a foreigner, an Italian perhaps, in London for the weekend with his wife and children who were visiting some monument or other and would join him later.

As far as I was concerned, he didn't even look my way that afternoon, unperturbed, it seemed, by Millie's loud cries of 'Snap!' We left soon after because I had to get Millie back to her school by six o'clock, in time for dinner at seven. Even though I didn't think I'd ever see him again, my mind returned again and again to the man I'd seen in the park and I found myself pretending that he wasn't married, that he had noticed me and had fallen in love with me and planned to return to the park the following Sunday in the hope of seeing me again. I hadn't fantasised about a man in such a way since I was a teenager and it made me realise how much I was beginning to despair of ever getting married and having a family. Although I was devoted to Millie, I had always imagined that by the time she came to live with me I would have children of my own, so she would become a part of my family rather than my sole family. I loved her dearly, but the thought of the two of us growing old together on our own filled me with dread.

The following week, the day the band was playing in the park, I didn't see Jack until he walked up to where Millie was dancing by herself in front of the bandstand, her arms around a partner only she could see. At such times, the emotions Millie provoked in me were often hard to deal with. While I was fiercely proud of her, that she had managed to master the steps she was performing, I was also fiercely protective, and when I heard someone laughing behind me I had to remind myself that their laughter was probably kind and that even if it wasn't, it wouldn't affect Millie's enjoyment of what she was doing. But the urge to stand up and bring her back to her seat was so strong that I hated myself for it, and for just about the first time I found myself wishing that Millie was ordinary. Images flashed through my mind of how our lives—my life—could have been and it was as I was quickly blinking away the tears of frustration which had filled my eyes that I saw Jack making his way towards Millie.

At first, I didn't recognise him and, thinking he was going to ask Millie to sit

back down, I got to my feet, ready to intervene. It was only when I saw him bowing to her and holding out his hand that I realised he was the man I'd been dreaming about all week. By the time he brought Millie back to her seat two dances later, I'd fallen in love with him.

'May I?' he asked, indicating the chair next to me.

'Yes, of course.' I smiled at him gratefully. 'Thank you for dancing with Millie, it was very kind of you.'

'The pleasure was all mine,' he said gravely. 'Millie is a very good dancer.'

'Nice man!' Millie said, beaming at him.

'Jack.'

'Nice Jack.'

'I really should introduce myself properly.' He held out his hand. 'Jack Angel.'

'Grace Harrington,' I said, shaking it. 'Millie's my sister. Are you here on holiday?'

'No, I live here.' I waited for him to add 'with my wife and children' but he didn't, so I stole a look at his left hand and when I saw that he wasn't wearing a wedding ring I felt such a rush of relief I had to remind myself it didn't mean anything. 'And you? Are you and Millie visiting London?'

'Not really. I live in Wimbledon but I often bring Millie here at weekends.'

'Does she live with you?'

'No, she boards at her school during the week. I try and see her most weekends, but as I travel a lot for my job it's not always possible. Fortunately, she has a wonderful carer who steps in when I can't be with her. And our parents do, of course.'

'Your job sounds exciting. Can I ask what you do?'

'I buy fruit.' He looked at me quizzically. 'For Harrods.'

'And the travelling?'

'I source fruit from Argentina and Chile.'

'That must be interesting.'

'It is,' I agreed. 'What about you?'

'I'm a lawyer.'

Millie, bored with our conversation, tugged at my arm. 'Drink, Grace. And ice cream. I hot.'



I smiled apologetically at Jack. 'I'm afraid I have to go. Thank you again for dancing with Millie.'

'Perhaps you would let me take you and Millie to tea?' He leant forward so that he could see Millie sitting on the other side of me. 'What do you think, Millie? Would you like some tea?'

'Juice,' Millie said, beaming at him. 'Juice, not tea. Don't like tea.'

'Juice it is, then,' he said, standing up. 'Shall we go?'

'No, really,' I protested. 'You've been too kind already.'

'Please. I'd like to.' He turned to Millie. 'Do you like cakes, Millie?'

Millie nodded enthusiastically. 'Yes, love cake.'

'That's decided then.'

We walked across the park to the restaurant, Millie and I arm in arm and Jack walking alongside us. By the time we parted company an hour later, I had agreed to meet him the following Thursday evening for dinner, and he quickly became a permanent fixture in my life. It wasn't hard to fall in love with him; there was something old-fashioned about him that I found refreshing—he opened doors for me, helped me on with my coat and sent me flowers. He made me feel special, cherished and, best of all, he adored Millie.

When we were about three months into our relationship, he asked if I would introduce him to my parents. I was a little taken aback as I'd already told him that I didn't have a close relationship with them. I had lied to Esther. My parents hadn't wanted another child and, when Millie arrived, they definitely hadn't wanted her. As a child, I had pestered my parents so much for a brother or sister that one day they had sat me down and told me, quite bluntly, that they hadn't really wanted any children at all. So when, some ten years later, my mother discovered she was pregnant, she was horrified. It was only when I overheard her discussing the risks of a late abortion with my father that I realised she was expecting a baby and I was outraged that they were thinking of getting rid of the little brother or sister I'd always wanted.

We argued back and forth; they pointed out that because my mother was already forty-six, a pregnancy at that age was risky; I pointed out that because she was already five months pregnant, an abortion at that age was illegal—and a mortal sin, because they were both Catholics. With guilt and God on my side, I won and my mother went reluctantly ahead with the pregnancy.

When Millie was born and was found to have Down's—as well as other difficulties—I couldn't understand my parents' rejection of her. I fell in love

with her at once and saw her as no different from any other baby, so when my mother became severely depressed I took over Millie's general day-to-day care, feeding her and changing her nappy before I went to school and coming back at lunchtime to repeat the process all over again. When she was three months old, my parents told me that they were putting her up for adoption and moving to New Zealand, where my maternal grandparents lived, something they had always said they would do. I screamed the place down, telling them that they couldn't put her up for adoption, that I would stay at home and look after her instead of going to university, but they refused to listen and, as the adoption procedure got underway, I took an overdose. It was a stupid thing to do, a childish attempt to get them to realise how serious I was, but for some reason it worked. I was already eighteen so with the help of various social workers, it was agreed that I would be Millie's principal carer and would effectively bring her up, with my parents providing financial support.

I took one step at a time. When a place was found for Millie at a local nursery, I began working part-time. My first job was working for a supermarket chain, in their fruit-buying department. At eleven years old, Millie was offered a place at a school I considered no better than an institution and, appalled, I told my parents that I would find somewhere more suitable. I had spent hours and hours with her, teaching her an independence I'm not sure she would have otherwise obtained, and I felt it was her lack of language skills rather than intelligence that made it difficult for her to integrate into society as well as she might have.

It was a long, hard battle to find a mainstream school willing to take Millie on and the only reason I managed was because the headmistress of the school I eventually found was a forward-thinking, open-minded woman who happened to have a younger brother with Down's. The private girls' boarding school she ran was perfect for Millie, but expensive, and, as my parents couldn't afford to pay for it, I told them I would. I sent my CV to several companies, with a letter explaining exactly why I needed a good, well-paid job, and was eventually taken on by Harrods.

When travelling became part of my job—something I jumped at the chance to do, because of the associated freedom—my parents didn't feel able to have Millie home for the weekends without me there. But they would visit her at school and Janice, Millie's carer, looked after her for the rest of the time. When the next problem—where Millie would go once she left school—began to loom on the horizon, I promised my parents that I would have her to live with me so that they could finally emigrate to New Zealand. And ever since,

they'd been counting the days. I didn't blame them; in their own way they were fond of me and Millie, and we were of them. But they were the sort of people who weren't suited to having children at all.

Because Jack was adamant that he wanted to meet them, I phoned my mother and asked her if we could go down the following Sunday. It was nearing the end of November and we took Millie with us. Although they didn't exactly throw their arms around us, I could see that my mother was impressed by Jack's impeccable manners and my father was pleased that Jack had taken an interest in his collection of first editions. We left soon after lunch and, by the time we dropped Millie back at her school, it was late afternoon. I had intended to head home, because I had a busy couple of days before leaving for Argentina later that week, but when Jack suggested a walk in Regent's Park I readily agreed, even though it was already dark. I wasn't looking forward to going away again; since meeting Jack I had become disenchanted with the amount of travelling my job required me to do as I had the impression that we hardly spent any time together. And when we did, it was often with a group of friends, or Millie, in tow.

'What did you think of my parents?' I asked when we had been walking a while.

'They were perfect,' he smiled.

I found myself frowning over his choice of words. 'What do you mean?'

'Just that they were everything I hoped they would be.'

I glanced at him, wondering if he was being ironic, as my parents had hardly gone out of their way for us. But then I remembered him telling me that his own parents, who had died some years before, had been extremely distant, and decided it was why he had appreciated my parents' lukewarm welcome so much.

We walked a little further and, when we arrived at the bandstand where he had danced with Millie, he drew me to a stop.

'Grace, will you do me the honour of marrying me?' he asked.

His proposal was so unexpected that my first reaction was to think he was joking. Although I'd harboured a secret hope that our relationship would one day lead to marriage, I'd imagined it happening a year or two down the line. Perhaps sensing my hesitation, he drew me into his arms.

'I knew from the minute I saw you sitting on the grass over there with Millie that you were the woman I'd been waiting for all my life. I don't want to have

to wait any longer to make you my wife. The reason I asked to meet your parents was so that I could ask your father for his blessing. I'm glad to say he gave it happily.'

I couldn't help feeling amused that my father had so readily agreed to me marrying someone he had only just met and knew nothing about. But as I stood there in Jack's arms, I was dismayed that the elation I felt at his proposal was tempered by a niggling anxiety, and just as I'd worked out it was because of Millie, Jack spoke again. 'Before you give me your answer, Grace, there's something I want to tell you.' He sounded so serious that I thought he was going to confess to an ex-wife, or a child, or a terrible illness. 'I just want you to know that wherever we live, there will always be a place for Millie.'

'You don't know how much it means to me to hear you say that,' I told him tearfully. 'Thank you.'

'So will you marry me?' he asked.

'Yes, of course I will.'

He drew a ring from his pocket and, taking my hand in his, slipped it on my finger. 'How soon?' he murmured.

'As soon as you like.' I looked down at the solitaire diamond. 'Jack, it's beautiful!'

'I'm glad you like it. So, how about sometime in March?'

I burst out laughing. 'March! How will we be able to organise a wedding in such a short time?'

'It won't be that difficult. I already have somewhere in mind for the reception, Cranleigh Park in Hecclescombe. It's a private country house and belongs to a friend of mine. Normally, he only holds wedding receptions for family members but I know it won't be a problem.'

'It sounds wonderful,' I said happily.

'As long as you don't want to invite too many people.'

'No, just my parents and a few friends.'

'That's settled then.'

Later, as he drove me back home, he asked if we could have a drink together the following evening as there were a couple of things he wanted to discuss with me before I left for Argentina on Wednesday.

'You could come in now, if you like,' I offered.

'I'm afraid I really need to be getting back. I have an early start tomorrow.' I

couldn't help feeling disappointed. 'I'd like nothing more than to come in and stay the night with you,' he said, noticing, 'but I have some files I need to look over tonight.'

'I can't believe I've agreed to marry someone I haven't even slept with yet,' I grumbled.

'Then how about we go away for a couple of days, the weekend after you get back from Argentina? We'll take Millie out to lunch and after we've dropped her back at school, we'll visit Cranleigh Park and find a hotel somewhere in the country for the night. Would that do?'

'Yes.' I nodded gratefully. 'Where shall I meet you tomorrow evening?'

'How about the bar at the Connaught?'

'If I come straight from work, I can be there around seven.'

'Perfect.'

I spent most of the next day wondering what Jack wanted to discuss with me before I went to Argentina. It never occurred to me that he would ask me to give up my job or that he would want to move out of London. I had presumed that once we were married we would carry on much as we were, except that we would be living together in his flat, as it was more central. His propositions left me reeling. Seeing how shocked I was, he sought to explain, pointing out what had occurred to me the day before, that in the three months since we'd known each other, we'd hardly spent any time together.

'What's the point of getting married if we never see each other?' he asked. 'We can't go on as we are and, more to the point, I don't want to. Something has to give and as I hope we'll be having children sooner rather than later ...' He stopped. 'You do want children, don't you?'

'Yes, Jack, of course I do,' I smiled.

'That's a relief.' He took my hand in his. 'The first time I saw you with Millie I knew you'd make a wonderful mother. I hope I won't have to wait too long before you make me a father.' Overwhelmed by a sudden desire to bear his child, I found I couldn't speak. 'But maybe you'd rather wait a few years,' he went on, hesitantly.

'It's not that,' I said, finding my voice. 'It's just that I don't see how I can give up my job, not while Millie is still at school. I pay her fees, you see, so I won't be able to give up work for a year and a half.'

'There's absolutely no question of you working for another eighteen months,' he said firmly. 'Millie can move in with us as soon as we come back

from our honeymoon.'

I looked at him guiltily. 'Much as I love Millie, I'd really like us to have a little time on our own first. And she's so happy at her school it seems a shame to take her out a year early.' I thought for a moment. 'Can we speak to her school and ask them what they think?'

'Of course. And maybe we should ask Millie what she thinks. I, for one, will be delighted if she chooses to move in with us at once. But if everybody thinks that it's best to leave her where she is for the moment, I insist on paying her fees. After all, she's going to be my sister soon.' He took my hand in his. 'Promise to let me help.'

I looked at him helplessly. 'I don't know what to say.'

'Then don't say anything. All you have to do is promise to think about handing your notice in. I don't want to never see you once we're married. Now, what sort of house would you like? I need to know because, if you'll let me, I'd like to buy you the house of your dreams as a wedding present.'

'I've never really thought about it,' I admitted.

'Well, think about it now, because it's important. Would you like a big garden, a swimming pool, lots of bedrooms?'

'A big garden, definitely. I'm not bothered about a swimming pool and as for the number of bedrooms, it depends how many children we're going to have.'

'Quite a lot then,' he smiled. 'I'd like to live in Surrey, near enough to London to make the commute each day bearable. What do you think?'

'Anywhere, as long as you're happy. What about you? What sort of house would you like?'

'I'd like it to be near a pretty town but far enough away for us not to be disturbed by noise. Like you, I'd like it to have a big garden, preferably with high walls around it so that nobody can see in. And I'd like a study, and a basement to keep things in. That's about it really.'

'A nice kitchen,' I said. 'I'd like a nice kitchen leading onto a terrace where we could have breakfast each morning, and a huge fireplace in the sitting room where we can have real log fires. And a yellow bedroom for Millie.'

'Why don't we draw up a plan of our dream house?' he suggested, taking a sheet of paper from his briefcase. 'Then I'll have something to work with.'

By the time he put me in a taxi two hours later, he'd made a drawing of a beautiful house, complete with landscaped gardens, a terrace, three reception

rooms, a fireplace, a kitchen, a study, five bedrooms—including a yellow one for Millie—three bathrooms, and a little round window in the roof.

‘I defy you to find such a house by the time I get back from Argentina,’ I laughed.

‘I’ll do my very best,’ he promised, before giving me a kiss.

The next few weeks passed in a whirlwind. When I got back from Argentina, I handed in my notice and put my house on the market. I had used my time away to think things over carefully and never doubted that I’d be doing the right thing if I did as Jack had asked. I knew that I wanted to marry him, and the thought that by the following spring I’d be living in a beautiful house in the country and maybe expecting our first baby, filled me with excitement. I’d been working non-stop for thirteen years and there’d been times when I’d wondered if I’d ever be able to get off the treadmill. And because I’d known that once Millie came to live with me I’d no longer be able to travel as I had, or work the long hours that I sometimes worked, I had been nervous about what sort of job I’d end up with. Suddenly, all my worries disappeared and, as I chose wedding invitations to send out to friends and family, I felt I was the luckiest person in the world.

## PRESENT

Jack, meticulous as always, comes up to the bedroom at ten-thirty in the morning and tells me we'll be leaving at eleven o'clock precisely. I'm not worried that I won't be ready in time. I've already showered, so thirty minutes is long enough to dress and put on my make-up. The shower calmed me down a little as, since waking at eight, I've been in a continuous state of excitement, hardly daring to believe that I'll soon be seeing Millie. Ever cautious, I remind myself that anything could happen. Yet the face I present to Jack shows nothing of my inner turmoil. It is calm and composed and, as he stands back to let me pass, I am just an ordinary young woman about to go on a day out.

Jack follows me into the bedroom next door, where my clothes hang. I walk over to the huge wardrobe that runs the length of the wall, slide back the mirrored door, pull out one of the drawers and select the cream-coloured bra and matching knickers which Jack bought me last week. In another drawer I find some flesh-coloured stockings, which I prefer to tights. Jack watches from a chair while I take off my pyjamas and put on my underwear and stockings. Then I slide back the next door and stand for a moment, looking at all the clothes hanging neatly by colour. I haven't worn my blue dress in a long time and it is one that Millie loves because it is the same colour as my eyes. I take it out of the wardrobe.

'Wear the cream one,' Jack says. It's true that he prefers me in neutral colours so I put the blue dress back and put on the cream one.

My shoes are stored in clear boxes on shelves in another part of the wardrobe. I choose a pair of beige shoes with a heel. As we usually go for a walk after lunch, flat ones would be more practical, but Jack likes me to be elegant at all times, whether we're walking around a lake or having dinner with friends. I slip them on, take a matching bag from the shelf and hand it to Jack. I walk over to the dressing table and sit down. It doesn't take me long to do my make-up: a little bit of eye pencil, some blusher and a dash of lipstick. There are still fifteen minutes left so to fill in the time I decide to wear some nail varnish. I choose a pretty pink from the various bottles arrayed on the dresser, wishing I could take it with me and paint Millie's nails, something I know she



would love. When it's dry, I stand up, take my bag from Jack and go downstairs.

'Which coat would you like to wear?' he asks, as we reach the hall.

'My beige wool, I think.'

He fetches it from the cloakroom and helps me on with it. I button it up and turn out the pockets while Jack looks on. He opens the front door and, once he's locked it behind us, I follow him out to the car.

Although we are almost at the end of March, the air is cold. My instinct is to draw it in hard through my nose and gulp it down. Instead, I remind myself that I have the whole day in front of me, and rejoice in that thought. This trip out has been hard won and I intend to make the most of it. As we reach the car, Jack activates the remote control and the huge black gates that front our house begin to open. Walking around to the passenger side of the car, he opens my door for me. I get in and a man jogging past the house looks through the gates towards us. I don't know him but Jack wishes him a good morning and—either because he is too out of breath to speak or because he is saving his energy for the rest of his run—the man acknowledges the greeting with a wave of his hand. Jack closes my door behind me and, less than a minute later, we drive out through the gates. As they swing shut behind us, I turn my head for a glimpse of the beautiful house Jack bought for me, because I like to see it as others see it.

We begin the journey into London and as we drive along, my mind goes back to the dinner party we hosted last night. How I managed to pull it off is still a mystery when there were so many things that could have gone wrong.

'Your soufflés were perfect,' Jack says, telling me that I'm not the only one thinking about the previous evening. 'It was clever of you to predict a delay in getting to the table and allow for it in your calculations, very clever indeed. But Esther doesn't seem to like you very much. I wonder why that is?'

I know I need to choose my words carefully. 'She doesn't appreciate perfection,' I say.

It's an answer that pleases him. He begins to hum a little tune and, as I look at the passing landscape, I find myself thinking about Esther. Under other circumstances, I would probably like her. But her undoubted intelligence makes her dangerous to someone like me. It's not that she doesn't appreciate perfection, as I first thought, it's more that she's suspicious of it.

It takes the best part of an hour to reach Millie's school. I spend the time thinking about Dena Anderson, Jack's client. I don't know much about her apart from the fact that she recently married a wealthy philanthropist, well

respected for his work with various charities and therefore an unlikely candidate in the wife-battering stakes. Still, I know only too well how appearances can be deceiving and if Jack has agreed to take her on as a client she must have a very strong case. Losing is not a word in Jack's vocabulary, as he never ceases to remind me.

We haven't seen Millie for a month so, impatient to see me, she's waiting on the bench outside the front door wrapped up in a yellow hat and scarf—yellow is her favourite colour—with Janice, her carer. When I get out of the car, she rushes over, her eyes bright with tears of relief and, as I hug her tightly, I'm aware of Jack watching us. Janice joins us and I hear Jack telling her that although we knew Millie would be disappointed, we hadn't dared to come and see her until I had completely recovered from the bout of flu that had laid me so low. Janice reassures him that we did the right thing, adding that she had explained to Millie why we couldn't come.

'But it was very hard for her,' she admits. 'She adores you both so much.'

'And we adore her,' Jack says, smiling fondly at Millie.

'Say hello to Jack, Millie,' I remind her quietly and, disentangling herself, she turns to Jack.

'Hello, Jack,' she says, giving him a big smile. 'I happy to see you.'

'And I'm very happy to see you too,' he says, kissing her cheek. 'You do understand why we couldn't come before, don't you?'

Millie nods. 'Yes, poor Grace ill. But better now.'

'Much better,' Jack agrees. 'I have something for you, Millie, for being so patient.' He puts his hand into his coat pocket. 'Can you guess what it is?'

'Agatha Christie?' Her brown eyes light up with pleasure, as there's nothing she loves more than listening to murder mysteries.

'Clever girl.' He takes an audio book from his pocket. 'I don't think you've got *And Then There Were None*, have you?'

She shakes her head.

'It's one of my favourites,' Janice says, smiling. 'Shall we start it tonight, Millie?'

'Yes,' Millie nods. 'Thank you, Jack.'

'It's my pleasure,' Jack tells her. 'And now I'm going to take my two favourite ladies out to lunch. Where would you like to go?'

'Hotel,' says Millie immediately. I know why she has chosen the hotel, just as

I know why Jack is going to refuse.

‘Why don’t we go to the restaurant by the lake?’ he says, as if she hadn’t spoken. ‘Or the one that serves those delicious pancakes for dessert?’ Millie’s face falls. ‘Which would you prefer?’

‘The lake,’ she mutters, her dark hair swinging in front of her face.

Millie doesn’t talk much on the way. She had wanted me to sit in the back of the car with her but Jack told her he would feel as if he was a taxi driver.

When we arrive at the restaurant, Jack finds a parking space and, as we walk up the path he takes our hands, so that we’re on either side of him. The staff greets us like old friends because we often bring Millie here. They show us to the round table in the corner, the one that Jack likes, by the window. We sit as we always do, Jack facing the window and Millie and I sitting on either side of him. As we study our menus, I stretch my leg out under the table and find hers, my secret sign to her.

Jack chats away to Millie during the meal, encouraging her to talk, asking her what she did during the weekends when we didn’t come to see her. She tells us that once Janice took her back to hers for lunch, once they went out for afternoon tea, and once they were both invited to her friend Paige’s house, and not for the first time I thank God that Millie has someone like Janice to step in whenever I can’t be with her.

‘Grace come walk?’ Millie asks once lunch is over. ‘Round lake.’

‘Yes, of course.’ I fold my napkin neatly and place it on the table, my movements deliberately unhurried. ‘Shall we go now?’

Jack pushes back his chair. ‘I’ll come too.’

Even though I didn’t expect anything less, there is still a feeling of crushing disappointment.

‘We go all way round,’ Millie warns.

‘Not all the way around,’ protests Jack. ‘It’s too cold to be outside for long.’

‘Then Jack stay here,’ Millie tells him. ‘I go with Grace.’

‘No,’ says Jack. ‘We’ll all go.’

Millie looks solemnly at Jack from across the table. ‘I like you, Jack,’ she says. ‘But I don’t like Jorj Koony.’

‘I know.’ Jack nods. ‘I don’t like him either.’

‘He ugly,’ says Millie.

‘Yes, he’s very ugly,’ agrees Jack.

And Millie bursts into fits of laughter.

We walk a little way around the lake, Jack walking between me and Millie. Jack tells Millie that he's busy getting her room ready for when she comes to live with us and when she asks if it's going to be yellow, he says that of course it is.

He was right; it is too cold to be outside for very long and after about twenty minutes we head back to the car. Millie is even quieter on the way back to her school and I know she feels the same frustration that I feel. When we say goodbye, she asks if we'll be back to see her the following weekend and when Jack says he's sure we will be, I'm glad that Janice is within earshot.

## PAST

When Jack and I told Millie that we were getting married, the first thing she asked was if she could be our bridesmaid.

‘Of course you can!’ I said, hugging her. ‘That is all right, isn’t it, Jack?’ I added, dismayed to see a frown on his face.

‘I thought we were having a simple wedding,’ he said pointedly.

‘We are, but I’ll still need a bridesmaid.’

‘Really?’

‘Well, yes,’ I said, feeling flustered. ‘It’s traditional. You don’t mind, do you?’

‘Don’t you think it’ll be a bit much for Millie?’ he asked, lowering his voice. ‘If you really need a bridesmaid, why not ask Kate or Emily?’

‘Because I want Millie,’ I insisted, aware of her watching us anxiously.

There was a moment’s awkward silence. ‘Then Millie you shall have,’ he said, smiling and holding his arm out to her. ‘Come on, let’s go and tell your headmistress the good news.’

Mrs Goodrich and Janice were delighted to hear we were getting married. After sending Millie off to wash her hands in preparation for dinner, Mrs Goodrich agreed that it would be best if Millie stayed at school for another fifteen months, until she turned eighteen, as had been planned all along, despite Jack reiterating that he would be quite happy to have Millie move in with us at once. I was glad when Mrs Goodrich suggested it would be nice for us to have some time on our own and I wondered if maybe she’d guessed that we hoped to start a family straight away.

Soon after, we were on our way to Hecclescombe, where Cranleigh Park was every bit as beautiful as Jack had told me it was. It was the perfect setting for a wedding and I was grateful to Giles and Moira, Jack’s friends, for allowing us to use their beautiful home. We didn’t think any of our guests would mind the forty-minute drive from London to be able to spend the afternoon and evening in such a lovely setting, especially as Giles and Moira

kindly offered to put up anyone who couldn't face the drive back to London once dinner was over. After a couple of hours spent deciding on a menu for fifty, which would be cooked and served by a catering company from London, we left for the hotel Jack had booked while I'd been in Argentina.

I couldn't wait for Jack to take me to bed at last, but dinner had to be got through first, because we only arrived in time for our reservation. The meal was delicious but I was impatient to be back in our room.

I went off to have a shower and, when I came out of the bathroom, eager to make love, I was dismayed to find Jack sound asleep on the bed. I didn't have the heart to wake him as I knew he was exhausted—he had confessed to me during dinner that he had almost cancelled our weekend away because of the amount of work he had on but hadn't wanted to let me down. When he eventually stirred a couple of hours later, he was mortified that he had fallen asleep and, gathering me in his arms, he made love to me.

We stayed in bed for most of the next morning and, after a lazy lunch, we headed back to London. Even though it meant that I didn't see Jack for the whole of the following week, I was glad we'd managed to take some time out from the frenzy our imminent wedding had precipitated us into. And not being able to see Jack gave me the chance to finish the painting I had started for him two months previously. Because I rarely had time to work on it I had resigned myself to giving it to him as a wedding present rather than for Christmas, as I had wanted to do, but with Jack busy in the evenings and my suitcases consigned indefinitely to the back of the cupboard, I managed to complete it in time for Christmas Day. I hoped that if he liked it, it would grace the walls of our new home—I could easily imagine it hanging above the fireplace we'd talked about having.

It was a large painting and, at first glance, it seemed to be an abstract design of different shades of red with tiny shots of silver running through it. It was only on closer inspection that one could distinguish the mass of red as hundreds of tiny fireflies—and only Jack and I would know that the mass of red had been created, not from paint, but from lipstick, which I had then sealed with a clear varnish before completing the painting.

I had never told Jack that I enjoyed painting, and even when he had admired one of the canvases that hung in my kitchen I hadn't mentioned that I was the artist. So when I told him on Christmas Day—once I was certain he liked the painting I'd given him—that not only had I painted *Fireflies* myself but that I had created it by kissing the canvas hundreds of times wearing different shades

of red lipstick, he lavished so many compliments on me that I was pleased I had managed to surprise him. He was delighted that I could paint and told me that once we moved into our house, he would expect me to cover the walls with my work.

My house sold quickly. I wanted Jack to put the money I received from the sale towards the house he had found for us in Spring Eaton, but he refused, reminding me that it was his wedding present to me. He had discovered the sleepy village of Spring Eaton whilst driving back from Adam and Diane's one Sunday, and found its situation some twenty miles south of London ideal. Because there was some minor work to be done on the house before we moved in, he didn't want me to see it until we came back from our honeymoon. When I badgered him to tell me what it was like, he simply smiled and told me it was perfect. When I asked if it was like the one in the picture we had drawn up together, he replied solemnly that of course it was. I told him that I wanted to use the money from the sale of my house to furnish our new home as my wedding present to him and, after a lot of persuasion, he agreed. It was strange shopping for furniture for a house I had never seen but Jack knew exactly what he wanted and I couldn't fault his taste.

I left my job a month before we were due to be married and a week later, after I complained teasingly to Jack that the novelty of not having anything to do all day long was wearing off, he appeared on my doorstep carrying a box tied with a red bow. Opening it, I found a three-month-old Labrador puppy staring up at me.

'Jack, she's adorable!' I cried, lifting her out. 'Where did you get her? Is she yours?'

'No, she's yours,' he said. 'Something to keep you busy.'

'She'll certainly do that,' I laughed. I put her down on the ground and she ran around the hall exploring everything. 'But I don't understand what I'm meant to do with her while we're on honeymoon in Thailand. We could ask my parents to have her, I suppose, but I'm not sure they'd agree.'

'Don't worry, it's all arranged. I've found a housekeeper to look after our house while we're away—I don't want it lying empty and there's still some furniture to be delivered, so she's going to live in until we get back—and she's going to look after Molly for us.'

'Molly?' I looked at the puppy. 'Yes, it suits her very well. Millie will be so pleased, she's always wanted a dog. Millie and Molly—they sound perfect together!'

‘That’s exactly what I thought,’ Jack nodded.

‘Millie is going to love her.’

‘And you? Will you love her?’

‘Of course I will!’ I scooped her into my arms. ‘I already do.’ I laughed as she began to lick my face. ‘I’m afraid I’m going to hate leaving her behind when we go to Thailand.’

‘But just think how pleased you’ll be to see her again when we get back. I can already picture your reunion,’ he smiled.

‘I can’t wait to show her to Millie! You’re so wonderfully kind, Jack.’ Leaning towards him, I kissed him tenderly. ‘Molly is exactly what I need to keep me company while you’re at work all day. I hope there are some lovely places to walk in Spring Eaton.’

‘There are plenty, especially along the river.’

‘I can’t wait,’ I told him happily. ‘I can’t wait to see the house and I can’t wait to be married to you!’

‘Neither can I,’ he said, kissing me back. ‘Neither can I.’

With Molly to keep me on my toes, the final weeks flew by. On the day before the wedding, I picked Millie up from school and we dropped Molly off with Jack, who was taking her down to the house that evening to settle her in with the housekeeper. I hated leaving her, but Jack assured me that Mrs Johns, the lady he’d found to house-sit for us, was wonderfully kind and was happy to look after Molly until our return from Thailand. I’d moved into a nearby hotel a few days earlier, after I’d seen the last of my possessions disappear off to Spring Eaton in a removal van, so Millie and I went back there to prepare for the next day. We spent the evening making sure our dresses fitted perfectly and trying out make-up I had bought especially for the wedding. I hadn’t wanted to wear a traditional wedding dress so I’d bought a cream silk dress that reached almost to my ankles and clung to my figure in all the right places, and Millie had chosen a cream dress too, but with a pink sash the exact colour of the bouquet she would carry.

When I put my dress on the next morning, I had never felt so beautiful. The wedding bouquets had arrived at the hotel earlier—pink roses for Millie and a cascade of deep red ones for me. Jack had organised a car to take us to the registry office and when there was a knock on the door at eleven the next morning I sent Millie to answer it.



‘Tell them I’ll be out in a minute,’ I said, disappearing into the bathroom to check myself one last time in the mirror. Satisfied with what I saw, I went back into the bedroom and picked up my bouquet.

‘You look stunning.’ Startled, I looked up and saw Jack standing in the doorway. He looked so handsome in his dark suit and deep red waistcoat that my stomach flipped over. ‘Almost as beautiful as Millie, in fact.’ Next to him, Millie clapped her hands happily.

‘What are you doing here?’ I cried, anxious and delighted at the same time. ‘Has something happened?’

He came over and took me in his arms. ‘I couldn’t wait to see you, that’s all. And also, I have something for you.’ Releasing me, he put his hand in his pocket and drew out a black box. ‘I went to the bank this morning to fetch them.’ Opening the box, I saw an exquisite pearl necklace lying on a bed of black velvet with a matching pair of pearl earrings.

‘Jack, they’re beautiful!’

‘They belonged to my mother. I’d forgotten all about them until last night. I thought you might want to wear them today, which is why I came over. You don’t have to, of course.’

‘I’d love to wear them,’ I told him, lifting out the necklace and undoing the clasp.

‘Here, let me.’ He took them from me and slipped them around my neck. ‘What do you think?’

I turned towards the mirror. ‘I can’t believe how perfectly they match the dress,’ I said, fingering them. ‘They’re exactly the same shade of cream.’ I unclipped the gold earrings I was wearing and replaced them with the pearls.

‘Grace pretty, very, very pretty!’ Millie laughed.

‘I agree,’ said Jack gravely. He put his hand in his other pocket and drew out a smaller box. ‘I have something for you too, Millie.’

When Millie saw the tear-shaped pearl on the silver chain, she gave a gasp of delight. ‘Thank you, Jack,’ she said, beaming. ‘I wear it now.’

‘You’re so kind, Jack,’ I told him as I put it around Millie’s neck. ‘But did you know it’s supposed to be bad luck to see your bride on her wedding day?’

‘Well, I guess I’ll just have to take my chance,’ he smiled.

‘How’s Molly? Did she settle in all right?’

‘Perfectly. Look.’ He took his phone out of his pocket and showed Millie and

me a photograph of Molly curled up asleep in her basket.

‘So the floor has tiles,’ I mused. ‘At least I know one thing about my future home.’

‘And that’s all you’re going to know,’ he said, pocketing his phone. ‘Now, shall we go? The chauffeur was surprised enough when I asked him to pick me up on the way to collect you, so if we don’t go out soon he might think I’ve come to call the whole thing off.’ After offering me and Millie an arm each, he escorted us down to the car and we set off for the registry office.

When we arrived, everyone was there waiting for us, including my parents. They had all but boxed up their house in preparation for their move to New Zealand and were set to leave a fortnight after we got back from our honeymoon. I’d been a bit surprised when they’d told me they were leaving so soon, but when I thought about it, they’d waited a long sixteen years. The previous week, Jack and I had met them for dinner, where they had officially signed Millie over to us, which meant that we were now her legal guardians. All of us were delighted by this arrangement and my parents, perhaps because they felt guilty about Jack shouldering the financial burden, told us that they would of course help out in any way they could. But Jack was adamant that he and I would be responsible for Millie and promised my parents that she would want for nothing.

Our guests were surprised to see Jack stepping out of the car alongside Millie and me, and as we set off up the flight of steps that led to the registry office, they teased him good-naturedly about not being able to resist riding in a Rolls-Royce. Dad was escorting me and Jack was escorting Millie and my Uncle Leonard, whom I hadn’t seen for several years, had given Mum his arm. I was almost at the top of the steps when I heard Millie cry out and, spinning round, saw her tumbling down the steps.

‘Millie!’ I screamed. By the time she came to a stop in a crumpled heap at the bottom of the steps, I was already halfway there. It seemed an age before I managed to push through the throng of people gathered around her and I knelt down beside her, not caring that my dress was getting dirty, only caring that Millie was lying there motionless.

‘It’s all right, Grace, she’s breathing,’ Adam said reassuringly, from where he crouched on the other side of her, as I searched frantically for a pulse. ‘She’ll be fine, you’ll see. Diane’s phoning for an ambulance, it’ll be here in a minute.’

‘What happened?’ I asked, my voice shaking, aware of Mum and Dad

crouching down next to me. I stroked Millie's hair back from her face, not daring to move her.

'Grace, I'm so sorry.' I looked up and saw Jack, his face as white as a sheet. 'She suddenly stumbled—I think her heel got caught in the hem of her dress—and before I knew what was happening, she was falling. I tried to grab her but I couldn't reach her.'

'It's all right,' I said quickly. 'It's not your fault.'

'I should have held on to her more tightly,' he went on desperately, running his hand through his hair. 'I should have remembered that steps aren't always easy for her.'

'I don't like the way her leg is bent,' Dad said quietly. 'It looks as if it's broken.'

'Oh God,' I moaned.

'Look, she's coming round.' Mum took Millie's hand in hers.

'It's all right, Millie,' I murmured as she began to stir. 'It's all right.'

The ambulance arrived in minutes. I wanted to go to the hospital with her but Mum and Dad told me they would go, reminding me that I was meant to be getting married.

'I can't get married now,' I sobbed, as Millie was carried into the ambulance.

'Of course you can,' said Mum briskly. 'Millie's going to be fine.'

'She has a broken leg,' I wept. 'And maybe other injuries we don't know about.'

'I won't blame you if you want to call it off,' Jack said quietly.

'It's just that I don't see how we can go ahead with everything when we don't even know how badly injured Millie is.'

The paramedics were wonderful. Understanding what a difficult situation I was in, they examined Millie as thoroughly as they could in the ambulance and told me that apart from her leg there didn't seem to be any other broken bones and that if I wanted to carry on with my wedding, they were sure my parents would keep me informed of any developments. They also pointed out that as soon as Millie arrived at the hospital, she would be whisked away for X-rays so I wouldn't be able to stay with her anyway. Still torn, I looked over to where Jack was standing talking quietly to Adam and the look of desolation on his face decided me. I clambered into the ambulance and kissed a drowsy Millie goodbye. After promising I would go and see her the next morning, I gave my

parents Jack's mobile number, because mine was in my case, and asked them to let me know as soon as they had any news.

'Are you sure you still want to go ahead?' Jack asked anxiously, once the ambulance had left. 'I don't suppose anyone particularly feels like celebrating after what's happened to Millie. Maybe we should wait until we know that she's definitely going to be all right.'

I looked at our guests, who were milling about, needing to know if our wedding was still taking place or not. 'I think they'll be fine with it if we are.' I turned him to face me. 'Jack, do you still want to get married?'

'Of course I do, more than anything. But, ultimately, it's your decision.'

'Then let's get married. It's what Millie would want,' I lied, because I knew Millie wouldn't understand why we had gone ahead and got married without her. The feeling that I was betraying her made fresh tears well in my eyes and I blinked them away quickly so that Jack wouldn't see, hoping I'd never have to choose between him and Millie again.

Everyone was delighted that we were getting married after all and when Mum phoned a couple of hours later to tell us that Millie was fine apart from a broken leg, I felt weak with relief. I wanted to cut the reception short and go to see her that evening, but Mum said that she was sleeping soundly and, with the painkillers the doctor had given her, she wasn't expected to wake until the following morning anyway. She added that she intended to stay at the hospital overnight, so I told her that Jack and I would stop off to see Millie the next morning, on the way to the airport.

Although I managed to enjoy myself for the rest of the evening, I was glad when the last of our guests had left and Jack and I were finally on our way to our hotel. Because Jack's car was still in London, Moira and Giles had lent us one of theirs so that we could get to the airport the next day and back to Spring Eaton when we returned from Thailand. With a garage full of cars, they insisted that they didn't need it and said we could drop it back whenever we had time.

When we arrived at the hotel where we were to spend our wedding night, I went straight to the bathroom and ran myself a hot bath, leaving Jack to pour himself a whisky while he waited for me. As I lay in the bath, my mind turned again and again to Millie, and I couldn't help being glad that the day was finally over. With the water beginning to get cold, I got out and dried myself hurriedly, eager to see Jack's face when he saw me in the cream silk camisole and knickers I'd bought specially for our wedding night. I slipped them on and,

with a shiver of anticipation, opened the door and walked into the bedroom.

## PRESENT

On the way home in the car from seeing Millie, I mention to Jack that I'm going to have to phone Diane sometime before Friday to tell her that I can't make lunch with her and Esther.

'On the contrary, I think you should go,' he says. Because he's said the same thing many times before I know it doesn't mean anything. 'After all, you've already cancelled twice.' Even those words aren't enough to get my hopes up. But on Friday morning, when he tells me to put on my prettiest dress, I can't help wondering if the moment I've been waiting for has finally come. My mind races so far ahead that I have to remind myself firmly of all the other times I've ended up disappointed. Even when I get into the car beside Jack, I still don't let myself believe that it might happen. But when we drive all the way into town I can't help but believe it, and I begin to plot feverishly, terrified that I'll let the moment slip through my fingers. It's only when Jack parks the car in the road outside the restaurant and gets out that I realise how deluded I've been.

Diane and Esther are already seated. Diane waves and I make my way over, a smile hiding my bitter disappointment, conscious of Jack's hand on my back.

'I'm so glad you could make it,' she says, giving me a quick hug. 'Jack, how nice of you to come and say hello. Is it your lunch hour?'

'I worked from home this morning,' he says. 'And, as I don't have to be in the office until later this afternoon, I was hoping you'd let me gatecrash your lunch—in exchange for me treating you, of course.'

'In that case, you can join us with pleasure,' she laughs. 'I'm sure it won't be any trouble to add an extra place, especially as it's a table for four.'

'Except that we won't be able to talk about you now,' Esther jokes. As Jack purloins a chair from another table, it occurs to me that had she wanted to say anything more damaging, she wouldn't have been able to. Not that it really matters any more.

'I'm sure you've got far more interesting things to talk about than me,' Jack smiles, placing me opposite Esther and signalling to the waitress to bring another place setting.

‘And Grace would only have nice things to say about you anyway, so it wouldn’t be much fun,’ Diane sighs.

‘Oh, I’m sure she’d be able to find a few little imperfections.’ Esther looks at me challengingly. ‘Wouldn’t you, Grace?’

‘I doubt it,’ I say. ‘As you can see, Jack is pretty perfect.’

‘Oh come on, he can’t be that perfect! There must be something!’

I furrow my brow, making a show of giving it some thought, then shake my head regretfully. ‘No, sorry, I really can’t think of anything—unless buying me too many flowers counts. Sometimes it’s hard to find enough vases to put them in.’

Beside me, Diane groans. ‘That is not a fault, Grace.’ She turns to Jack. ‘I don’t suppose you could give Adam a few tips on how to spoil one’s wife, could you?’

‘Don’t forget that Grace and Jack are practically newly-weds compared to all of us,’ Esther points out. ‘And they don’t have children yet. Gallantry tends to fly out of the window once familiarity and babies install themselves in a relationship.’ She pauses a moment. ‘Did you live together for long before you got married?’

‘We didn’t have time to live together,’ Jack explains. ‘We got married less than six months after we met.’

Esther raises her eyebrows. ‘Gosh, that was quick!’

‘Once I knew Grace was the one for me, there didn’t seem to be any point in hanging around,’ he says, taking my hand.

Esther looks over at me, a smile playing at the corner of her mouth. ‘And you didn’t find any skeletons in the closet once you were married?’

‘Not a single one.’ I take the menu the waitress holds out to me and open it eagerly, not only because I want to stop Esther’s interrogation of my relationship with Jack but also because I’m hungry. I scan the dishes on offer and see that their fillet steak comes with mushrooms, onions and French fries. Perfect.

‘Is anybody having anything remotely fattening?’ Diane asks hopefully.

Esther shakes her head. ‘Sorry. I’m going for a salad.’

‘I’m having the fillet steak,’ I tell her. ‘With fries. And I’ll probably have the chocolate fudge cake for dessert,’ I add, knowing that is what she wants to hear.

‘In that case, I’ll join Esther in a salad and you in the fudge cake,’ she says

happily.

‘Would anybody like wine?’ Jack asks, ever the perfect host.

‘No, thank you,’ says Diane, and, regretfully, I resign myself to an alcohol-free lunch because Jack never drinks during the day.

‘I’d love some,’ says Esther. ‘But only if you and Grace have some too.’

‘I won’t,’ says Jack. ‘I have a lot to do this afternoon.’

‘I will,’ I tell Esther. ‘Would you prefer red or white?’

The conversation, while we’re waiting to be served, turns to the local musical festival, which takes place every July and draws people from miles around. We agree that where we all live, we’re near enough to be able to attend the festival easily yet far enough away to not be disturbed by the thousands of people that descend on the town. Although Diane and Adam always go to the festival, Jack and I have never been and we’re soon drawn into Diane’s plans for all of us to go together. In talking about music, we learn that Esther plays the piano and Rufus the guitar and when I admit to not being at all musical, Esther asks me if I like reading and I tell her I do, although I do very little. We talk about the sort of books we like, and Esther mentions a new bestseller that has just come out and asks if we’ve read it. It turns out that none of us have.

‘Would you like me to lend it to you?’ she asks, as the waitress puts our meals on the table.

‘Yes, please.’ I’m so touched that she has offered to lend her book to me rather than to Diane that I forget.

‘I’ll drop it round this afternoon,’ she offers. ‘I don’t teach on Fridays.’

Now I remember. ‘You might have to leave it in the letter box. If I’m in the garden, which I probably will be, I won’t hear the bell.’

‘I’d love to see your garden sometime,’ she enthuses. ‘Especially after what Jack said about you having green fingers.’

‘There’s no need for you to drive over,’ says Jack, neatly sidestepping the massive hint she’s just dropped. ‘Grace can buy the book for herself.’

‘It’s really no problem.’ Esther eyes her salad appreciatively. ‘Gosh, this looks lovely.’

‘In fact, we’ll go and buy a copy as soon as we’ve finished here. Smith’s is just around the corner.’

‘Is it just on Fridays that you don’t work?’ I ask, wanting to change the subject.



‘No, I don’t work Tuesdays either. One of the other teachers and I job-share.’

‘I’d love to be able to do that,’ says Diane wistfully. ‘It’s hard working full-time when you’ve got children. But I’d hate to give up working altogether, which is the only alternative because my firm haven’t heard of job-sharing yet.’

Esther looks over at me. ‘I can’t believe you don’t miss working. I mean, you had a pretty exciting job before you got married.’

I busy myself cutting a piece of steak, because it’s hard being reminded of the life I used to have. ‘Not at all—I have plenty to keep me occupied.’

‘So what are your other hobbies, apart from painting, gardening and reading?’

‘Oh, a bit of this and a bit of that,’ I say, realising how lame it sounds.

‘What Grace hasn’t told you is that she makes a lot of her own clothes,’ Jack intervenes. ‘Just the other day, she made herself a lovely dress.’

‘Really?’ Esther looks at me with interest.

Used to thinking on my feet, I don’t bat an eyelid. ‘It was just a dress to wear around the house,’ I explain. ‘Nothing fancy. I don’t make clothes to wear out in the evening or anything too complicated.’

‘I didn’t know you were good with a needle.’ Diane’s eyes gleam. ‘I’d love to be able to sew.’

‘Me too,’ says Esther. ‘Perhaps you could teach me, Grace.’

‘Maybe we could start a sewing circle with you as our teacher,’ Diane suggests.

‘I’m really not that good,’ I protest, ‘which is why I’ve never mentioned it before. I’m too worried people will ask to see something I’ve made.’

‘Well, if you sew anything like you cook, I’m sure the dress you made is beautiful!’

‘You’ll have to show it to us sometime,’ Esther says.

‘I will,’ I promise. ‘But only if you don’t ask me to make you one.’

The constant need to field her remarks makes me feel so tense that I consider skipping dessert, something I wouldn’t normally do. But if I don’t have one, Diane won’t, and because Esther has just professed herself too full to eat another thing, it means that the meal can be rounded up quickly. I weigh the pros and cons but in the end the lure of chocolate fudge cake is too strong. I take another sip of wine, hoping to stave off more of Esther’s questioning,

wishing she would turn her attention to Diane for a while.

As if reading my mind, she asks Diane about her son. His eating habits is one of Diane's favourite topics of conversation, so I get a few minutes' reprieve while the conversation revolves around how best to get children to eat vegetables they don't like. Jack listens attentively, as if the subject is of real interest to him and my mind turns to Millie, worrying how she will take it if I'm not able to go and see her over the weekend, because it's getting harder and harder to explain my absences to her. Once, it would never have occurred to me to wish her to be any different to how she has always been. Now, I'm constantly wishing that she didn't have Down's, that she wasn't dependent on me, that she could live her own life instead of having to share mine.

Called abruptly back to the present by Diane ordering my dessert for me, I tell Esther, when she asks what I was dreaming about, that I was thinking about Millie. Diane asks if we've seen her recently so I tell her that we saw her the previous Sunday and that Jack took us out for a lovely lunch. I wait for someone to ask if we'll be going to see her again this weekend, but nobody does, so I am none the wiser.

'She must be looking forward to coming to live with you,' Esther says, as the desserts arrive.

'Yes, she is,' I agree.

Jack smiles. 'We're looking forward to it too.'

'What does she think of the house?'

I reach for my glass. 'Actually, she hasn't seen it yet.'

'But didn't you move in a year ago?'

'Yes, but we want everything to be perfect before she sees it,' Jack explains.

'It looked pretty perfect to me when I saw it,' she remarks.

'Her room isn't quite finished yet, but I'm having so much fun doing it up, aren't I, darling?' To my horror, I feel tears welling up inside me and bow my head quickly, conscious of Esther's eyes on me.

'What colour will it be?' asks Diane.

'Red,' says Jack. 'It's her favourite colour.' He nods at my chocolate fudge cake. 'Eat up, darling.'

I pick up my spoon, wondering how I'm going to be able to do as he says.

'It looks delicious,' says Esther. 'I don't suppose you want to share it with me, do you?'

I hesitate, feigning reluctance, wondering why I'm bothering because I won't have fooled Jack. 'Help yourself,' I say, offering her my fork.

'Thank you.' She spears a piece of the cake. 'Did you and Jack come in separate cars?'

'No, we came together.'

'Then I'll drop you back, if you like.'

'It's fine, I intend taking Grace home before going into the office,' Jack says.

'Isn't that a bit of a detour?' she frowns. 'You can get straight on the motorway to London from here. I'll take her home, Jack, it's really no problem.'

'That's very kind of you, but there are some documents that I need to pick up before seeing one of my clients later this afternoon.' He pauses. 'It's a shame I didn't bring them with me, because I would have let you take Grace home with pleasure.'

'Another time, then.' Esther turns to me. 'Grace, perhaps we can exchange telephone numbers? I'd like to have you all around to dinner, but I need to check with Rufus to see when he's free. He has a trip to Berlin coming up and I'm not sure when it is.'

'Of course.' I give her our home number and she taps it into her mobile.

'And your mobile?'

'I don't have one.'

She does a double take. 'You don't have a mobile?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'Because I don't see the need for one.'

'But everybody over the age of ten and under the age of eighty has one!'

'Well, not me,' I say, amused—despite myself—at her reaction.

'I know, it's incredible, isn't it?' says Diane. 'I've tried to persuade her to buy one but she isn't interested.'

'But how on earth does anybody get hold of you when you're out and about?' wonders Esther.

I shrug. 'They don't.'

'Which is quite a good thing,' says Diane dryly. 'I can't go shopping without

Adam or one of the children phoning to ask me to get them something, or to find out when I'll be back. The number of times I've been standing at the checkout in Tesco trying to load all my shopping into bags while trying to sort out something at home doesn't bear thinking about.'

'But what if you have a problem?' asks Esther, still trying to get her head round it.

'People managed perfectly well before without mobiles,' I point out.

'Yes, back in the Dark Ages.' She turns to Jack. 'Jack, buy your wife a mobile, for God's sake!'

Jack opens his hands in a gesture of defeat. 'I'd be only too happy to. But I know that if I did, she wouldn't use it.'

'I can't believe that—not once she realises how practical they are.'

'Jack's right, I wouldn't,' I confirm.

'Please tell me you have a computer.'

'Yes, of course I do.'

'Then could I have your email address?'

'Sure. It's *jackangel@court.com*.'

'Isn't that Jack's address?'

'It's mine too.'

She raises her head and looks at me quizzically from across the table. 'Don't you have your own address?'

'What for? Jack and I don't have any secrets from each other. And if people email me, it's usually to invite us for dinner, or something else that concerns Jack too, so it's easier if he sees the messages as well.'

'Especially as Grace often forgets to tell me things,' Jack says, smiling indulgently at me.

Esther looks thoughtfully at the two of us. 'You really are a joined-at-the-hip couple, aren't you? Well, as you haven't got a mobile, I suppose you'll have to resort to pen and paper to take my numbers down. Have you got a pen?'

I know that I don't. 'I'm not sure,' I say, intending to make a show of looking for one. I reach for my bag, which I had slung over the back of my chair, but she gets there first and hands it to me.

'Goodness, it feels empty!'

'I travel light,' I tell her, opening my bag and peering inside. 'No, sorry, I

don't have one.'

'It's all right, I'll get them.' Jack takes out his mobile. 'I already have your home number, Esther, from Rufus, so if you just give me your mobile?'

As she reels it off, I try desperately to commit it to memory, but I get lost somewhere near the end. I close my eyes and try to retrieve the last few numbers but it's impossible.

'Thanks, Esther,' says Jack. I open my eyes and find Esther looking at me curiously from across the table. 'I'll write it down for Grace when we get home.'

'Wait a minute—is it 721 or 712 in the middle?' Esther furrows her brow. 'I can never remember which it is. The end is easy enough—9146—it's the bit before I have a problem with. Could you just check, Diane?'

Diane gets out her phone and locates Esther's number. 'It's 712,' she says.

'Oh yes—07517129146. Did you get that, Jack?'

'Yes, it's fine. Right, anyone for coffee?'

But we don't bother, because Diane has to get back to work and Esther doesn't want any. Jack asks for the bill and Diane and Esther disappear off to the toilet. I would like to go too, but I don't bother following them. The bill paid, Jack and I take leave of the others and walk towards the car park.

'Well, did you enjoy that, my perfect little wife?' Jack asks, opening the car door for me.

I recognise one of his million-dollar questions. 'Not really.'

'Not even the dessert you were so looking forward to?'

I swallow hard. 'Not as much as I thought I would.'

'It's lucky Esther was able to help you out then, wasn't it?'

'I would have eaten it anyway,' I tell him.

'And deprived me of so much pleasure?'

A tremor goes through my body. 'Absolutely.'

He raises his eyebrows. 'Do I detect a renewal of your fighting spirit? I'm so glad. To tell the truth, I've been getting quite bored.' He gives me an amused glance. 'Bring it on, Grace—I'm waiting for you.'

## PAST

That evening, the evening of my wedding day, when I stepped into the bedroom after my bath, I was dismayed to find it empty. Presuming that Jack had gone off to make a phone call, I felt irritated that something could be more important to him on our wedding day than me. But my irritation quickly turned to anxiety when I remembered that Millie was in hospital and in the space of a couple of seconds I managed to convince myself that something terrible had happened to her, that Mum had phoned Jack to tell him, and that he had left the room because he didn't want me to hear their conversation.

I ran to the bedroom door and flung it open, expecting to see Jack pacing up and down the corridor, trying to work out how to break some tragic news to me. But it was empty. Guessing he had gone down to the lobby and not wanting to waste time going to find him, I searched through my luggage, which had been dropped off at the hotel by the chauffeur, dug out my phone and rang Mum's mobile. As I waited to be connected, it occurred to me that if she was talking to Jack, I wouldn't be able to get through to her anyway. I was about to hang up and call Dad's mobile instead when I heard her phone ringing and, soon after, her voice.

'Mum, what's happened?' I cried before she'd even finished saying hello. 'Has there been a complication or something?'

'No, everything's fine.' Mum sounded surprised.

'So Millie's all right?'

'Yes, she's sound asleep.' She paused. 'Are you all right? You sound agitated.'

I sat down on the bed, weak with relief. 'Jack's disappeared so I thought that maybe you'd phoned with bad news and that he'd gone to talk to you in private,' I explained.

'What do you mean, "disappeared"?'

'Well, he's not in the room. I went into the bathroom to have a bath and when I came out he was gone.'

‘He’s probably gone down to the reception for something. I’m sure he’ll be back in a minute. How did the wedding go?’

‘Fine, really well, considering that I couldn’t stop thinking about Millie. I hated that she wasn’t there. She’s going to be so disappointed when she realises that we went ahead and got married without her.’

‘I’m sure she’ll understand,’ Mum soothed, and I felt furious at how little she knew Millie, because of course she wouldn’t understand. I was appalled to find I was near to tears, but after all that had happened, Jack’s disappearing act was the last straw. Telling Mum that I would see her at the hospital the next morning, I asked her to give Millie a kiss for me and hung up.

As I dialled Jack’s mobile, I told myself to calm down. We had never rowed before and shouting at him down the phone like a fishwife wouldn’t achieve anything. Something had obviously come up with one of his clients, a last-minute problem that he needed to sort out before we left for Thailand. He would be just as annoyed at being disturbed on his wedding day as I was.

I was relieved when I heard his phone ringing, relieved that he wasn’t on the phone to someone, hoping it meant that the problem—whatever it was—had been sorted. When he didn’t pick up I stifled a cry of frustration and left a message on his voicemail.

‘Jack, where on earth are you? Could you phone me back, please?’

I hung up and began to pace the room restlessly, wondering where he had gone. My eyes fell on the clock on the bedside table and I saw that it was nine o’clock. I tried to imagine why Jack hadn’t answered his phone, why he hadn’t been able to take my call and wondered if one of the other partners had come to the hotel to talk to him. When another ten minutes had gone by, I dialled his number again. This time it went straight through to his voicemail.

‘Jack, please phone me back,’ I said sharply, knowing he must have turned his mobile off after my last call. ‘I need to know where you are.’

I heaved my suitcase onto the bed, opened it and took out the beige trousers and shirt I planned to wear for travelling the following day. Pulling them on over my camisole and knickers, I dressed quickly, put the key card into my pocket and left the room, taking my telephone with me. Too agitated to wait for the lift, I took the stairs down to the lobby and headed for the reception desk.

‘Mrs Angel, isn’t it?’ The young man behind the desk smiled at me. ‘How can I help you?’

‘Actually, I’m looking for my husband. Have you seen him anywhere?’

‘Yes, he came down about an hour ago, not long after you checked in.’

‘Do you know where he went? Did he go to the bar, by any chance?’

He shook his head. ‘He went out through the front doors. I presumed he was going to fetch something from the car.’

‘Did you see him come back in?’

‘Now that you mention it, no, I didn’t. But I was busy checking in another client at one point, so it could be that I didn’t see him.’ He eyed the phone in my hand. ‘Have you tried phoning him?’

‘Yes, but his mobile’s switched off. He’s probably in the bar, drowning his sorrows that he’s now a married man.’ I smiled, trying to make light of it. ‘I’ll go and have a look.’

I made my way to the bar but there was no sign of Jack. I checked the various lounges, the fitness room and the swimming pool. On the way to check the two restaurants, I left another message on his voicemail, my voice breaking with anxiety.

‘No luck?’ The receptionist gave me a sympathetic look as I arrived back in the lobby on my own.

I shook my head. ‘I’m afraid I can’t find him anywhere.’

‘Have you looked if your car is still in the car park? At least you’d know whether or not he’d left the hotel.’

I went out through the front doors and followed the path round to the car park at the back of the hotel. The car wasn’t where Jack had left it nor was it anywhere else. Not wanting to go back through the lobby and face the receptionist again, I went in through the back door and ran up the stairs to the bedroom, praying that I would find Jack already there, that he would have arrived back while I’d been out looking for him. When I found the bedroom empty, I burst into tears of frustration. I told myself that the fact the car was missing went some way to explaining why he hadn’t answered his phone, because he never answered his phone while he was driving. But if he’d had to go back to the office on urgent business, why hadn’t he knocked on the bathroom door and told me? And if he hadn’t wanted to disturb me in my bath, why hadn’t he at least left me a note?

Increasingly worried, I dialled his number and left a tearful message saying that if I didn’t hear from him within the next ten minutes I was going to phone the police. I knew that the police would be my last port of call, that before phoning them I would phone Adam, but I hoped that in mentioning the police



Jack would realise just how worried I was.

They were the longest ten minutes of my life. Then, just as I was about to call Adam, my phone beeped, telling me I'd received a text message. Letting out a shaky sigh of relief, I opened it and when I saw that it was from Jack, tears of relief fell from my eyes, making it impossible to read what he had written. But it didn't matter because I knew what it would say, I knew it would say that he'd been called away unexpectedly, that he was sorry I'd been worried but that he hadn't been able to answer his phone because he'd been in a meeting, that he'd be back soon and that he loved me.

I reached for a tissue from the box on the desk, wiped my eyes, blew my nose and looked at the message again.

*'Don't be so hysterical, it doesn't suit you. Something's come up, I'll see you in the morning.'*

Stunned, I sat down on the bed, reading the message over and over again, convinced I had misunderstood it in some way. I couldn't believe that Jack would have written something so cruel or been so cutting. He had never spoken to me in such a way before, he had never even raised his voice to me. I felt as if I'd been slapped in the face. And why wouldn't he be back until the following morning? Surely I deserved some explanation and, at the very least, an apology? Suddenly furious, I called him back, trembling with anger, daring him to answer his phone and, when he didn't, I had to force myself not to leave a voicemail that I would later regret.

I needed to talk to someone, badly, so it was sobering to realise there was no one I could call. My parents and I didn't have the sort of relationship that would allow me to sob down the phone that Jack had left me by myself on our wedding night and for some reason I felt too ashamed to tell any of my friends. I would normally have confided in Kate or Emily, but at the wedding I realised how much I'd neglected them since I met Jack, so I didn't feel able to call them either. I thought about phoning Adam to see if he knew why Jack had been called away so suddenly but as they didn't work in the same field, I doubted he would know. And again, there was the feeling of shame that something could be more important to Jack on our wedding night than me.

Stemming the tears that fell from my eyes with a tissue, I made an effort to understand. If he was with one of the other lawyers, I reasoned, locked in some delicate meeting, it was normal that he had turned his phone off after my first attempt to contact him so that he wouldn't be further disturbed. He had probably intended to phone me back as soon as he had a chance, but the

meeting must have gone on longer than expected. Maybe during a quick break he had listened to my messages and, angry at my tone of voice, had retaliated by sending me a sharp text message instead of phoning me. And maybe he had guessed that if he did speak to me, I'd be so overwrought that he wouldn't have been able to get back to his meeting until he'd calmed me down.

It all sounded so plausible that I regretted acting as hysterically as I had. Jack had been right to be angry with me. I had already seen how his work could impinge on our relationship—God knew how many times he had been too tired or too stressed for sex—and he had already apologised for it, and had begged me to understand that the very nature of his work meant that he couldn't always be there, both mentally and physically, for me. I had been proud of the fact that we had never rowed but now, I had fallen at the first hurdle.

I wanted nothing more but to see Jack, to tell him how sorry I was, to feel his arms around me, to hear him say that he forgave me. Reading his message again, I realised that when he said he'd see me in the morning, he probably meant the small hours. Feeling much calmer, and suddenly very tired, I got undressed and climbed into bed, relishing the thought of being woken before too long by Jack making love to me. I just had time to hope that Millie was still sleeping soundly before I fell into a deep sleep.

It hadn't occurred to me that Jack might be spending the night with another woman, but it was the first thought that entered my mind when I woke sometime after eight the next morning and realised that he hadn't come back after all. Fighting down panic, I reached for my mobile, expecting to find a message from him, if only to say at what time he would be at the hotel. But there was nothing, and because there was the possibility that he'd decided to snatch a couple of hours' sleep in the office rather than disturb me, I was reluctant to phone him in case I woke him up. But I was desperate to speak to him, so I called him anyway. When I got his voicemail, I took a deep breath and left a message in as normal a tone as I could muster, asking him to let me know what time I could expect him at the hotel and telling him that we needed to call by the hospital to see Millie on the way to the airport. Then I showered, dressed and sat down to wait.

As I waited, I realised that I didn't even know what time our flight was due to leave. I vaguely remembered Jack saying something about an afternoon flight so I guessed that we would have to be at the airport at least a couple of hours before. When I eventually received a text message from Jack, almost an hour later, I was again bewildered by its tone. There was no apology, no mention of anything except an order to meet him in the hotel car park at eleven. By the

time I struggled into the lift with our two suitcases and my hand luggage, my stomach was churning with anxiety. As I handed the room key in at the reception, I was glad that the man I had spoken to the night before had been replaced by a young woman who, I hoped, knew nothing of my missing husband.

A porter helped me take the luggage out to the car park. I told him that my husband had gone to fill the car with petrol and headed for a nearby bench, ignoring his suggestion that I'd be better off waiting in the warmth of the hotel. I hadn't wanted to take a heavy coat with me to Thailand and because I'd expected to go from the hotel to the car to the airport, barely venturing out into the open, I was only wearing a jacket which was no match for the vicious wind that whipped across the car park. By the time Jack showed up twenty-five minutes later, I was blue with cold and on the verge of tears. Stopping the car only feet away from me, he got out and walked over to where I was sitting.

'Get in,' he said, picking up the cases and loading them into the boot.

Too cold to argue, I stumbled into the car and huddled against the door, wanting only to feel warm again. I waited for him to speak, to say something—anything—which would go some way to explaining why I felt as if I was sitting next to someone I didn't know. When the silence had gone on for too long, I summoned up the courage to look at him. The lack of emotion on his face shocked me. I had expected to see anger, stress or irritation. But there was nothing.

'What's going on, Jack?' I asked unsteadily. It was as if I hadn't spoken. 'For God's sake, Jack!' I cried. 'What the hell is going on?'

'Please don't swear,' he said distastefully.

I looked at him in amazement. 'What do you expect? You disappear without a word, leaving me to spend our wedding night alone and then you turn up half an hour late to fetch me, leaving me waiting in the freezing cold! Surely I have a right to be angry!'

'No,' he said. 'You don't. You have no rights at all.'

'Don't be ridiculous! Is there someone else, Jack? Is that what all this is about? Are you in love with somebody else? Is that where you were last night?'

'Now it's you who's being ridiculous. You're my wife, Grace. Why would I need anybody else?'

Defeated, I shook my head miserably. 'I don't understand. Is there some problem at work, something you can't tell me about?'

‘I’ll explain everything when we’re in Thailand.’

‘Why can’t you tell me now? Please, Jack, tell me what’s wrong.’

‘In Thailand.’

I wanted to tell him that I didn’t particularly feel like going to Thailand with him in the mood he was in, but I took comfort in the fact that, once there, I would at least have an explanation as to why our marriage had got off to such a bad start. Because his mood seemed to be related to some sort of problem at work, I couldn’t help feeling apprehensive that it might be something I’d be seeing a lot more of in the future. I was so busy working out how I would adjust to being married to a man I hadn’t known existed that it was a while before I realised we were heading straight out to the airport.

‘What about Millie?’ I cried. ‘We’re meant to be going to see her!’

‘I’m afraid it’s too late,’ he said. ‘We should have turned off miles back.’

‘But I told you in my message that we had to stop by the hospital!’

‘Well, as you didn’t mention anything about it when you got into the car, I thought you’d changed your mind. Besides, we don’t really have time.’

‘But our flight isn’t until this afternoon!’

‘It leaves at three, which means we have to check in at twelve.’

‘But I promised her! I told Millie I’d go and see her this morning!’

‘When? When did you tell her that? I don’t remember.’

‘When she was in the ambulance!’

‘She was unconscious, so she’ll hardly remember.’

‘That’s not the point! Anyway, I told Mum that we’d call in and she’ll have told Millie.’

‘If you had checked with me first I would have told you that it wouldn’t be possible.’

‘How could I check with you when you weren’t there! Jack, please turn back, we have plenty of time. The check-in may open at twelve but it won’t close until much later. I won’t stay long, I promise, I just want to see her.’

‘It’s out of the question, I’m afraid.’

‘Why are you being like this?’ I cried. ‘You know what Millie’s like, you know she won’t understand if I don’t turn up.’

‘Then phone her and explain. Phone her and tell her you got it wrong.’

Frustrated, I burst into tears. ‘I didn’t get it wrong,’ I sobbed. ‘We have

plenty of time, you know we do!’

He had never seen me cry before and, although I felt ashamed at resorting to tears, I hoped he would realise how unreasonable he was being. So when he swung the car off the road, taking an exit to a service station at the last minute, I wiped my eyes and blew my nose, thinking he was going to turn back.

‘Thank you,’ I said as he brought the car to a standstill.

Switching off the ignition, he turned towards me. ‘Listen to me, Grace, and listen carefully. If you want to go and see Millie, you can. You can get out of the car now and take a taxi to the hospital. But I’m going on to the airport and if you choose to go to the hospital, you won’t be coming to Thailand with me. It’s as simple as that.’

I shook my head, making fresh tears cascade down my cheeks. ‘I don’t believe you,’ I wept. ‘You wouldn’t make me choose between you and Millie, not if you loved me.’

‘But that is exactly what I’m doing.’

‘How can I choose?’ I looked at him in anguish. ‘I love both of you!’

He gave a sigh of irritation. ‘It saddens me that you’re making such a song and dance about it. Surely it should be simple. Are you really going to throw away our marriage simply because I refuse to turn back to see Millie when we’re already well on the way to the airport? Is that how little I mean to you?’

‘No, of course not,’ I gulped, swallowing down my tears.

‘And don’t you think I’ve been very generous in the past, never complaining about the amount of time we have to spend with Millie each weekend?’

‘Yes,’ I said miserably.

He nodded, satisfied. ‘So what’s it to be, Grace? The airport or the hospital? Your husband or your sister?’ He paused a moment. ‘Me, or Millie?’

‘You, Jack,’ I said quietly. ‘You, of course.’

‘Good. Now, where’s your passport?’

‘In my bag,’ I mumbled.

‘Can I have it?’

I picked up my bag, took out my passport and handed it to him.

‘Thank you,’ he said, slipping it into the inside pocket of his jacket. Without another word, he put the car into gear, drove out of the service station and back onto the motorway.

Despite what had happened, I couldn't really believe that he wouldn't take me to see Millie and I wondered if what had just happened had been some kind of test, and that because I had chosen him over her, he was now going to take me to the hospital. When I saw that we were once again heading for the airport, I felt desperate, not just because of Millie but also because, in the six months since I had met Jack, I had never even glimpsed this side of his character. I had never guessed that he could be anything but the kindest, most reasonable man in the universe. All my instincts told me to ask him to stop the car and let me out, but I was scared of what would happen if I did. In the mood he was in, there was no way of knowing if he would do as he had threatened and go on to Thailand without me. And, if he did, where would that leave me, us, our marriage? By the time we got to the airport I felt sick with stress.

As we stood in the queue waiting to check in, Jack suggested that I phone Mum to tell her that we'd been unable to call in at the hospital, telling me that the sooner I did, the better it would be for all concerned. Still bewildered by his attitude, I did as he asked and when my call went straight through to Mum's voicemail I didn't know whether to be upset or relieved. On balance, I decided it was probably just as well that I couldn't speak to Millie, and left a message explaining that because I had made a mistake with the time of our flight, I wouldn't be able to call in after all. I asked Mum to give Millie a kiss from me and to tell her that I would call once we got to Thailand. As I hung up, Jack smiled and took my hand in his, and, for the first time ever, I wanted to snatch it away again.

When it was time for us to approach the desk, Jack was so utterly charming to the hostess, explaining we were newly-weds and that we had had a disastrous wedding day because our bridesmaid, who had Down's syndrome, had fallen down the stairs and broken her leg, that we were upgraded to first class. But it didn't make me feel any better—if anything, the fact that he had used Millie's condition to gain sympathy disgusted me. The old Jack would never have done such a thing and the thought of spending the next two weeks with someone who had become a virtual stranger was terrifying. Yet the alternative—telling Jack I didn't want to go to Thailand with him—was equally so. As we went through passport control, I couldn't shake the feeling that I was making the biggest mistake of my life.

I felt even more confused in the departure lounge when Jack sat and read the paper with his arm draped around my shoulders as if he didn't have a care in the world. I refused champagne when it was offered to us, hoping Jack would understand that I wasn't in the mood for a celebration. But he accepted a glass

readily, seemingly unaffected by the chasm that now existed between us. I tried to tell myself that what had happened between us was nothing more than a lovers' tiff, a momentary blip on the path to a long and happy marriage, but I knew it was more serious than that. Desperate to understand where we had gone wrong, I went over everything that had happened since I'd stepped out of the bathroom less than twenty-four hours earlier, and when I remembered the panicked messages I'd left on his phone, I began to wonder if I was the one in the wrong. But I knew I wasn't, I knew it was Jack's fault, it was just that I was so tired I couldn't work out why. Suddenly, I couldn't wait to be on the plane, hoping that after being pampered for fourteen hours I would arrive in Thailand in a better frame of mind.

Because I had also refused to eat anything in the departure lounge, I was desperately hungry by the time we boarded, as I'd been too upset to eat breakfast. Jack was solicitous as we settled into our seats, making sure I had everything I needed, and my mood began to lift slightly. As I began to relax, I could feel my eyes closing.

'Tired?' Jack asked.

'Yes.' I nodded. 'And very hungry. If I fall asleep could you wake me for dinner?'

'Of course.'

I was gone before the plane had even taken off. When I eventually opened my eyes again, the cabin was in darkness and everyone seemed to be sleeping. Only Jack was awake, reading the newspaper.

I looked at him in dismay. 'I thought I asked you to wake me for dinner?'

'I thought it better not to disturb you. But don't worry, they'll be serving breakfast in a couple of hours.'

'I can't wait a couple of hours; I haven't eaten since yesterday!'

'Then ask one of hostesses to bring you something.'

I stared at him over the divide between us. In our other life, before we'd got married, he would have rung for the hostess himself. Where had the perfect gentleman I'd thought him to be gone? Had it all been a facade, had he covered his true self with a cloak of geniality and good humour to impress me? Aware of my eyes on him, he put down his paper.

'Who are you, Jack?' I asked quietly.

'Your husband,' he said. 'I am your husband.' Taking my hand in his, he raised it to his lips and kissed it. 'For better or for worse. In sickness and in

health. Till death do us part.' Letting go of my hand, he pushed the button, summoning the hostess. She came immediately.

'Could you bring my wife something to eat, please? She missed dinner, I'm afraid.'

'Certainly, sir,' she smiled.

'There,' said Jack, once she'd left. 'Happy?' He turned back towards his newspaper and I was glad he couldn't see the tears of pathetic gratitude that had pricked my eyes. When my food was brought, I ate it quickly and, not particularly wanting to talk to Jack, I slept until we began our descent into Bangkok.

Jack had insisted on making all the arrangements for our honeymoon because he wanted it to be a surprise for me. He had already been to Thailand several times and knew the best places to stay, so, even though I had hinted heavily about Koh Samui, I had little idea of where we were actually going. I couldn't help feeling disappointed when, rather than head for domestic departures, Jack led me towards the taxi rank. Soon, we were on our way into the centre of Bangkok and I couldn't help feeling excited by the hustle and bustle of the city, although a little appalled at the noise. When the taxi slowed down in front of a hotel called The Golden Temple, my spirits lifted even more as it was one of the most beautiful hotels I had ever seen. But, instead of coming to a stop, the taxi continued on its way until we arrived in front of a good but less luxurious hotel three hundred metres further down the road. The lobby was better than its facade, but when we arrived in our room and found the bathroom to be so small that Jack would have trouble using the shower, I fully expected him to turn around and leave at once.

'Perfect,' he said, taking off his jacket and hanging it in the wardrobe. 'This will do nicely.'

'Jack, you can't be serious.' I looked around the room. 'Surely we can do better than this?'

'It's time to wake up, Grace.'

He looked so solemn I wondered why it hadn't occurred to me that he might have lost his job, and the more I thought about it the more I realised that I had found the perfect explanation for his sudden change of character. If he had been told sometime on Friday evening, I reasoned, my mind darting back and forth as I tried to work it out, he had probably gone back to the office on Saturday, while I was having my bath, to try to sort things out with the other partners before we left on honeymoon. Of course he wouldn't have wanted to tell me



during our wedding, of course my visit to Millie must have seemed paltry compared to what he was going through! No wonder he had wanted to wait until we were in Thailand to tell me what had happened and, as he had obviously changed our hotel reservation for something cheaper, I prepared myself to hear that he hadn't managed to negotiate his job back.

'What's happened?' I asked.

'The dream is over, I'm afraid.'

'It doesn't matter,' I said reassuringly, telling myself that it could be the best thing to happen to us. 'We'll manage.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, I'm sure you'll be able to find another job easily—or you could even set up on your own if you wanted. And, if things are really tight, I could always go back to work. I wouldn't be able to have my old job back, but I'm sure they'd take me on in some capacity or other.'

He gave me an amused look. 'I haven't lost my job, Grace.'

I stared at him. 'Then what is this all about?'

He shook his head sorrowfully. 'You should have chosen Millie, you really should have.'

I felt a prickle of fear run down my spine. 'What's going on?' I asked, trying to keep my voice calm. 'Why are you being like this?'

'Do you realise what you've done, do you realise that you've sold your soul to me? And Millie's, for that matter.' He paused. 'Especially Millie's.'

'Stop it!' I said sharply. 'Stop playing games with me!'

'It's not a game.' The calmness of his voice sent panic shooting through me. I felt my eyes dart around the room, subconsciously looking for a way out. 'It's too late,' he said, noticing. 'Far too late.'

'I don't understand,' I said, choking back a sob. 'What is it that you want?'

'Exactly what I've got—you, and Millie.'

'You haven't got Millie and you certainly haven't got me.' Snatching up my handbag, I looked angrily at him. 'I'm going back to London.'

He let me get as far as the door. 'Grace?'

I took my time turning round because I wasn't sure how I was going to react when he told me what I knew he was going to tell me, that it had all been some kind of stupid joke. Neither did I want him to see how relieved I was, because I couldn't bear to think what would have happened if he had let me step over the

threshold.

‘What?’ I asked coolly.

He put his hand in his pocket and drew out my passport. ‘Aren’t you forgetting something?’ Holding it between his finger and thumb, he dangled it in front of me. ‘You can’t go to England without it, you know. In fact, you can’t go anywhere without it.’

I held out my hand. ‘Give it to me, please.’

‘No.’

‘Give me my passport, Jack! I mean it!’

‘Even if I were to give it to you, how would you get to the airport without money?’

‘I have money,’ I said haughtily, glad that I had bought some baht before we’d left. ‘I also have a credit card.’

‘No,’ he said, shaking his head regretfully, ‘you don’t. Not anymore.’

Unzipping my handbag quickly, I saw that my purse was missing, as was my mobile phone.

‘Where’s my purse, and my phone? What have you done with them?’ I lunged for his travel bag and scrabbled through it, looking for them.

‘You won’t find them in there,’ he said, amused. ‘You’re wasting your time.’

‘Do you really think you can keep me a prisoner here? That I won’t be able to get away if I want to?’

‘That,’ he said solemnly, ‘is where Millie comes in.’

I felt myself go cold. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Put it this way—what do you think will happen to her if I stop paying her school fees? An asylum, perhaps?’

‘I’ll pay her fees—I have enough money from the sale of my house.’

‘You paid that money over to me, remember, to buy furniture for our new house, which I did. As for what was left over—well, it’s mine now. You don’t have any money, Grace, none at all.’

‘Then I’ll go back to work. And I’ll sue you for the rest of my money,’ I added savagely.

‘No, you won’t. For a start, you won’t be going back to work.’

‘You can’t stop me.’

‘Of course I can.’

‘How? This is the twenty-first century, Jack. If all of this is really happening, if it isn’t some kind of sick joke, do you really think I’m going to stay married to you?’

‘Yes, because you’ll have no choice. Why don’t you sit down and I’ll tell you why.’

‘I’m not interested. Give me my passport and enough money to get back to England and we’ll put this down to some terrible mistake. You can stay here if you like and when you get back we can tell everybody that we realised it wasn’t meant to be and have decided to separate.’

‘That’s very generous of you.’ He took a moment to consider it and I found I was holding my breath. ‘The only trouble is, I don’t make mistakes. I never have and I never will.’

‘Please, Jack,’ I said desperately. ‘Please let me go.’

‘I’ll tell you what I’ll do. If you sit down, I’ll explain everything to you, just as I said I would. And after, when you’ve heard what I’ve got to say, if you still want to leave, I’ll let you.’

‘Do you promise?’

‘You have my word.’

I quickly weighed up my options and, when I realised that I didn’t have any, I sat down on the edge of the bed, as far away from him as I could. ‘Go on, then.’

He nodded. ‘But, before I begin, just so you understand how serious I am, I’m going to let you into a secret.’

I looked at him warily. ‘What?’

He leant towards me, a small smile playing at the corner of his mouth. ‘There is no housekeeper,’ he whispered.