

Prologue

It was Olivia who found the boy. She only went to the changing room because she thought that was where she had dropped her keys, and there he was, suspended from a coat hook, a black leather belt round his neck. At that moment she knew why people claimed not to believe their eyes. It seemed an odd expression, implying one's eyes had the capacity for deceit, but now she understood it completely.

His face was ashen – a greyish sort of white – his lips tinged with blue. Olivia clamped her hand over her mouth to stifle a cry. She wanted to call the boy's name but was too shocked to remember it. Instead she lunged forward, grabbed his legs in a kind of bear hug and took the weight of his body in her arms. The obvious thing was to shout for help, but the changing rooms were out of bounds after supper so nobody would hear. She released her right arm, taking all his weight in the left, reached up to the metal buckle and pulled it undone with a hard tug. The boy slumped forward over her shoulder. Freddie Burton. Of course.

Olivia laid him on the bench that ran under the row of hooks and felt his vividly bruised neck for a pulse. New houseparents had to take a first aid course, otherwise she wouldn't have known that the carotid pulse can be felt on either side of the windpipe, just below the jaw. It was weak and faint, barely there.



‘Freddie,’ she said, her voice artificially calm. ‘Freddie, it’s Mrs Parry. You’re going to be fine.’

She didn’t know if that was true but it seemed the right thing to say. As gently as she could, she manoeuvred him into a sitting position and from there managed to roll him over her shoulder. His build was as stocky as hers was slight, and he felt awkward and heavy as she carried him, fireman-like, along the dimly lit corridor and out into the deserted quad. His bony shoulder pressed painfully into hers. She breathed through the pain, the way she had when Edward was born.

A biting wind whipped fallen leaves into a frenzy. Its ghostly howls drowned Olivia’s pleas for help and she braced herself to scream. From the pit of her stomach she released a shrill, desperate sound, bringing Leo Sheridan, Freddie and Edward’s housemaster, to the dorm-room window. He flung it open and shouted down to her.

‘Olivia? What’s going on?’

‘Ambulance. Call an ambulance.’

Seconds later Leo was in the quad, dashing towards her. Explanations could wait. He relieved her of the boy and carried him into the school building, up the wide stone staircase and past the girls’ dorm to sickbay, where Matron was waiting, her face slack with shock.

‘I’ve called the ambulance and Martin’s on his way,’ she said, helping Leo lay the boy down on a narrow metal-framed bed. Olivia hated the sickbay beds. They had something of a mental asylum about them: austere, cold, frighteningly functional.



Matron checked the boy's pulse and respiration while Olivia recounted how she had found him, but then Martin Rutherford, the headmaster, rushed in, panting as if he had run from his house at the end of the long driveway, and she had to repeat it all again. He put his hands to his forehead, almost covering his eyes, and shook his head.

'I don't understand.'

Olivia summarised. 'He tried to hang himself.'

'Good heavens,' gasped Martin. 'Is he going to be all right?'

'He's breathing,' said Matron, 'and there's a faint pulse. The ambulance will be here soon.'

Martin's sickly pallor was now strikingly similar to Freddie's. 'I should call his parents,' he said. 'Burton, isn't it?'

'Yes,' said Leo. 'He's in my dorm. The parents are divorced so there are two numbers.'

Martin ran a hand through his thinning hair and pulled himself up into headmaster mode. 'Fetch those numbers, would you, please,' he said. 'And don't say anything to the other boys yet. This needs to be handled sensitively.'

Olivia didn't envy Martin the task of breaking the news to Freddie's parents, a thought interrupted by the piercing scream of approaching sirens, and then everything happened very quickly. Two paramedics checked Freddie's vital signs, put a collar round his neck and whisked him off to hospital with Matron by his side. Martin and Olivia watched in silence as the ambulance sped away, its flashing blue lights fading into the inclement night.

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In the tense weeks that followed, an ominous cloud of rumour and disquiet descended on St Bede's. The press relished an opportunity to engage in a bit of finger-wagging, vilifying those callous parents who 'farmed out' the care of their offspring to expensive boarding schools. They dragged up cases where deviant adults had sought out such establishments in order to gain access to vulnerable children. Martin attributed these articles to resentment about perceived privilege and elitism, but it didn't help that Freddie's father, Toby Burton, gave an interview citing the school's 'near fatal neglect of his son's welfare'.

It was Freddie who set the record straight. He had lingered in a coma for five agonising days before the prayers offered up at morning chapel were finally answered. He explained that he had hung himself from a coat hook as an early Halloween stunt, his sole intention being to 'scare the shit' out of his friends. Freddie was well known as an attention seeker, a serial prankster, but even for him this seemed extreme. Didn't he realise how dangerous it was, that he could have died? This, Martin confided to Olivia, is what he had asked when visiting Freddie in hospital, but the boy had shrugged and blamed it all on his friends. They were supposed to meet him in the dark and spooky changing room after supper, where they would have found him *pretending* to be hanged. He had stressed that, Martin said, because he was fed up with being asked stupid questions about whether he meant to harm himself. Olivia was surprised when Martin said that Freddie blamed Edward in particular, because he was the one who had piped up that *Doctor Who* was about to start, prompting Freddie's friends to forget him altogether.



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‘Let’s hope he never does anything like that again,’ said Olivia, to which Martin replied, ‘Amen.’

It was a relief when October half-term arrived and at chapel, on the last day of school, Martin urged staff and pupils to pray for a return to normality. They had just stood for a hymn – three rousing verses of ‘Give Me Joy in My Heart’ – when the strangest sensation of dread crept over Olivia. Not a premonition as such, but an inexplicable sense of foreboding. At least that’s what she claimed later, although she had no more inkling than anyone else that before the year was over, another boy would be discovered close to death, and this time she would know his name.

One

The prospect of ten days at the Rectory was about to test Olivia's resolve to make the best of a bad situation. As she packed her bag – a suede Gucci holdall that reminded her of more affluent times – she tried to focus on all the things she would do with Edward, on long country walks with the dogs, on having Geoffrey's warm body next to her in bed. Sleeping alone was one of the many changes she had been forced to make when she swapped the luxury of a listed farmhouse for a cramped little flat above the science block at St Bede's. She shook that thought from her head. No, she refused to dwell on it now.

Edward arrived as she zipped up the holdall. He had Geoffrey's strong jaw and broad shoulders, her mop of unruly blonde hair. He ran his hand over the top of his head, flattening the curls as best he could, but they sprang back, thick and determined.

'You ready, Mum?'

No, not really, but until this whole mess was sorted out they had to spend school holidays in the guest room at the Rectory, Edward in Geoffrey's childhood bedroom, Rowena smug with the pyrrhic victory of having got her precious son back home. Olivia stopped herself right there. No unkind thoughts about Rowena. The pair of them proved the cliché that mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law harboured thinly concealed resentment towards each



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other, but whatever their history, Rowena was recently widowed and for that, Olivia was genuinely sorry.

Wine would help. She hoped Geoffrey had remembered to buy some. Nothing decent of course – that would be extravagant under the circumstances. Cheap supermarket plonk would be fine.

She glanced round her unlikely refuge and threw Edward a reassuring smile. 'I'm ready.'

*

It had been six weeks since Olivia left Compton Cross in the shimmering heat of an Indian summer, Geoffrey at the wheel of her Land Rover, the boot crammed with bags and boxes. They hadn't talked much. What was there to say? He was driving her away from the life they had built together but which he had single-handedly dismantled. When he reminded her she had a choice, that it wasn't too late to change her mind, she had looked out of the window because she didn't want to look at him.

What were her choices, exactly? Live at the Rectory with Geoffrey and his mother or take a job as houseparent at St Bede's. Their own house – Manor Farm, their home – was about to be repossessed by the bank. Tucked away at St Bede's, she would at least be spared the shameful spectacle of their belongings being packed up and driven off to the self-storage unit Geoffrey had rented on the Mendip Industrial Estate. Downings Factory was on the estate too. How was that for irony? He must have read her mood because he had stopped talking and turned on the car radio.

Edward did the same now – found a radio station playing a Coldplay song that reminded Olivia of boozy



nights with Johnny and Lorna, the sort that leave you with a pounding headache and queasy stomach. In the morning you wish you hadn't drunk so much but as the day wears on and the hangover wears off, you remember how much you laughed, how free you felt. Was their friendship spoiled too? She drove past the row of thatched cottages where Johnny and Lorna lived, the twins' bikes in the front garden, lights on inside even though it was early afternoon. She would call Lorna tomorrow. Definitely.

The lane was thick with tractor mud that splattered the Land Rover in sticky clumps. Countryside and clean cars didn't go together. Over the summer Edward and the twins went from house to house offering to wash cars for five pounds a time. They didn't make much money.

'You OK, Mum?' he said.

Olivia realised she was frowning and forced a smile. 'Uh huh.'

'You're quiet.'

'Is that a bad thing?'

He curled the corner of his mouth into a half-smile, exactly like Geoffrey did. Was it a mannerism Edward copied or something imprinted in his DNA? Usually she pined for him during term-time, the house so empty and still without him. The silver lining to her houseparent storm cloud was that she saw Edward all the time at school. It wasn't the same, though – she had to learn a whole new set of rules. He called her Mrs Parry, pretended he hadn't seen her if he was with his friends, recoiled in horror if she went to touch him.

One night she committed the heinous crime of wandering along to his dorm to say goodnight. He was sitting in front of the television with the other boarders, the buzz of easy banter all around them, when Freddie Burton spotted her loitering in the doorway and announced in a loud, theatrical voice, 'Your mummy's here, Parry.' Edward turned round, his face crimson with shame, and glared at her. She knew instantly she had transgressed. 'Doesn't matter,' she said quickly and retreated to sounds of mocking and laughter. Not a mistake she would repeat. When she saw him in chapel the next morning they didn't acknowledge each other. She sat four rows behind him, the back of his head as familiar to her as breathing, everything else disturbingly different. The melancholy hymn didn't help. 'In Christ Alone' – Martin Rutherford's idea of being modern. Ten minutes later, as they all filed out, Edward offered a conciliatory smile. Nothing obvious, but enough to know she had been forgiven.

She glanced at him in the passenger seat, so smart in his burgundy blazer, white shirt and black trousers. His profile was changing, becoming less soft and childlike, more angular and adolescent. He caught her staring and said, 'You seem a bit weird.'

She raised her eyebrows. 'Only a bit?' She turned it back on him. 'Are *you* OK, darling?'

He bobbed his head, more to the beat of the music than in response to her question. She had thought the thirty-minute drive would be a good opportunity for them to talk but he seemed happy and relaxed and she didn't want to spoil that.



A city girl born and bred, Olivia had been wary of moving to Compton Cross. So much grass, so few people. She drove slowly through the narrow lane that skirted the village green, recognised the scatter of vehicles parked outside the Lamb and Lion, waved to a fellow dog walker whose name she could never remember and then turned into the Rectory. The gate was open, Geoffrey's silver Mercedes in the driveway, its personalised plate a source of chronic embarrassment: GP 007. Olivia complained it was crass – *you're not a doctor or a secret agent, you own a factory* – but he pointed out they were his initials and anyway, it was a collector's item: a good investment. He never told her how much the coveted number plate had set him back, no matter how many times she asked.

She turned off the engine and sat for a moment. Edward undid his seat belt and looked at her, waiting. Was he really that resilient? He had lost his home too.

Geoffrey opened the front door and Edward jumped out to greet him. Their manly hug was a pleasure to watch – lots of back-slapping and that boxing thing where they pretended to spar with each other. When Geoffrey looked in Olivia's direction he offered a faux frown and tilted his head to one side. Thirteen years together – she could read him so well. His look said: sorry about all this shit, I know I've screwed up, please be nice. She got out of the car and walked over to him as Rollo and Dice bounded out of the house, tails wagging, wild with excitement. They leaped up at Edward, lashing his face with their rough pink tongues. A cacophony of barking accompanied the reunion: a picture of innocence and joy that eased Olivia's trepidation about the days ahead.





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‘It’ll be fine,’ said Geoffrey, reading her mind. ‘I promise.’

*

Don’t make promises you can’t keep.

Geoffrey showed Olivia to their room, its musty odour clinging to them like a damp shroud, and put her holdall on the bed.

She thought he might make a lame joke – tell her not to get too excited, or ‘it’s not exactly the Ritz, is it?’ – but he didn’t. All he said was that his mother had made lunch and she could unpack later.

Olivia followed him to the kitchen – large, old-fashioned, redeemed by the warmth of a bottle-green Aga – where Edward was already sitting at the long pine table, chomping on an apple, the dogs curled obediently at his feet. Rowena, busy slicing a loaf of home-made bread, put down the knife and wiped her hands on her apron.

‘There you are,’ she said. ‘I was expecting you earlier.’

The first subtle barb of the day. By implication Olivia was late, even though she had said she would arrive around two and it was ten minutes past. In her head she heard Geoffrey tell her not to be so sensitive, that it was a perfectly innocent comment and his mother didn’t mean anything by it, but Olivia felt that she absolutely did.

They took a few steps towards each other until they were close enough to peck cheeks. Rowena’s signature scent – dough, Jeyes fluid, a hint of lavender soap – stirred a deep-seated sense of grievance. Olivia had been judged and found wanting and however many years had passed, Geoffrey could not persuade her that was then and this is now. Get over it, move on, were his stock pleas when she





complained about his mother's slights. Did he genuinely not see them, or did he choose not to see them? Or maybe he was right and Olivia took offence where none existed.

Rowena looked the same as she always did: tallish and straight-backed, weathered face, devoid of creams or cosmetics, steel-grey hair pinned into a loose low bun. She wore a long woollen cardigan over a blouse, buttoned to her throat, and a calf-length pleated skirt. There was no outward sign that just three months ago she had lost her husband of forty-five years, but she must surely be in pain. Olivia resolved again to make a special effort, although it wouldn't be easy. Two women under one roof? They had both run their own homes, managed their own families, lived separate but intersecting lives until Geoffrey's financial problems changed everything. Homelessness had imposed a sense of humiliation that unbalanced the scales in Rowena's favour. Olivia was unsure of her status, her role. Should she treat the Rectory as her home, come and go as she pleased, have a long lie-in if she felt like it, invite friends over for coffee and a chat? Or would she fall foul of the tacit set of rules that the Parrys instinctively understood but Olivia had never quite figured out?

'Are you hungry?' Rowena asked, picking up the bread knife again. 'I'm making sandwiches.'

Ah, this rule Olivia was familiar with. Refusing food went against the Parry code of conduct. She had discovered this early on in her relationship with Geoffrey, when they first moved to Compton Cross and she was pregnant with Edward. They were often invited to the Rectory for lunch or afternoon tea; occasionally dinner on a Saturday





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night. Olivia had been laid low with a vague but persistent nausea that lasted well into her sixth month and however much Rowena tried to coax her, she simply had no appetite. This became an unnecessary bone of much contention, Olivia made to feel ungrateful, difficult to please, a generally rather awkward girl. You're not *made* to feel like that, you just do, was Geoffrey's analysis.

Nevertheless, it prised open a rich seam of innuendo: about Olivia's lean figure (*We didn't have eating disorders in my day*), her domestic failings (*Shop-bought is fine if you don't have time to bake*), her general contrariness (*You must make me a list of all the things you won't eat so I don't forget*). Geoffrey insisted she had the habit of taking general and innocuous comments and applying them to herself, hearing criticism that wasn't there. But irrespective of who was right and who was wrong, Olivia had tired of fighting a battle on two fronts. Easier to go along with whatever was required, which today was to sit round the table, eat sandwiches and play happy families. That Olivia's stomach churned and she didn't think she could eat a thing was neither here nor there.

She looked at Geoffrey and made a little gesture with her hand, bringing an imaginary glass to her mouth. Wine at lunchtime would be a rare but much appreciated treat. Alcohol wasn't allowed on the premises at St Bede's and on the few occasions she had craved it, she realised it wasn't the wine she missed, but the ritual of selecting, uncorking, pouring, sipping. It seemed very grown-up, very civilised: a reminder of the life she and Geoffrey used to have. And a small glass of wine might help calm her gnawing apprehension; wash down the unwanted but obligatory sandwich.





Geoffrey produced a bottle of Chablis from the fridge and rummaged around the cutlery draw for a corkscrew – the sort waiters use in good restaurants.

‘Would you like a glass, Mum?’ he asked, deftly opening the bottle.

‘No, thank you,’ she said, ‘but you two go ahead.’

Olivia ignored the tone of permission having been granted and asked if there was anything she could do.

‘All done,’ said Rowena, placing the sandwiches on a large oval plate and ushering Olivia over to the old church pews on either side of the table.

She slid along next to Edward, who had discarded the apple core and was now peeling a banana. He offered her a satsuma but she declined in favour of a deep drink from her glass. Olivia was impatient for the wine to do its job and damp down the panicky feeling that this was all wrong. It wasn’t her life; it couldn’t be.

Edward filled a tumbler from the tap and topped it up with orange squash. Rowena put the platter and a pot of tea on the table, took off her apron and sat down.

‘Well, this is nice,’ she said, passing round white cotton napkins. ‘Have you unpacked, Edward? You know that used to be your father’s room?’

Edward nodded – he wouldn’t speak with food in his mouth. When he finished chewing he said, ‘There are ten of us in my dorm so it’s nice to have a room to myself.’

‘And what about you, Olivia?’ said Rowena. ‘I don’t want you to feel uncomfortable.’

Being told not to feel uncomfortable was itself uncomfortable. Olivia took another hit of wine.





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'I'll try not to,' she said, then noticed the way Geoffrey was looking at her. 'Thank you,' she added.

Conversation turned to the incident with Freddie Burton, Rowena asking Edward why a child would do such a silly thing; such a dangerous thing. Edward shrugged in an exaggerated way and said Freddie was always doing stupid stuff, that he was a bit of a show-off.

'Is he a friend of yours?' Rowena asked.

Edward thought about it for a second. 'Sometimes,' was his answer.

Olivia had no wish to compound her uneasiness by being reminded of that dreadful night, so moved the conversation in a different direction.

'I thought we could take Rollo and Dice for a walk when we've finished.'

Rowena turned round so she could see out of the window. 'It's raining,' she said.

'Still,' said Olivia, 'Dalmatians need a lot of exercise.'

'We always had terriers when Geoffrey was a boy,' said Rowena, selecting a cheese and pickle sandwich. 'Very easy little dogs. No trouble at all.'

Olivia heard this as criticism and looked at Geoffrey, willing him to wade in and defend their canine preferences. He pretended not to notice and reached for another sandwich.

'I don't mind getting wet,' said Edward, refreshingly oblivious.

'Me neither,' said Olivia, looking straight at Geoffrey.

*

Their walk had been a miserable trudge. Edward wore a pair of Geoffrey's wellingtons, two sizes too big, because





God knows where his were – packed up and put into storage, no doubt. Geoffrey said he would have gone but had important emails to attend to. Olivia hadn't exactly hidden her disappointment but he pretended not to notice that either. Pretending was one of his skills.

She regretted the wine, how tired and irritable it had made her. Manor Farm came into view from the crest of the hill. Home. The hot sting of tears were another side effect of the wine. She wiped them with a gloved hand before Edward noticed.

When they got back to the Rectory she had excused herself saying she needed to unpack, but what she really needed was to lie down. She had drifted into a three-glasses-of-Chablis sleep – so much for one small glass to settle her nerves – and when Geoffrey had gently roused her at seven for supper, she told him she couldn't face it. It was a mistake for him to say his mother had gone to a lot of trouble, roasted a chicken, baked an apple and blackberry pie, and couldn't she just make a bit of an effort? In retrospect, yes, Olivia could have been less vehement in her response, but come on. *A bit of an effort? Are you serious? Every day is an effort. What more do you want from me?*

So often the thing you're arguing about isn't the thing you're arguing about. It's a proxy for all the grievances that accumulate throughout a marriage: the things never quite resolved, never quite forgiven. Geoffrey had shaken his head and retreated downstairs, leaving Olivia curled in the foetal position, dry-mouthed but too lethargic to go to the bathroom and fetch a drink of water.



He woke her again when he came to bed – told her it was ten o'clock and she should probably get undressed. It took a few moments to register where she was, that she had missed dinner, that her stomach was empty and rumbling. He took off his clothes, tossed them on to a chair by the dressing table, put on his pyjamas (he never wore pyjamas at home) and went to the bathroom, the creak of floorboards marking his every step.

Olivia produced a dressing gown and toilet bag from her unpacked holdall and shivered as she pulled her jumper over her head. The radiator was stone cold. A draught from the window moved the flimsy curtains to a flutter.

Geoffrey returned and, without a word, slipped under the icy sheet, the itchy woollen blanket, the pink candlewick eiderdown seen only on the beds of those aged seventy and over. Olivia took her turn in the bathroom, quickly brushed her teeth, splashed her face with tepid water and had a much-needed pee. On her way back along the landing she checked on Edward, fast asleep in Geoffrey's old single bed, his golden curls illuminated by a thin slither of moonlight. She tiptoed over and kissed his forehead like she used to when he was small. *Sorry*, she whispered, knowing he wouldn't hear, but needing to say it anyway.

When she got under the covers next to Geoffrey, he didn't move. She lay on her back, rigid, and stared into the darkness. So much for making the best of things. Day one and she had already screwed up. Guilt pressed down on her. She imagined the scene at supper, Edward asking where Mum was, Geoffrey making some thin excuse. Worst of



all, she had played right into Rowena's hands. How often would she be reminded of the afternoon she drank too much and had to sleep it off instead of joining the family for a roast chicken supper, cooked especially because it was her favourite?

*

The next morning a mug of steaming tea and plate of toast had mysteriously appeared on the bedside table. Olivia propped herself up on the pillows and sipped gratefully from the mug. Geoffrey's side of the bed was warm but empty. Memories of yesterday eked into her consciousness; ill-fitting pieces of a depressing domestic jigsaw. How could she face Rowena? Or Geoffrey. And what about Edward? Her stomach wafted between hunger and nausea. She started on the toast, hoping it would make her feel better. It galled her to admit it, but Rowena's bread was delicious: light wholemeal flour with mixed seeds and a good crust. Butter too – none of those bland low-fat spreads. Geoffrey arrived with his own tea and toast and a sheepish look she knew all too well.

'Feeling better?' he asked, setting his breakfast down on the dressing table.

'Feeling stupid and embarrassed,' she replied.

He came over and perched next to her. 'Don't. It's my fault we're here. It won't be for long, I promise.'

Another promise he couldn't keep. He had no way of knowing how long it would be before they had a home of their own again. The uncertainty was frightening; having no idea what lay ahead. If she thought about it she panicked, so she forced herself not to.



Geoffrey tentatively stroked her hair, as if to gauge her mood. Hard to believe they had spent their first night together in weeks and had barely touched each other. She leaned her head on his hand. So many nights, as she lay alone in her bed at St Bede's, she had thought about Geoffrey holding her, making love to her, but now that the moment presented itself, she was distracted by the musty smell, the faded floral wallpaper, the heavy mahogany furniture that made the room appear smaller and darker than it was. If she moved his hand away, however gently, it would seem like a rejection so she closed her eyes and imagined they were in their bedroom at Manor Farm, with its huge four-poster and thick cream carpet. No, that didn't work. All it did was make her miss their home more keenly.

She switched to a different image: her thirtieth birthday at the Four Seasons in Mexico, sun beating down on her tanned bare breasts. OK, that worked better. She relaxed into the sensation of Geoffrey's lips on her neck, his breath warm on her skin. He slipped his hand under her T-shirt and she arched her back in response. He put his mouth on hers, a vague taste of marmalade on his tongue. She lay back down, eager to feel the weight of his body on hers, and ran her fingers through his tangle of wavy hair. They locked eyes, the anticipation building, when Rowena's voice brought them bolt upright.

'Breakfast, Edward. It's on the table.'

Olivia and Geoffrey froze, like a couple of teenagers caught doing something they shouldn't. They waited, motionless, as Edward bounded noisily down the stairs, sending Rollo and Dice into a barking duet. Geoffrey



took a long breath in through his nose and held it for a moment before he exhaled.

‘That’s that then,’ he said.

*

Olivia wanted to call Lorna but worried about how much could be read into a tone of voice, how the most casual comment, the wrong inflection on a word, a pause where a pause shouldn’t be, might so easily be misinterpreted. Better to send a text – brief and to the point – but Edward beat her to it. After breakfast he had called Josh and arranged to cycle over there. At first he refused Olivia’s offer of a lift, preferring to make his own way on his much prized mountain bike, but when a search of the garage and garden shed proved futile, Geoffrey admitted it might have gone into storage by mistake. Sorry – he would go over and retrieve it later.

Edward wasn’t in the mood to wait so accepted Olivia’s offer after all. She couldn’t say why she didn’t text Lorna to let her know she was coming, except that the same creeping sense of unease stopped her. Not on a conscious level – she wouldn’t allow herself to admit it – but it nagged her, like a tiny ulcer on her tongue. She sent Edward to the village shop for a bag of chocolate eclairs while she dressed and put on a bit of make-up. Geoffrey loitered, as though he wanted to say something but wasn’t sure how. He thought the shift in her friendship with Lorna was down to him. He had said it before and depending on her mood, Olivia either denied it (if she was feeling kind), or agreed with him (if she wasn’t). And yes, it was largely Geoffrey’s fault that Johnny was out of work, that he and Lorna were





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struggling to pay the bills. How could that not impact on their friendship? But it wasn't the whole story. There were things Geoffrey and Lorna didn't know, things Olivia had promised to keep from them.

This morning she was feeling kind. She kissed Geoffrey lightly on the mouth and he pulled her up against him, his hand firm on the small of her back. Edward bounced in with the eclairs, saw them and covered his eyes.

'Get a room,' he said with mock disgust.

Geoffrey whispered in Olivia's ear. 'I wish.'

*

Johnny and Lorna's cottage nestled in the middle of a row of five – all identical and picture-perfect until you had to live in one of them. Thatched roofs that needed replacing every twenty years (theirs was overdue), low beams Johnny had to duck, small rooms, big spiders, one bathroom between four, no downstairs toilet. The Grade One listing meant planning for an extension would be denied, but Johnny was adamant he would never move. He had been born in that cottage, in the bedroom he now shared with Lorna. What was it about men and their childhood homes?

Olivia parked on the lane and walked up the garden path with Edward, her heart pattering like rain against glass. Lily opened the front door wearing skinny jeans and an oversized hoodie, straight auburn hair falling like curtains around her pretty face. Such a shame Edward and Lily would never be more than friends. Too familiar – that was the problem. They had known each other all their lives, Lily like the sister Edward never had. Olivia and Lorna had spent many a happy afternoon fantasising about a





Parry–Reed marriage: sharing grandchildren, being family as well as friends.

‘That’s mine,’ said Josh, tugging at Lily’s hood, and then to Edward, a matey, ‘All right?’

‘Nice to see you too, Josh,’ said Olivia.

‘Are those for us?’ he asked, relieving her of the bag. He peered inside. ‘Chocolate eclairs. Thanks, Olivia.’

Edward kicked off his trainers and followed the twins into the kitchen but Olivia hung back. If Lorna was home she would have come and said hello. No Benji either – she must be walking him. The children’s chatter spilled out of the kitchen, comforting and familiar. Olivia popped her head round the door.

‘Will Mum be long, do you think?’

Lily turned to her with a mouth full of eclair and shrugged. The boys hadn’t even registered the question. Olivia couldn’t decide if she should wait. That was the problem with secrets. They disrupted the natural flow of things, rendered the simplest decision laden with meaning only you understood.

Perhaps she should come back later, but would Lorna be upset knowing she had been here and left without seeing her? Olivia was wrestling with this when the back door opened and Benji ran in wearing the leather-studded collar Olivia had bought him as a joke a few Christmases ago. A Jack Russell who thought he was a pit bull: snarly, snappy, full of attitude. Lorna had her back to the door, prising off her muddy Hunters with the boot pull. When she turned and saw Olivia, it was a fraction of a second before she smiled.



‘Hello, stranger. When did you get back?’

‘Yesterday. I was going to call but Edward needed a lift.’

It wasn’t clear how Edward needing a lift prevented Olivia from calling, but they moved swiftly past it.

‘Cup of tea?’

The children piled out of the kitchen – something about a wicked new computer game – leaving Olivia and Lorna alone.

‘Love one. I brought cakes.’ Olivia looked in the paper bag. ‘Sorry, there’s only one left. We’ll have to share.’

‘Home-made?’ asked Lorna, filling the kettle.

The tension floated away.

‘Of course,’ said Olivia, mimicking Rowena’s cut-glass accent. ‘One can always find time to bake.’

Lorna chuckled. ‘How is the dowager Parry?’

‘Missing Ronald, I imagine. I promised myself I would be sympathetic but failed abysmally.’

‘Oh?’

‘I lived down to her expectations last night – drank too much wine and slept through supper.’

Lorna made an ‘ouch’ face and poured boiling water into a china teapot. Nothing but loose-leaf tea would do. She considered tea bags the devil’s work: expensively flavoured dust. Olivia sat down at the table and cut the éclair in half. The children’s rough and tumble thumped on the heavily beamed ceiling and Olivia realised how much she’d missed this. If she couldn’t be in her own home, this was the next best thing.

Lorna gave the tea a stir and then poured it into two man-sized mugs: ‘World’s Greatest Dad’ on one, ‘Keep



Calm and Drink' on the other. She sat down and took her half of the eclair.

'Now tell me everything.'

Olivia outlined her six weeks at St Bede's: the moment she found Freddie Burton (*God, that must have been awful. It was all over the news*), the fallout (*baptism of fire for the new head*), how onerous the responsibility of looking after a dozen girls (*one is bad enough once the hormones kick in*), how hard it was to treat Edward like a pupil and not a son (*I can't imagine*). Olivia was about to ask what had been happening with Lorna but that would lead to talk of futile job-hunting, money worries, having Johnny under her feet all day, so she carried on with tales from the Rectory. Olivia versus Rowena; reassuringly familiar territory.

Rowena was the reason Olivia had disliked Lorna before she even got to know her.

They were pregnant at the same time, Olivia recently having moved to Compton Cross, friendless and homesick for Reading, an admission too embarrassing to share with anyone but her mum and dad. She and Lorna had spoken a few times when their paths crossed in the village but severe pre-eclampsia meant Olivia spent the last weeks of her pregnancy in a hospital bed, lonely, frightened, mind-numbingly bored. Edward had to be delivered by Caesarean section at thirty-five weeks, weighing roughly the same as two bags of sugar. Rowena had peered into his hospital cot and announced that Lorna Reed was along the corridor, twins safely delivered, both a healthy six-and-a-half pounds. Oh, and she managed a natural birth. Olivia was left in no doubt whatsoever she had let



the side down; failed in some grievous yet unspecified way. Unable to carry a baby to term. Unable to produce a strap-ping baby. Unable to push said baby out of her vagina. The same vagina that had trapped Geoffrey into an unsuitable marriage. Her vagina, it seemed, had a lot to answer for.

Once home, Olivia's mum had come to stay – a protective buffer between her and Rowena. When they spotted her walking up the path, her mum would usher Olivia upstairs and choose from a list of pre-prepared excuses: catching up on a bit of sleep, taking a bath, settling Edward down for a nap. Out of politeness Rowena would stay for a cup of tea before making her own excuses to leave.

Becoming a mother made Olivia feel like a child again. Being responsible for another human life terrified her. With Olivia, Edward tended to fuss and cry, but with her mum he always settled. When the time came for her mum to go home, Olivia pleaded with her to stay. She knew she was being whiny and unreasonable, putting off the inevitable moment when she would have to cope by herself, but whenever she imagined being alone with a fractious baby, her stomach clenched. *I have to get back to work, and to your dad and Sam. You'll be fine, darling – it's always hard at the beginning.*

The day her mum left, Geoffrey came home from the factory to find Olivia sobbing on the sofa. He hated it when she cried. *What do you want me to do?* A question that only made her cry harder. He did the worst thing possible and called Rowena. An epiphany, as it turned out. Olivia finally realised what she was up against. Put simply, Geoffrey was clueless when it came to dealing with the messy business of



emotions, so outsourced the problem to his mother, who was no expert herself. Olivia felt her difficulties with homesickness and motherhood were viewed not with sympathy, but as a sign of weakness. Geoffrey insisted this wasn't the case, that Olivia had a chip on her shoulder and it was up to her to get over it.

So be it. She washed her face and brushed her hair so that when Rowena arrived, expecting to have to step in for her useless daughter-in-law, she was greeted with a cheery smile, an offer of tea and cake – her mum had rustled up a Victoria sponge before she left – and Edward asleep over Geoffrey's shoulder. This was Olivia's new strategy. If she was right and Rowena took perverse pleasure in seeing her struggle, Olivia would simply deny her that pleasure.

Easier said than done. In her capacity as vicar's wife, Rowena took it upon herself to visit new mothers and regaled Olivia with glowing reports of how marvellously Lorna Reed was coping with twins: how healthy she looked, how bonnie the babies, how they fed and slept without so much as a murmur. This in contrast to Edward – a difficult, colicky baby who never slept more than two hours at a time. Olivia neglected to wash her hair and wore the same shapeless tracksuit for days on end, the shoulder crusty with dried baby sick. Geoffrey called Olivia's mum, who took another week off work and returned to Compton Cross. Her advice was that Olivia should try to get out more, mix with other new mums, make some friends. Great in principle, but Olivia had little energy and even less confidence, so launching herself on the mother-and-baby scene – if such a scene even existed – was unthinkable.





AN UNSUITABLE MARRIAGE

The week flew by and when her mum's bags were packed, Olivia was five years old again, clinging to her at the school gates. They stood by her red Fiesta, both of them trying to be brave, when Edward's piercing screams forced Olivia back inside. She climbed the stairs, gathered him up in a heap of blankets, went to the window and watched her mum drive away.

Olivia came to detest Rowena's tales of Lorna bloody Reed and her perfect bloody twins until one afternoon Lorna dropped by unannounced, a present for Edward in her hand, Josh and Lily asleep in the car. Olivia stood aghast, wholly unprepared to come face to face with her nemesis. It was a moment before she could speak. *Would you like to come in?*

Two hours later they were the best of friends. Over tea and cakes, helpfully supplied by Lorna via the village shop, they compared notes. The saintly twins, it transpired, weren't saintly at all. As soon as one stopped crying the other one started. Josh had squirmed so much when Lorna tried to nurse him, she feared permanent injury to her nipples and had put him on the bottle. To Olivia, still valiantly struggling under the tyranny of 'breast is best', this was a revelation. *Can you really do that?* Apparently you could. It didn't mean you had failed, that you didn't love your child, that you were selfish and inadequate; it just meant your baby did better on formula milk. Lorna had two bottles of formula in her bag. Always carry a spare – excellent advice.

Edward was squirming in his Moses basket, his face screwed up and an angry shade of puce. Lorna offered Olivia one of the bottles. She hesitated, unsure if this really





was allowed or if Lorna, in cahoots with Rowena, was trying to trick her, but Edward emitted such an ear-splitting scream that she grabbed the bottle and shoved the teat in his mouth. He sucked so hungrily she wondered if she had been starving him all along. When he had finished every last drop he fell into a miraculously sound sleep. A blissful six hours had passed before he woke. Olivia remembered weeping with gratitude.

‘What are you smiling about?’ asked Lorna, licking eclair from her fingers.

Upstairs, music blared, Lily belting out a pop song in a terrible singing-shouting voice.

‘I was just thinking about the first time we met properly, when you came over with that blue bunny for Edward and a life-saving bottle of formula.’

‘God, you looked a state. I had half a mind to call social services.’

Olivia laughed. The boys joined in the singing and Benji tried to burrow inside the fleecy cover of his bed. Lorna stood up and went over to the sink.

‘More tea?’

Olivia was about to say yes when Johnny opened the back door. The kitchen seemed to shrink around him – Gulliver arriving in Lilliput. Newly acquired flecks of grey threaded through his ebony hair. They looked at each other, their expressions somewhere on a continuum between good surprise and bad surprise, before they put on their game faces and smiled like the old friends they were.

‘Boots off,’ said Lorna. ‘I’m just putting the kettle on if you want a cuppa.’



He set about unlacing his boots, the heavy-duty type labourers wear on building sites.

Olivia grabbed her coat from the back of the chair. 'I should make a move. I promised Geoffrey I'd go to the storage unit with him and get Edward's bike. OK if I leave him here?'

Did it seem too abrupt? Afterwards Olivia thought maybe it did, but she hadn't prepared herself for Johnny.

When he dropped Edward off later, he didn't come in. Geoffrey saw him from the study window, pulling up on the lane and then driving away. He reported this to Olivia as she peeled potatoes, Rowena next to her, rinsing vegetables in the cavernous Butler sink.

'I can't believe he's turned his back on you,' said Rowena crisply. 'So much for loyalty.'

Olivia had nothing to add. She was grateful when Edward breezed in and asked about his mountain bike. Tomorrow, promised Geoffrey, without fail. He went to the fridge, got himself a beer and sank dejectedly into the rocking chair by the Aga. It was wrong to let him shoulder all the blame but the truth wouldn't make him feel better. Quite the contrary. Olivia cut a Maris Piper in half and plunged it into boiling water.

No, it had to be this way.