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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Catherine Alliott started her first novel under the desk when she worked as an advertising copywriter. She was duly fired. With time on her hands she persevered with the novels, which happily flourished. In the early days she produced a baby with each book, but after three stuck to the writing as it was less painful. She writes with the nearest pen in exercise books, either in the garden or on the sofa. Home is a rural spot on the Herts/Bucks borders, which she shares with her family and a menagerie of horses, sheep, chickens and dogs, which at the last count totalled eighty-seven beating hearts, including her husband. Some of her household have walk-on parts in her novels, but only the chickens would probably recognize themselves.

Find out more about Catherine and keep
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The Secret Life of Evie Hamilton

CATHERINE ALLIOTT

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I

Just recently, and it's hardly even worth mentioning except perhaps as a reproof to myself, I find that whenever I enter a church, not only does my heart sink, but I'm invariably late. Today was no exception. As the sorrowful aroma of beeswax, stone and candles contrived to lower my spirits, so the shrill tones of the female vicar, welcoming the congregation, confirmed my bad timing.

As I crept in, a few heads near the back swivelled to smile sympathetically. I made to slide in amongst them, whispering apologetically, 'Sorry, sorry . . .' but my sister-in-law up near the front was having none of it. Her pointy features, flushed, irritated and rotated at a hundred and eighty degrees, were hard to miss.

'Down here,' she was mouthing theatrically, beckoning me on like an Italian traffic policeman. She even had the white gloves. White gloves!

Dutifully I gathered my hymn book and handbag, and hastened, head bowed, down the aisle. As I hurried along, I inadvertently looked up and caught the eye of my brother in his rather too tight hound's-tooth-check suit, up by the altar, in his occasional capacity of churchwarden. He rolled his eyes in mock horror and gave me a huge wink.

'We were worried about you,' Caro hissed as I squeezed

in beside her. Everyone in the pew shoved up a bit. 'You're so late!'

'Sorry,' I muttered. 'Traffic was horrific.'

'On a Sunday?'

I shrugged helplessly as if to suggest I could hardly be held accountable for the vagaries of Oxford's one-way system, and craned my neck past her to greet the rest of my family, such as it was. Beside Caro, my mother and stepmother had both leaned forward to smile: Felicity, my stepmother, elegant in a taupe chenille jacket and vanilla silk skirt, and my mother, startling in leopard-print leggings, a pair of tangerine trainers and matching headband. She blew me an extravagant kiss.

'What's she come as?' I muttered to Caro as I sat back.

'Don't,' she moaned, closing her eyes. 'I swear she does it on purpose. I told her it was smart but casual, as in "no hats", but she looks like she's out on day release. As if the minibus has just dropped her off!'

I suppressed a smile and turned my attention to the vicar, visiting for the occasion: not the village's usual, but very enthusiastic, and, despite a telltale flush up her neck, really getting into her stride, encouraging us in carrying tones, to support these young people before us today, to applaud them in this, their momentous decision, to foster their faith.

I smiled. Jack, my nephew, one of the six or seven teenagers in the front pew, the sun from a stained-glass window shining through his ears, making them glow pink, his red hair dishevelled and hanging over the collar of an uncharacteristic tweed jacket, had the grace to turn and flash me a grin. When he'd cycled into college one day to

see us and I'd casually enquired as to his motives, he'd replied in surprise, 'Oh, you get terrific presents. Hugo Palmerton got a diving watch, and his godfather gave him a digital camera.' As I'd raised faintly startled eyebrows he'd rushed on, 'And obviously I believe, and all that stuff. And it's a good idea if you want to get married.' He nodded sagely. 'Saves a lot of hassle.'

I had an idea he was confusing confirmation with baptism, but grasped the general sentiment. He was getting something under his juvenile belt, another notch on his list of 'must dos': get GCSEs, play in the cricket team, snog a girl at a party. Getting confirmed, whilst not necessarily up there with the snog, was still a rite of passage to be doggedly manoeuvred. He was at a particular stage on his greasy pole, as I, I supposed, glancing around, was on mine. There was a time when I used to go to church for weddings, Saturday after Saturday, and then christenings, Sunday after Sunday. Now, with unerring regularity, it appeared to be first communions. Next, I imagined, with a jolt of surprise, it would be . . . yes. Well. After all, there'd been one of those already, hadn't there? Dad's. One box ticked. One box that had gone up the aisle, containing a supposedly hale and hearty man, a florid-faced, larger-than-life man, in this, our village church, whilst we'd all sat in this family pew, hankies clutched to mouths, shocked and silent: the remains of the Milligan family.

Family pew. An anachronism, of course, but one that Caro maintained rigorously, referring to it loudly, as Mum and Granny never had, as if we were the ancient descendants of some aristocratic lineage, instead of impoverished

farmers who'd managed, by the skin of their teeth, to hang on to a certain amount of dubiously infertile land and a crumbling old farmhouse.

Caro leaned in to me now. 'No Ant?' She glanced around, as if perhaps expecting him to slide in, having parked the car. I swallowed my irritation.

'No, I told you, he's taken Anna to a clarinet exam.'

'Ah, yes,' she said vaguely. She had a faraway look in her eye, as if in some dim, distant conversation I *had* mentioned it, when in fact I'd made a point of ringing her and apologizing profusely, knowing what store Caro set by family occasions.

'Does she still enjoy it?' she whispered incredulously.

'Loves it,' I hissed back, as we were enjoined, at that moment, to get to our feet and sing hymn number 108.

Yes, that was always the implication, wasn't it, I thought as I added my low warble to Caro's reedy treble and joined the debate as to whether those feet really did walk upon England's mountains green: that my overstimulated, hot-house flower was wilting under the pressure of academia and music exams and pushy parents, whilst her 'brood', as she always referred to them – as if three were a cast of thousands, for heaven's sake – got out into the fresh air and had a 'proper childhood'; as if, somehow, Anna's was *im*proper. My blood simmered away for a bit, but then, as the hymn came to rest in a green and pleasant land and we were bidden to pray, I tried to, not have green thoughts, but pleasant ones.

After all, she was not only my sister-in-law, she was my oldest friend. I was guiltily aware that at one point 'oldest' would have been substituted by 'best'. Certainly

years ago, at school, when we were pretty much joined at the hip and lived in each other's houses. Which was probably where the trouble had started. She'd taken one look at my rambling old farmhouse in its idyllic riparian setting, the river threading through the willows in the bottom pasture, observed the big family meals in the farmhouse kitchen, the laughter, the noise, the sense of history, and thought: I want some of that. I can almost remember the look in her eye as she'd stood at the kitchen window one day after lunch, watching Tim, huge, burly and kindly, with his father's shock of red hair, bowling at a tree stump in the back garden. She'd wanted him too, and she'd got him. And if I'm honest, I thought, gazing down at the pattern on my tapestry kneeler, I'd looked at her orderly family, her punctual meals in the uncluttered town house with its state-of-the-art appliances, its colour TV and microwave, her quiet, professional, teacher parents, and thought: and I'll have some of that. Of course, I didn't marry her brother – that would have been too neat, and apart from anything else she didn't have one – but my eyes, shall we say, were opened: to an urbane, civilized lifestyle. One that revolved around restaurants and concerts and political debate instead of wheat yields and set-aside and crop rotation. I was smitten.

When, some years later, I'd met Ant, tall, tousled, slightly myopic in his John Lennon glasses, an academic I'd found in a bookshop I was working in, I knew it was a blueprint I'd been working to. And so everything slotted into place. Caro got her heart's desire, and I got mine. In fact, Caro, even more so, because when Dad died,

suddenly, unexpectedly, not in a tangle in his combine, as some farmers do, but just quietly in his sleep and, it transpired, intestate, Caro got the farm too. She almost hadn't, actually, because everything naturally went to Felicity, but Felicity wouldn't hear of it. No, no, the house and land should go to Tim. It was what Dad had always wanted, she insisted, what he'd *said* he wanted, what would have happened if he'd flipping well bothered to write it down. Felicity took sufficient from the estate to buy herself a small house in town, and left the bricks, the mortar – the acres – to Tim and Caro.

I wouldn't say Caro moved in with indecent haste, but it must have been a relief to leave the dismal white bungalow in the village and hustle her children into their bedrooms under the eaves, with the playroom downstairs, family kitchen and rambling back garden. The fact that the roof leaked like a sieve and the winter months were spent running from room to room with buckets whilst the damp galloped gaily up the walls was neither here nor there. She'd got her farm, her land, the whole bucolic bit.

As I'd got my bit, I thought, as I watched Jack come back from the altar, fresh from taking his first parish communion, cheeks flaming, eyes down, collar too tight, looking so impossibly like Tim at that age. I'd got my academic: my sensitive, clever Ant, who duly went on to become a don, making me, nearly bursting with pride, a don's wife, and all at the tender age of twenty-nine. Ant, not me. We had a house in college, in Balliol, one of those dear yellow stone terraced ones, looking out onto the grassy quad complete with gates and porter; we had

like-minded friends on our doorstep – dons' wives with babies, with whom I pushed prams. Life was sweet.

But then Ant had gone one step further. He'd written a book. Not a dry, academic tome, but a rather accessible biography of Byron, about whom he was a bit of an expert and whom he regarded as a bit of a dude. Which was how he'd portrayed him. As a legend. A modern-day lyricist, a good-looking, aristocratic, floppy-haired, druggy poet with supermodel girlfriends, in an accessible way that had caught the public's eye, and, more importantly the eye of a daytime television programme, which promoted him. Almost overnight, he became something of a success, and Anthony Hamilton, obscure English professor from Oxford, became Anthony Hamilton, best-selling author. Which wasn't entirely in the script, as far as Caro was concerned.

Oh, it wasn't the fame she envied – I knew she got a vicarious thrill out of being his sister-in-law; broadcasted it loud and clear at the slightest opportunity – no, it was the money. Not a great deal, but enough for us to move out of the college house, which, whilst sweet, was tiny, to a large Victorian villa on four floors with high ceilings and sash windows in that academic Mecca, Jericho. Bills were paid, credit cards sorted, and Anna's school fees, which frankly we'd struggled with, became a doddle. And Tim and Caro couldn't even afford school fees. There was no money in farming now, not unless you had a thousand acres or a private income, and even with the extra Caro made from holding wedding receptions in the garden they were still very short. So they'd had to send their three to the local comp.

I shifted in my pew. Yes, their three. To my one. After all, I'd been quite good about that, hadn't I? Quite grown up. We all had our crosses to bear. OK, not in the early days I hadn't been good. Not when Jack had been swiftly followed by Phoebe and Henry, and Anna by not a sausage. The despair, the sadness, the seething jealousy had threatened to overwhelm me then, but later . . . well, later, Ant and I accepted it. And she, Anna, was so lovely.

I remember once, standing at the window at Church Farm, watching her play with her cousins in the garden. Jack and Henry were fighting as usual, Phoebe was petulantly splashing in the paddling pool as Anna patiently tried to fill her doll's teapot from it, and I was reminded of an Aesop fable. The one about the vixen, surrounded by her swarm of cubs – seven or eight – counting them loudly, taunting the lioness beside her, who only had one. 'Ah, but mine is a lion,' the lioness had replied with a smile. In a guilty, secret place in my heart I felt that; felt that every scrap of Ant and my energy, every ounce of excellence from the collective gene pool, had gone into creating not a scrappy load of cubs, but a tall, blonde, clever, brave lion.

'Are you going up?' Caro nudged me and I felt a rush of blood up my neck. How awful. To be considering her children so. In church!

'Sorry?'

'For communion. Are you going?'

'Oh. Yes – of course.'

Our pew was filing out from the other end and I got up and followed Caro, Mum and Felicity, pausing to greet Henry and Phoebe on the way, who, yet to be confirmed,

were staying put. I felt even *more* guilty as they smiled shyly but delightedly up at me. Sorry, God, I muttered, as I crept towards the altar. They're lovely. Of *course* they're lovely. How *awful*.

Up on the rostrum, Tim was dutifully helping with the communion wine, there being quite a congregation today, offering the chalice to Felicity as she kneeled. The vicar, meanwhile, was offering hers to Mum.

'No, thank you,' said Mum, firmly.

'Oh – but I thought . . .'

'I'll take it from my son.'

The vicar cleared her throat. 'The thing is,' she murmured embarrassed, 'we've got quite a lot to get through this morning, so—'

Mum's voice became ominously loud. 'I will take the blood of Christ from my son!'

Caro shot me a look of horror and, after some hasty eye contact, Tim and the vicar switched places. As Mum stood up and I went to kneel in her place, she hissed, 'I will not take the Holy Sacrament from a woman!'

'So you made crystal clear,' I muttered back.

Tim's eyes, though, were sparkling with amusement at the diversion, and as he approached me with his chalice I felt those terrible church giggles I'd felt years ago; every Sunday, in fact, in this church, as Tim did his damnedest to make me laugh, seeing how many coughs or farts he could get away with during prayers, deliberately singing off key in the hymns, making my father lean across to swipe him as I shook with mirth beside him, my fist in my mouth. I determined not to look up at him now. As he put the cup to my lips, he affected a thick Irish brogue.

'De blood of Christ, my child,' he wheedled softly.

No. I would not lose it. And I was fine, actually, until, as I sipped, Tim whispered in mock alarm, as if I'd taken a huge gulp, 'Steady!'

Doing the nose trick with the communion wine is pretty unforgivable, and as I returned, chastened and wine splattered, to my seat, Caro was frowning darkly. I knew she thought I was a bad influence on her husband. 'Tim seems to revert to childhood when he's with you!' she'd trill gaily, and I just knew she meant, behaves like an absolute oaf. As I bent my head to pray, I recalled a friend's comment when Caro had married Tim. 'How lovely, so you're gaining a sister.' Why, then, years later, did I have a sinking feeling I'd lost a brother?

Shocked for the second time by my impure thoughts, I resolved, as we all filed out ten minutes later into the sunshine, congratulating the young people as they stood about awkwardly, to be more sisterly. More . . . supportive.

Caro turned to me, a defensive look in her eye. 'You're coming back to the house?'

'Of course,' I smiled.

'Good,' she beamed, clearly imagining, I realized with a jolt, that I might not. 'We haven't done much in the way of catering, just a glass of sherry and some sandwiches.'

'Lovely,' I said faintly, knowing the sherry would be sweet and the sandwiches curly, and wondering how Caro had got so determinedly stuck in the 1950s when she hadn't even lived through them. Why she was so determined to be a parody of a landowner's wife.

'Of course, we would have done lunch,' she said, peel-

ing off her gloves – Granny's gloves, I realized with surprise – and scurrying down the path, 'but it gets so expensive, doesn't it?'

Ah, there it was: the first reference to penury. Plenty more where that came from. She hurried up the lane to the farm where our land – her land – adjoined the churchyard. Stick thin as ever, bent at the waist as if against a howling gale, she bustled along and I followed, just as I'd followed her to lessons or PE, always with that same steely determination; always needing to get on.

In my not terribly strenuous efforts to catch up with her I passed Mum and Felicity, loitering by the church gate, looking furtive.

'Coming?' I called cheerily.

Felicity glanced over her shoulder. 'Er, no.'

'No?' I stopped in my tracks.

'Well, the thing is, Evie, we've got tickets – have *had* tickets, for ages – for a choral concert at Christ Church. Tom James is the soloist, and we told Caro at the time, when she arranged this, that we could only come to the church, but you know what she's like.' Felicity looked genuinely fearful, whilst Mum grinned, eyes rolling, enjoying herself hugely.

'Oh, I think we just tell her to piss off, don't you?' she said loudly, puffing on a ciggie. 'After all, it's Jack's party, and he's not fussed, are you, darling?'

'Go on, you ravers, off you go.' Jack appeared behind us, putting an arm around each of their shoulders, hustling them towards their car. 'Off to your gig. Your guilty secret is safe with me. Like the leggings, Granny.'

'Thank you, darling.' She struck a pose. 'I thought if

I wore skin-tight Lycra I wouldn't be so tempted to throw my knickers.'

This was baffling even for Mum, and I wondered if she'd got Tom James muddled with an ageing crooner from Wales. Two hours of Fauré's *Requiem* might come as a bit of a shock if she was expecting to punch the air to 'Sex Bomb'.

'Well, you look terrific,' said Jack, unfazed. 'Got a fag, Granny?'

'Yes, darling.' Mum went for her handbag. 'Here, I—'

'No she *hasn't*,' hissed Felicity, staying Mum's hand and glancing round tremulously. 'Caro will freak. Now come on, Barbara, we're in enough trouble as it is. Let's get going.'

Jack and I shielded them as they hastened to Felicity's old green Subaru, and then, as they drove away, we turned to join the straggle of people making their way down the lane to the farm.

'I've got half a mind to go with them,' Jack said gloomily, pulling a butt out of his jacket pocket and attempting to set fire to it. It was doomed to failure but he persevered. It always amused me that he deemed me the *laissez-faire* aunt, the one he could smoke in front of. Or perhaps he was testing me.

'Oh, come on, Jack, your mum's gone to a lot of trouble.'

He frowned, considering this, his freckled face upturned to the sun. 'Yes, maybe that's the problem. It's always trouble. Never fun. Oops, talk of the devil.' He tossed the butt in the hedge as Caro, having gone round

the back of the farmhouse, flung open the front door from inside.

'Come on, Jack, you're supposed to be welcoming everyone!' she yelled across the yard.

'Coming,' he called. Then, softly to me: 'Might just go for a whiz in the hydrangeas first, though. Got a bit of an experiment going. Did you know if you pee on a pink one, you can turn it blue?'

'I didn't, but thanks for sharing that with me.'

'It's the acid, I suppose.'

'I suppose,' I agreed, as my favourite nephew – although of course one shouldn't have favourites, but the most like Tim, at any rate – slunk off around the side of the house, shoulders hunched.

I, in turn, squared my own as I went through the sagging, five-bar gate hanging limply on its hinges at the front. I could already see a gaggle of people through the sitting-room windows: old friends, family friends, neighbours from the village, no doubt. People who'd tell me they didn't see enough of me these days. That I spread myself too thinly. Maybe even Neville Carter's parents, I thought with a pang. That rocked me for a second; made me hold the gate. Then I took a deep breath and picked my way in my heels through the filthy yard, which periodically, Tim got the local pikies to tip a load of shingle over. But no amount of shingle could stop the mud seeping through, just as – I paused and glanced up at the modest stone farmhouse – no amount of time could stop the seep of memories.

2

'Evelyn! Oh my God, I haven't seen you in ages.'

I'd just taken the few steps required to cross the narrow flagstone hall and duck under the low door into the sitting room, when the hated name rang out and my arm was seized. An overweight woman in tight white trousers, tight pink sweater, and an even tighter perm, beamed delightedly at me, her face glowing. She reminded me vaguely of a girl I'd been at school with, Paula someone.

'It's Paula! Paula Simons, remember?'

'Gosh. Of . . . course. How are you?'

'Really well, thanks. Have you brought your husband?' Her eyes roved past me, hopefully.

I smiled. 'No, he had to take our daughter to a music exam, I'm afraid.'

'Oh, shame.' Her mouth drooped. 'I brought a book for him to sign. You should have taken her!'

'Who, Anna?' I was startled. 'Yes, I suppose . . . but then Jack is my—'

'Hey, Kay. Kay, look, it's Evelyn *Hamilton*!'

Another pink-faced middle-aged woman materialized, and this one I really didn't know except . . . oh heavens, Kay Pritchard. Suddenly I was nine years old again in the school cloakroom, giggling hysterically amongst the hats and coats. Our teacher, Mrs Stanley, had just told us that one of our classmates, Debbie Holt, wouldn't be

coming in that day because her mother had died in the night. In the stunned silence that followed, Kay and I had dissolved. Not tears, giggles. Nerves, I suppose. We'd been sent out, but to our horror, couldn't stop, even in the cloakroom. Later I'd been mortified and it had haunted me for weeks. I wondered if she remembered. I also wondered if I was as changed as Paula and Kay: so . . . old?

'Oh, *Evelyn*! Oh God – is he here?' She glanced around excitedly.

'He's not, I'm afraid. Will I do?'

'Oh.' She pouted. 'Well, you'll have to, won't you?' She gave a tinkly laugh. 'But I want to hear all about it. Did he really go to bed with a different woman every week?'

This, a reference not to Ant, but a Georgian dramatist, whose biography he'd just written and which was currently being serialized, pre-publication, in the *Daily Mail*.

'If that's what it says.' I smiled thinly.

'You haven't read it?' Kay's eyes were huge.

'Er . . . not that particular one.' I'd read most of the Byron, and I'd started the one Ant had done on Kilvert, which hadn't been such a success, but not this one, the one Ant referred to disparagingly as his 'Bodice Ripper'. The whole thing made us cringe a bit, actually. After all, he was a serious biographer, it wasn't usually the sort of thing he did, but the publisher had offered a big advance for something a little more spicy, a little more Byronesque, a little less Kilvert – no more dreary parsons, please! And to be fair, there was really only one steamy chapter, which, naturally, the *Mail* had chosen . . .

'And you're living in Jericho now, I gather?' Kay's face

was flushed, either from the warmth of the room or her sherry. Her eyes were bright.

'Well, on the edge.'

'Yes, but *still*.' They looked at me admiringly. 'And what are you doing now?' demanded Kay, rather pointedly.

'Oh, this and that,' I said uncomfortably. 'What about you, Kay?' I said quickly. 'Still, um . . .' I mentally scrolled down my school-leavers archive, 'nursing?'

'Yes, but not in hospitals any more. It doesn't really work with kids. I'm a practice nurse. You know, in Ludworth?'

The next village. So perhaps I should. Perhaps Caro should have told me. When I'd asked. I smiled nervously. 'Right.'

'And I'm on the Parish Council too,' she informed me. 'For my sins.'

'Sounds fun,' I said politely.

She made a sour face. 'Think *Vicar of Dibley* without the humour.'

I laughed, and through the years caught a flash of wit I'd enjoyed when our desks had adjoined long ago. I wondered vaguely what they were doing here, these women, then remembered with a jolt they were also Jack's godparents. It occurred to me that none of Anna's godparents stemmed from my school days. They were all friends Ant and I had met together. Well, not quite true. They were Ant's friends, from Westminster, or Balliol. Not Parsonage Road Comprehensive. I wondered, uneasily, what that said about me. That I'd simply moved on? Or reinvented myself? Didn't sound very nice.

Across the other side of the room I noticed Tim stand-

ing awkwardly by the fireplace, resting one leg, his hand gripping the mantel. He'd had a hip replacement a couple of months ago after years of pain, which was supposed to make a new man of him. I thought he looked worse. I'd have loved a quick chat, but Caro, looking harassed, swept by with a plate of egg sandwiches and I realized I should offer to help. But that would mean circulating, and I'd already spotted Neville Carter's parents in the other room, which would mean talking to them and . . . oh, for heaven's sake, Evie.

I seized the plate of sandwiches from Caro's startled hand and marched across the hall into the small magnolia dining room. It doubled as the children's homework room, and had been hastily cleared of files and papers, which were stacked in a chaotic fashion by the piano, the table requisitioned for drinks. I'd briefly glimpsed the Carters in here earlier, before Paula had claimed me. They were clutching an orange juice apiece and still had their coats on, looking rather temporary. And so *old*, I thought with a lurch as I greeted them. To my relief, Mrs Carter smiled.

'Evelyn.' Her face relaxed. 'How are you, dear?'

'I'm fine thanks, and you? Hi there, Mr Carter.'

He nodded wordlessly at me, shaking his head as I offered him a sandwich. Much less friendly, I thought, my chest tightening.

'Oh, you know, we keep busy. Our Eileen's married now, of course. She's pregnant too. Expecting in March, did you know?'

'I didn't! How marvellous.'

'And the garden keeps us very busy.'

The garden. Yes, away from children and on to flowers. Good idea.

'Yes, Caro says you had a terrific display of bulbs this year,' I blurted. She hadn't, but bulbs were safe, surely?

She frowned. 'Oh, no, we just did primulas this spring. Perhaps she meant the snowdrops?'

'That's it.' I faltered. 'Snowdrops.'

'The garden's been a great comfort to us,' Mr Carter said quietly.

'Yes.' I caught my breath. 'I can imagine. Although,' I went on bravely, 'no, I can't really imagine at all.'

There was a silence. Mrs Carter put a hand on my arm. 'Well, you had a sadness too, dear. You lost your dad.'

I smiled, acknowledging her graciousness. Losing a parent was ghastly, of course it was. But it wasn't the same as losing a child.

Happily Mrs Pallister from next door approached and I took it as my cue to remove myself, and my plate of egg sandwiches, from the Carters' presence. There. I'd done it. I felt a wave of relief. Then shame at the relief. And instead of going back to the sitting room I went down the passage to the kitchen, ostensibly to refuel my plate, but actually, to take a moment.

The kitchen still looked pretty much as it always had done, which was a comfort: cheap laminate flooring had replaced the black and white checked lino, and the walls, once cream, were now lilac, but the old range was still in situ, the oak table still sat squarely in the middle, and the station clock Dad had salvaged from a disused railway yard ticked on above the window seat I used to curl up

on with my books. Right now it was fairly chaotic: the table was littered with empty plates and hastily removed bits of tin foil, and a rather cloying, eggy smell prevailed, but it had always been my favourite room and I felt better for being here. I went to the window seat, kneeling on the faded chintz cushion, leaning forward to rest my hands on the sill as I gazed out.

The bumpy, erratically mown lawn, perhaps an attempt by Jack for some extra pocket money, tumbled down to the river at the bottom: in the paddocks beyond, Caro's pink and white marquee, a permanent fixture after months of haggling with the local council, flapped prettily in the breeze on the other side. Sheep were encouraged to graze around it and the huge oak tree spread benign limbs above it in the sunshine.

It all looked desperately idyllic, but I knew the reality. Knew about stumbling out there in January, across the stepping stones in a dressing gown and wellies, slipping on mercilessly hard ground, stumbling over frozen ruts to crack the ice on the troughs for the sheep, the wind stinging your cheeks as it whipped across the Vale. Knew that, just yards from this window, behind that barn, rusting old machinery, not good enough to sell and too expensive to remove, lurked menacingly, like sleeping dragons, camouflaged by weeds and grass, ready to trip the unsuspecting. I knew where the wheel-less Jeeps and tractors were parked on bricks; knew, if you found a length of barbed wire sticking out of the ground, not to pull it or a whole line of broken fencing would emerge like an earth monster. I knew the Steptoe and Son side of farming; all of which was kept from Caro's brides, of

course. They saw none of this as they tripped prettily down the lane behind the hedge, fresh from the church, the congregation following on foot – no cars, that was the draw – through a pretty white gate, and straight into the bottom meadow. From that vantage point, as they sipped champagne amongst the buttercups, Church Farm was just a hazy blob on the horizon: small, compact and Georgian. You wouldn't know the masonry was crumbling, the sashes in the windows broken, or that the gutters leaked huge incontinent stains down the brickwork.

'Bucolic Betrothals' Caro advertised as in the local paper, and then some blurb about experiencing olde worlde charm and dipping into England's rural past, which was where all this belonged, of course: the past. It should have been sold years ago, the farm, when Dad died. Not that I'd wanted any money. I agreed with Felicity: it was Tim's inheritance, as it had been Dad's from his father, and as it was with all farming families, from father to son. But Tim could have bought himself a little business, set himself up. Keeping it was like hanging on to the trappings of an empire, for all the wrong reasons.

Ant would be kinder, I thought, as I heard Paula, roaring with laughter in the next room. I straightened up from the window seat. 'They can't sell it, it's part of them,' he'd say.

'Well, it's part of me too, and I had no problems leaving.'

'Ah, but you always had your head in a book. Never looked out of the window, let alone went outside. Never let it get to you, the land. That's what it's all about, you

know. See the Romantic Poets on this. Wordsworth, Blake – they'd have plenty to say on the subject.'

It was true, I thought as I picked up a fresh plate of cocktail sausages and made to go back. I'd never really troubled the great outdoors. Too busy trying to leave. All that fresh air and I couldn't breathe. I'd always felt a great affinity with the Mitford sister who'd hoarded running-away money; had even started a collection myself. Although, as it turned out, I hadn't needed to run; I was rescued.

As I left the kitchen, I paused a moment at the door at the end of the passage. Through the leaded lights I could see Jack, Henry and Phoebe, plus a few friends, on the trampoline. Too cool to bounce, they were lying on it, chatting and laughing in the sunshine. I smiled. Anna would have liked that. Suddenly I wished she hadn't had the clarinet exam.

Unsettled, I made my way back to the sitting room. Paula and Kay had clearly worked up quite a head of steam and were shrieking and hooting, glasses recharged. This was obviously a big day out for them. I tried to skirt round them to Tim, who was bustling around with a bottle being mine host, but my arm was seized by Paula.

'And you're so *brown*. Have you been away?' Her eyes were squiffy, accusatorial.

'Only to Italy.'

'*Only* to Italy,' the pair of them mimicked.

I flushed. 'Ant and I just went for a few days.'

'Whereabouts?'

'Um, Venice.'

'Oooh,' they cooed, like a Greek chorus.

A man had joined them now, small and wiry, blinking behind his spectacles. Oh God, *Kevin Wise*. Again from school, and – yes, of course, Caro had told me. He and Kay . . .

'Kevin and I go to Cornwall, don't we?' Kay regarded him sourly. 'Every year, to the same grotty bungalow.'

'Cornwall's lovely,' I said encouragingly.

'Not where we go. And his parents come with us, sadly. His mother's a witch.'

Crikey. 'Ant and I like Helford,' I managed.

'Ant and I, Ant and I,' mocked Paula. 'Anyone would think you were still in love with your husband!' She threw back her head and cackled. Then her head snapped back abruptly. 'My husband won't make love to me any more,' she announced in a loud voice, clearly spectacularly pissed. 'He says he doesn't find it stimulating any more. Doesn't—'

'Evie.' Caro plucked at my sleeve. 'Have you had one of these?'

Never had I been so delighted to see my sister-in-law brandishing a plate of vol-au-vents. 'I have thanks, delicious.' I took her aside. 'But listen, Caro, the thing is, I'm going to have to dash quite soon. Ant and I are going out to dinner tonight. His publishers are—' Shit. Ant and I *and* the publishers. I held my breath.

'Don't worry,' she said gently, to my surprise. 'I know how it is. We all have commitments, and these summer weekends are a nightmare. Everything seems to come at once, doesn't it? It was sweet of you to come.'

'Thanks, Caro,' I said gratefully, remembering why we'd been such friends. *Were* such friends. Why, at school,

we'd stuck together so firmly, amongst the Kays and the Paulas. 'I'll just say goodbye to Tim.'

'Oh, don't worry, I'll tell him you've gone. And I'd better escort you out,' she said, taking my arm. 'Your fan club will never let you go, otherwise.'

'I don't know about fan club,' I said nervously as we skirted the room. 'I get the feeling they're muttering: "'Thinks she's something special".'

'They're just jealous,' she said, seeing me to the door. 'They know we all left the starting blocks together and they want to know why they haven't gone as far, that's all.'

I shot her a grateful look as we emerged on the doorstep together in the sunshine. Suddenly I remembered my promise to Anna; wondered if this was a good moment. I hesitated.

'By the way, Anna's got a bit of a bee in her bonnet about riding at the moment.'

'Oh?'

'She's had quite a lot of lessons now and I just wondered . . . well, she's terribly keen to join the Pony Club.'

'The Pony Club?'

'Yes, and you're on the committee, aren't you? So I wondered . . .'

'But she doesn't live round here. It's all done locally, Evie. Neighbouring farms, that sort of thing.'

'I know, but I thought she could cycle.'

'Where?'

'Um, here. It's only about twenty minutes – well, half an hour. Or she could get the train. At weekends. Not every weekend, obviously.' I was rapidly losing my nerve.

My palms felt a bit sweaty. 'But now and again I thought she could, you know, come across. Have some fun with her cousins.'

Caro folded her arms. Her chin retracted slowly back into her neck. She surveyed me through narrowed eyes.

'Right,' she said thoughtfully. 'So you want me to pick her up from the station on a Saturday morning, take her to the rallies, give her a bed for the night, and then drop her back at the station the next day?'

I flushed. 'Well, no. That sounds—'

'You want to cherry-pick your bits of country life for her. You don't actually want to live here, but you want her to reap the benefits. Is that it?'

I stared at her, horrified. Suddenly I saw red. 'Caro, I did live here, remember? This was my home. And no, I don't mean to pass the buck. I'll come across, do my share, take the children to shows or whatever.'

'Oh, really?'

'Yes, of course.'

'OK,' she said suddenly, 'you're on.'

'What?'

'Yes, fine.' Her eyes glittered. 'You tack up the ponies, muck out the lorry, drive it to shows in the pouring rain – splendid. I'd like to see more of Anna. And you too, Evie. You're on.' She challenged me with her eyes.

'Right.' I caught my breath, taken aback. 'I will.' I swallowed. There didn't seem to be much more to say. After a moment I turned, somewhat shaken, and walked uncertainly across the yard to the gate.

'But don't forget,' she called sweetly after me, 'she can't come to Pony Club unless she has a pony!'

I stopped a moment in the muddy yard. Blinked rapidly. Then I took a deep breath and marched on as best I could, hobbling in the shingle in my heels, knowing she was watching me, a smile on her face.

I turned up the lane, fury mounting. She had to spoil it, didn't she? Just when I thought we were getting on so well, she had to go and muddy the waters. Get all chippy again. And, boy, was her resentment close to the surface. Scratch it and – *whoosh* – did she erupt. Because that was what it was, I decided angrily as I stalked on to the car. Resentment. And envy. Anna had her cool town life – plays, concerts, friends nearby – and she should jolly well stick to it. Her kids didn't have any of that, so she was damned if Anna was going to have a bit of something hers had in spades.

Well, we'll see about that, I thought as I marched round the church wall to the car. I got in, slamming the door behind me. It created a breeze and sent a shopping list on the dashboard fluttering into my lap. I snatched it up irritably. Eggs, butter, dishwasher powder . . . On an impulse I plunged my hand into my bag, rifled fruitlessly for a pen, found an eyeliner instead, and in black, sticky and appropriately childish letters scrawled 'PONY' underneath. I gazed at it a moment; felt a tiny bit better. Then I turned the key in the ignition and sped off.

3

'She's infuriating!' I stormed to Ant the next morning, chucking bowls in the dishwasher and tossing cereal packets back in the cupboard. 'One minute she's nice as pie, and the next she's morphed into Anne Robinson!'

He smiled into his *Independent*. 'Only if you know which buttons to press.'

'I didn't press anything *deliberately*.' I flicked the dishwasher door shut with my foot as I passed. 'I thought she'd be pleased, actually, to have Anna around, have her more involved in the farm. I certainly didn't think she'd jump down my throat like that.'

Ant folded up his paper calmly. 'Now why do I suspect you're being slightly disingenuous?'

'What d'you mean?'

'Surely you knew there was every possibility? Caro is one of life's throat jumpers.'

'Yes, but why?' I wailed. 'She never used to be.'

'Because she's sensitive. For obvious reasons.'

He stood up and drained his coffee, tilting back his head. 'And tackling her in the middle of her party was perhaps not the most subtle of manoeuvres.'

'It wasn't the middle of her party, it was at the end, when she was being uncharacteristically sweet and understanding and I was stupidly lured into a false sense of security. Oh, *morning*, sleepy-head. You're cutting it fine.'

Anna had slipped into the kitchen via the basement stairs and slunk into position at the table, shoulders hunched, eyes half shut.

'Not really, there's no assembly this morning. Miss Braithwaite's got clinical depression. Who was being sweet?'

'Caro,' I said shortly. 'At Jack's party.'

'Oh. Did you ask—'

'Darling, how was the exam?' I said quickly. I hadn't had a chance to talk to her last night: Ant and I had gone out for supper soon after I'd got back and she'd been asleep when we'd got in.

'Fine.' She yawned widely and shook some Golden Nuggets into a bowl. She sloshed milk on top and began mechanically scooping them into her mouth, crunching hard. As the sugar kicked in, her eyes opened a bit. She gazed blankly out of the open French windows to our stretch of parched lawn, fringed by dusty laurels. 'I was a bit nervous in the Schubert, though. Probably played a few bum notes.'

'Didn't sound like it from where I was sitting.' Ant crossed the kitchen to put his mug in the sink.

'Could you hear?' She turned to look at him.

'The walls at the Royal College are notoriously thin. Granny always used to listen to me.'

'Oh.' Her eyes widened with interest. 'So what about the Beethoven? A bit too slow at the end?'

'It's supposed to be slow. It's a moody old piece by a moody old bugger contemplating slitting his throat. You had me reaching for the Sabuteos when you launched into those last arpeggios, I can tell you.'

She laughed and I glowed as I cleared up around them, enjoying the musical banter. It was all Greek to me, just as it was when they talked poetry and Latin and, well, Greek.

Anna got up to put her bowl in the sink and I watched as they leaned languidly against the stainless steel together, chewing the academic fat: both tall, fair-skinned and blond, Ant's springy curls turning slightly grey at the temples, Anna's hair much straighter, more flaxen, and tucked behind her ears. Athletic, their figures might be described as, not small and solid like mine, and they both had fine features, straight noses, and wide-apart eyes, which gave them a faintly startled look, although Anna's weren't quite as blue. She'd got his temperament too – calm, unruffled – and definitely his brain. So what had I brought to the party? You might well ask. Ant would be kind enough to say, amongst other things, an impulsiveness to temper his natural caution, his reserve. I might say, not a lot. I smiled as I tossed a fork into the cutlery drawer.

As I popped a slice of bread in the toaster, half an ear on what they were saying about Schubert not being as religious as he made out and just laying it on thick to get in with Beethoven, I marvelled how, even though my subconscious must absorb a certain amount, I never really made sense of it. If you asked me in ten minutes if Schubert had been the religious one or Beethoven I wouldn't have a clue. But I enjoyed listening. A culture vulture, my father used to call me, when, instead of watching *Grandstand* with the rest of the family, I'd catch a bus into town and go round the Bodleian, or be found lying on my bed with my nose in a book whilst Tim

helped with the lambing. Not the sort of book Ant and Anna read, I might add, but a light romance – very light – possibly a clogs-and-shawls saga from the mobile library that used to stop outside the farm. But any sort of book was highbrow to Dad, and the fact that I read all day persuaded him I was clever. That I then messed up my A levels and ended up going to secretarial college was therefore a bit of a surprise all round. Not that he minded. On the contrary, he was pleased I was doing something practical, 'acquiring a skill,' he'd say proudly, something I could use afterwards. But I hadn't used it, had probably known I never would, and had gone straight into Bletchley's Books on the outskirts of town as a sales assistant. Dad wasn't convinced about that, but I loved it. Loved the feel and smell of the books – which in my department were way beyond me – loved the people who used to come in and pore over them with their long scarves and their owl glasses. One of whom, of course, was Ant, who'd lost his copy of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and had come in to replace it.

'*Sir Gawain and the* what?' I'd said, scrolling down the list of titles on my computer.

'*Green Knight*?' He'd swivelled round to look at the screen and I remember our heads were quite close.

'Is it a fairy tale? Maybe in the children's section.'

He'd laughed. 'I wish it was. No, it's like deciphering Chinese.'

Later, when I'd found it in the storeroom and boggled at the hideously difficult Middle English, I'd blushed. But it was all part of the learning curve. And after all, that was what I was doing here: learning the way of life,

acquiring the habits of an undergraduate, without actually doing any hard graft. I took the *Coles Notes* approach to Oxford; I didn't actually study the text, but, boy, could I wing the lifestyle. Naturally I had a bike, and long dark hair, and a scarf of indeterminate origin with the stripes going lengthways, and I'd cycle round the city with a basket of books on the front, hoping the gaggle of Japanese tourists on Magdalen Bridge would think I was the real McCoy. I'd once – laughingly – said as much to Ant, and he'd roared.

'Oh, no, no one would ever take you for one of those St Hilda's girls.'

'Why not?' I'd said, hugely offended.

'You're much too pretty.'

I didn't quite know if I was mollified. Probably. A bit. But I wouldn't have minded being both. Like Anna. Pretty and clever.

I watched now as she scooped up her GCSE coursework folder with one hand and took the piece of buttered toast I proffered with the other.

'See you,' she called as she went through the open French windows, pausing to stroke Brenda, our West Highland terrier, who was asleep on the lawn, then going to the wall at the far end where her bike was parked. When she'd dumped her books in the basket she clamped the piece of toast between her teeth and went to wheel her bike through the garden gate to the street. She turned back suddenly. Removed the toast.

'So what did she say?'

'What?'

The washing machine had embarked on its final spin behind me.

'Caro. What did she say?'

I caught this, but shrugged and cupped my ear, pretending I couldn't hear over the noise, which she acknowledged with an impatient shake of her head. I watched as she swung a leg over the saddle and pedalled off down the road in her dark blue Oxford High uniform.

'She wants to get her ears pierced,' I murmured to no one in particular, but I suppose to Ant, who was also gathering books and papers, making final debarkation noises, patting his pockets to check for wallet, glasses.

'There, on the dresser.' I pointed to his ancient spectacle case on the top shelf.

'Thanks.' He reached up. 'Well, I suppose if that's what all her friends are doing,' he said vaguely. 'But she's a bit young, isn't she?'

'That's what I said. I said, what about next summer, when she's fifteen?'

'And she said?'

'Fine. It was almost as if she felt she had to ask, but was quite relieved when I said no.'

We exchanged smiles and I knew we were silently congratulating ourselves on having a daughter who didn't actually want every orifice pierced, or a tattoo on her bottom, like Jess next door; who thought smoking was sad, drink to be sipped cautiously, and who wanted to get ten A stars in her GCSEs, and looked as if she was going to.

'See you later.' Ant kissed my cheek.

I leaned on the open frame of the French windows in my dressing gown and watched him go: crossing the garden to get his own bike, head slightly bowed, in the manner of a very tall man. Yes, we didn't do too badly, Ant and I. When friends complained about their bloody husbands, or their bloody marriages, I found myself keeping quiet, or even making things up. 'Yes, desperately untidy,' or 'No, never remembers an anniversary,' I'd sometimes contribute. I remembered Paula's accusation, yesterday – 'Don't tell me you're still in love with your husband!' Well, I was, actually. And he with me. I knew that, not smugly or sloppily, but just with a thumping great visceral certainty: knew we were in this for the long haul. Lifers.

As he went through the back gate he met the postman and took the letters from him, brandishing them at me to let me know he'd got them. I smiled and nodded back. These days they were nearly all for him, anyway. Not just the bills – I could barely manage the milk bill – but readers' letters too. When the publishers had sent the first few – which invariably began, very sweetly, 'I've never written to an author before but I just had to congratulate you . . .' – Anna and I had hooted with laughter.

'Fan mail!' she'd spluttered. 'My God, Dad, like a pop star. They'll be wanting a photo next.'

And the very next one had asked for just that. Ant had declined, writing back saying he was terribly flattered, but really, he was no oil painting, which was why there was no author photo on the dust jacket. But it gave us a flavour of things to come, of the number of people who'd come to listen to him give a reading in New College and

the sheer volume at the reception in the adjoining room afterwards, as we'd stood clutching glasses of warm white wine: quite a lot of dusty academics – colleagues, many of them – but also plenty of perfectly normal people too, and that was the clincher. To be celebrated amongst one's peers, the people Ant respected, was crucial, but to have gone over the wire, to have breached the gap between these hallowed, honey-coloured walls and entertained the man on the street, the woman in Tesco's, to have reached the *real* world, was something else. Joe Public's recognition was secretly craved by the high-minded, for only that brought fame and fortune.

And I'd been so proud, *so* proud, standing there beside him in my new wraparound dress, Anna, stunning in a Topshop number, laughing later with Ant as I recalled how someone had approached me and asked politely, 'And what do you do?' and I'd replied thoughtlessly, 'Oh, nothing.' 'Nothing will come of nothing,' the bearded cove had murmured before moving on, and I'd shrugged, used to quotes being flung at me in this city, used to people being surprised I didn't teach, or paint, or write, secretly knowing Ant did enough for both of us. 'Should have told him to sod off,' Ant had said, annoyed, but I'd just laughed.

But there'd been jealousy too, at his success. Intellectuals, despite, or perhaps because of, their brains, can be a mean-spirited bunch, and there'd been those who'd said Ant had sold out, been too commercial, betrayed Byron, in his flagrant depiction of him as a 'yoof culture' figure. But as Anna said, it was all bollocks, because if Byron had been alive today he'd have loved it. Would have

turned up the collar of his leather jacket, flopped down on the sofa in his stately pile with his babe and given an interview to *Hello!*, unlike Wordsworth, who'd have headed for the Lake District in his anorak. And herein lay the rub. The fact that Byron would have been cool and Wordsworth a geek came as no surprise to anyone in the English Department: it was that someone had thought of saying it, of stating the obvious, that they didn't like.

So we'd been careful, in the face of this potential envy. Or rather, Ant had been careful. I, on the other hand, had gone shopping. House hunting, to be more precise. Recalling that, I cringed now as I wrapped my dressing gown around me and scooped up my breakfast tray, making for the stairs. Oh, we'd agreed we were *moving*, that much had been discussed – the college house was only rented and we needed to buy – but what we hadn't quite established was where. As I nipped up the stairs now to the ground floor, balancing my tea and toast, I passed the double doors into the drawing room – drawing room, God, we never thought we'd have one of those – following the curved, French-polished rail up to my bedroom. But this wasn't the house I was cringing about, no. It was the one off the Banbury Road, the one in Westgate Avenue with the six bedrooms, the acre of garden, the music room, the – God help me – orangery. I remember looking round it, excitement mounting, following the estate agent as more and more spacious rooms unfolded, and then the next day, breathlessly dragging Ant and Anna there, verbally incontinent with excitement. I explained, as I hustled them up the crunchy gravel drive,

that it was just down the road from Grant Marshall's house – Grant, a medic, having also recently made it over the wire as a television psychiatrist – and his famously snooty wife, Prue, and that I simply couldn't *wait* to see Prue's face!

In the event, Ant's face had been more interesting. He'd stood on the terrace overlooking the vast, manicured garden, thrust his hands in his pockets and jingled his change nervously.

'For just the three of us? It doesn't seem quite right.'

There was a silence as I digested this.

'It's too far from where we've come from,' Anna, young, but terrifyingly articulate, had commented at length. She'd picked a scab on her knee and frowned, as if she wasn't quite sure what she meant by that. But I knew exactly and I felt ashamed.

Ant cleared his throat. 'I'm just not convinced it's sort of . . . us.'

'No, no, you're right,' I'd said quickly. Meekly. 'Quite right.'

Suddenly it was as clear as day. This house took us out of quiet, muted, university-professor land and into loud, cushy, fat-cat suburbia. Suddenly the wall-to-wall white carpets were vulgar, the four bathrooms flashy, the orangery a joke. And I hadn't known. Not immediately. It had had to be pointed out to me by my intrinsically tasteful husband and child.

We'd headed straight back into town, and then the following day had seen this place. Tall, terraced, with a little iron balcony at the front, still central, still close to our friends, still built of mellow Cotswold stone, still with

integrity. I paused at the landing window now, looking out at our long, slim walled garden, elegant and leafy, sandwiched between two similarly elegant and leafy enclosures, belonging to a chemistry don and a journalist. Yes. It suited us, I thought, going on to my bedroom. Was right up the Hamiltons' street.

I smiled and hopped back into bed with my toast and the papers.

When Ant and I had been married only a few months, he'd left for work one morning then popped back ten minutes later, having forgotten a student's essay. He'd found me back in bed with a box of lime creams, a cigarette and *Cosmo*. I'd been as mortified as if he'd caught me with a naked man, but Ant had roared with delight.

'It's why I love you,' he'd said, leaning over the bed to kiss me. 'Because you're not up and dressed, hair scraped back, beavering away trying to write the next *Madame Bovary*, like everyone else in this city. You just enjoy yourself. You embrace pleasure.'

I seem to remember we'd embraced a bit more pleasure that morning as one kiss had led to another and Ant was late for his tutorial, and I remember wondering if the student waiting patiently for him to arrive had any idea that the flushed young professor, who eventually appeared waving the forgotten essay, had just achieved bliss in the arms of his wife, on top of a box of lime creams. Probably not.

These days my tastes had changed, and tea and toast accompanied the *Daily Mail*, but I still read the important bits: the 'Femail' section in the middle, the diets, the detoxing, the fashion – I didn't skimp. This being Monday

I also shimmied through the local paper too, glancing, out of habit, at the houses at the back, then the furniture for sale – we were vaguely looking for a baby grand piano for Anna – when an ad in the livestock column caught my eye.

For Sale. Beautiful grey Connemara pony, 14.2 hands, 6 years. Very willing, a great character. A teenager's dream. First to see will buy. £1,000.

I stared in disbelief; read it again. Oh. Oh, how marvellous! Right here, in front of my nose. It was fate. I just knew it was. And I also knew, from listening to Anna, that 14.2 was about the right height. And a thousand pounds, I was sure, was pretty reasonable too. I feverishly read the address. Parkfield Lane. Which was off the Woodstock Road. Minutes away!

I straightened up in the crumpled bed, retying my dressing gown, lips pursed triumphantly. Never in a million years had Caro imagined I'd actually *buy* a pony when she'd sent her taunt sailing across the yard, and never in a million years had I imagined I could. She knew I didn't know a thing about horses, knew she'd clean-bowled me right through the stumps, and yet . . . what could be so hard? I peered at the ad again. 'A teenager's dream.' Well, I had a teenager and she had a dream – perfect. My hand was already straying across the duvet towards the phone on the bedside table when it stopped. Hang on. It was one thing to sit up in bed full of bravado, and think, I'll show her, and quite another to march into her farmyard leading a horse.

I swallowed; saw my nerve rapidly disappearing down the plughole. Well, OK, I'd talk to her, I determined. She'd probably calmed down a bit by now, as had I, and we'd sort this out like . . . like friends. Like sisters. If Caro really meant Anna needed a pony for Pony Club, then fine, we'd get one, but if she'd meant over her dead body, we'd forget it. Anna would understand. I quaked, remembering her eager little face at the gate this morning.

On the other hand – I leaned forward, dissecting the ad minutely – this pony might go quickly. It was clearly a winner, and my sister-in-law was a busy woman. She never answered her mobile and I'd have to go to the farm to track her down, and whilst I was canvassing her opinion in a pigsty, or sucking up to her whilst her head was down her Portaloos, she'd say she'd think about it and get back to me, while in the meantime some other lucky teenager would have bought it. Whereas if I just presented her with a *fait accompli* . . . In another moment, and with that famous impulsion Ant was so fond of, I'd plucked the phone from the bedside table and dialled the number.

'Hello, yes, I've just seen your ad in the local paper . . .'

Ten minutes later I'd agreed to meet a man in a stable yard off the Woodstock Road, who'd promised me a mare to die for: a horse so serene the Queen herself would be proud to be seen on her, so quiet she'd take a sugar lump from your head without harming a hair, and so well trained she'd wandered into his kitchen only yesterday, quiet as a mouse, without him even noticing.

I'd had a rather unsettling vision of a horse, perched on a stool at my granite breakfast bar, legs crossed, calmly

reading the paper and demanding cereal, but agreed that my daughter and I would most certainly be there on Saturday morning, early, to meet this equine paragon. Then I put the phone down and flushed with horror. Lord, what had I done?

I quickly dialled Caro's number. Tim answered.

'Oh, Tim.' I flooded with relief. 'I was, um, ringing to thank you both for yesterday,' I lied. 'Such a lovely day, and all that delicious food!'

'Well, it was good to see you. How did Anna get on?'

'Oh, fine. She said it was easy. I mean – not bad.'

'Grade seven, Caro tells me!'

'Um, yes. Tim, is Caro around? I wouldn't mind a word.'

'She's not at the moment. She's down at the yard with Harriet.'

'Harriet?'

'The blind pig. She has to hand-feed her or the others don't let her get a look in.'

I blinked. The paradox didn't escape me. Caro was already up and hand-feeding her blind pig, whilst I was sitting up in bed in my Cath Kidston nightie.

'Right. Yes, well, speaking of animals, Tim, I just wondered . . .' and off I skittered, it all coming tumbling out, ending up with '. . . I mean, we obviously haven't got anywhere to keep it, so I just sort of wondered—'

'Course you can,' he boomed, interrupting me. 'God, we've got too much grass here for our own horses, one more won't make any difference. And if it lives out it's no trouble at all. No mucking out stables and all that malarkey.'

'Well, that's what I thought,' I said eagerly. 'And obviously I'd pop over and – you know – check it occasionally.'

'Oh, Caro can do all that. She has to sort out the others, she can cast an eye.'

'Oh, no, I don't want Caro doing anything,' I said quickly. 'It's my responsibility. But I just wondered, if it needed – I don't know – its feet picking out or something and I couldn't get there, maybe you, or Jack . . . ?'

'Well, not me, obviously. I don't know the first thing. Dangerous at both ends and uncomfortable in the middle, as far as I'm concerned, but Jack's your man, or Phoebe. And how lovely to see more of Anna. The kids will be thrilled.'

I knew he was genuinely pleased. There *was* a bit of a gap, socially and intellectually, between Anna and her cousins, and Tim and I had been so close.

'Caro too,' he added.

'Er, actually, Tim, she wasn't.'

'What?'

'Thrilled. I sort of broached it with her yesterday, and she was a bit . . . you know.'

'Was she? Well, yesterday was a stressy day, Evie. But don't you worry. You get your horse and we'll give it a home. Anna can come at weekends, get the train over. Caro will pick her up. I must fly now, hon. Got to see a man about a bull.'

I opened my mouth to protest, but he'd gone. I put the phone down guiltily. I'd gone round Caro, hadn't I? Gone straight to Tim. But not deliberately, I decided. I'd actually rung to speak to *her*, to thank *her* for yesterday,

seek *her* permission. It wasn't my fault Tim had answered, was it? I got out of bed and reached for my clothes. I'd ring her again later. When Tim had already broken it to her, told her it was a *fait accompli*, I realized with another guilty pang. Oh dear. But actually, Tim's response was the more natural one, I decided as I buttoned up my new Joseph shirt. The more mature, friendly response. And I'd do the lion's share of the work – I pulled on my jeans – of course I would. I'd enjoy it. I needed a project. I wouldn't ride it or anything, but I could – you know – lead it. In my mind's eye I was already strolling down a country lane in a spriggy summer dress and a straw hat with an old grey mare, flowers in its hair. The old grey mare, not me. And the old grey mare was the horse not— Anyway. Lovely.

Right now, though, I thought, darting round the room, popping in some sparkly earrings, finding my Italian mules, I needed to hustle. Maria would be here at ten to clean and I hated her to find me in bed. I had to get Ant's suit from the dry cleaners and pick up that clarinet music Anna wanted. I had a busy day ahead and I needed to get on.

4

Days passed and Friday found me cycling to meet Ant for lunch, under a cloudless sky, treats from the deli for the weekend safely stashed in my basket, long dark hair streaming out behind me. I'd suggested cutting my hair recently – shoulder length, I'd thought, in a bob – but Ant had been horrified.

'Why?'

'Because I'm too old for long hair,' I'd protested.

'Don't be ridiculous. It's you.'

He'd looked so upset, I'd left it. But perhaps I should tie it up, I wondered as I cycled behind a lady of a certain age with an elegant grey chignon fastened to her head with pearly combs. She turned left under the arch into Trinity and I smiled to myself. That was what I loved about this city: you never quite knew who you were cycling behind or sitting next to on the bus; a scientist working on the next cure for cancer, or an astrophysicist sending rockets to Mars?

'Probably some poor devil off to restock the KitKats in the staff canteen,' Ant would scoff.

'Nonsense, you can tell. They have that vague, eccentric look, like they don't know what day it is.'

'Ah, like your mother.'

He had me here. Mum rarely knew what day it was, sported a wispy grey ponytail and a charity-shop ward-

robe, yet didn't have a scholastic bone in her body. Felicity, on the other hand, my stepmother, looked like she'd just stepped off a yacht in St-Tropez and was, in fact, a biology professor at Keble.

'I rest my case,' Ant would say smugly.

I smiled as I neared the end of their road: Mum and Felicity's. Not that they lived together or anything, but when Dad died, Mum had told her about a house that was coming up at the end of her street. Felicity, grief-stricken, and for once needing a bit of help and guidance, had looked at it and bought it immediately. Yes, odd, I mused, turning into it now as a short cut, how that had worked out. No one had been terribly surprised when, after Tim and I got married – and I do think she'd hung on until then – my mother left my father. They rowed pretty much constantly and had always had a tempestuous relationship, but the marriage really came to a head when, on one memorable occasion, empty gin bottles were thrown, of which, as Tim commented later, there were not a few. Mum had come to loathe the farm: the mud, the wet – which was rich, my father would snap, when she'd married a farmer – and Dad hated what he called her spiritualistic crap; her cod medicine.

Mum, a self-styled free spirit, was heavily into alternative remedies. Reflexology, aromatherapy, you name it, she'd tried it, her latest obsession being reiki, of which, after a startlingly brief training period, she claimed to be a qualified practitioner. The final straw for Dad had been her plan to set up a practice at the farm, transforming one of the barns – with a few pink towels and some womb music, he'd snort – into a holistic medical centre.

'I'm not denying there's something in all this alternative bollocks,' he'd roared. 'What I *am* denying is that your mother is in any way, shape or form qualified to administer it!'

One unseasonably clement day in October, after just such a heated exchange, Mum took her beloved Cairn terrier, Bathsheba, and walked all the way into Oxford – no mean eight miles – to visit her sister. She telephoned Dad to say that since it was so far, she thought she'd stay the night. The following morning she rang to say she thought she'd stay a few days, because Cynthia, her sister, was under the weather. A few days had turned into a few weeks, and then a few months – and then she never came back. If Tim or I enquired, Dad would say vaguely, 'Your mother? Oh, she's still at Cynthia's.' And if we rang Mum and asked when she was thinking of returning, she'd say, 'Oh, when Cynthia's a bit better, I expect.'

The truth was it suited them. Mum was back in the city where she belonged, and Dad was happy with the farm to himself, remote control in his hand of an evening and no frustrated housewife wanting him to light candles and sit cross-legged listening to his inner music. Dad lived like a slob, wore the same clothes every day, ate baked beans from the tin and left washing up in the sink in a tottering pagoda. Periodically I'd despair to Tim, who'd say – who cares? He's happy. Let him be. And he was. They both were, in fact, for the first time in years, and life became remarkably peaceful.

Inevitably, though, as time went by, they both became lonely and then came what Tim and I nervously referred

to as 'the courting phase'. Mum embarked on a series of jaw-droopingly unsuitable boyfriends – some half her age, one a student, for God's sake, one a busker she'd found in an underpass, all of whom predictably came to nothing – and Dad moved in Felicity.

I have to say, in the beginning Tim and I were slightly wary of Felicity, simply because she was so palpably not Dad's type. He'd met a few women through Rural Relations, a country dating agency – primarily rosy-cheeked women with trousers held up with binder twine – but Felicity was tall, slim, ravishingly good-looking and highly intelligent.

'What does she see in Dad?' I wondered rather disloyally to Caro over a cup of tea in her bungalow. She'd bristled slightly, Tim being very like his father.

'Well, he's tall, good-looking and not entirely impoverished, with a farm and three hundred acres – what's not to see?'

'I suppose,' I'd agreed, suitably rebuked.

Some weeks later Dad had invited us all to Sunday lunch, to meet Felicity properly. We'd tried not to boggle as we spotted napkins on the table and a vase of flowers in the middle, and then sat down to a starter – a starter! – with Dad at one end in a freshly laundered shirt, Felicity at the other, looking nervous. And actually, because of her slight unease, I'd warmed to her instantly. We all had, even Caro.

'She's just what your father needs,' she'd declared when she'd rung me later for a post-match analysis. 'An intelligent woman with a no-nonsense approach to lick that farmhouse into shape.'

'Mum was intelligent,' I'd countered loyally, but I knew what she meant.

'Yes, but she got so distracted. Felicity has such a clear vision of how that farm should be.'

It was true, Dad and Felicity were a brilliant team. In no time at all she'd cleared the house of clutter, redecorated, and even attacked the garden, so that although we all still knew the place was falling down, cosmetically it looked a lot better. And she was fun to have around; pleasant, friendly but didn't try to ingratiate herself too much, just cheerily invited us to lunch most weekends, knowing Tim, especially, still regarded the farm as home. She'd click around the kitchen she'd repainted a sunny cadmium yellow, in high heels to Classic FM – whilst Mum had shuffled in moccasins to Cat Stevens – served delicious food with vegetables and herbs she'd grown in the garden, and then excused herself after coffee, ostensibly to disappear to work in the study but perhaps to let us chat. Dad adored her, absolutely adored her, his whole, astonished, wide-eyed demeanour saying, *Look! Look what I've got! Bloody hell!*

In time, Felicity included Mum in her invitations too, asking her first one Christmas, for lunch.

'So that everyone can be together, and you and Tim don't have to flit from house to house?' she'd asked me anxiously, soliciting my opinion first, when we'd met for lunch in Browns. 'What d'you think, Evie?'

'I think it's a brilliant idea,' I'd said. 'If she'll come.'

To our surprise, she did, and a surprisingly jolly Christmas Day was had by all. The first for many years, I'd thought as I'd caught Tim's eye over the turkey, wonder-

ing if he remembered the one when Mum had chased Dad round the table with her Christmas present to him, an electric carving knife.

And Felicity had a way of getting the best out of people: of getting Dad to be garrulous and genial, Tim to be amusing and a chip off the old block, Mum not to be too embarrassingly wacky but charmingly eccentric, and even Caro . . . Caro I'd looked at with new eyes that Christmas Day as she'd recounted losing her shoe in Cornmarket, putting it on again and getting home to discover she'd got one blue and one brown. 'I swear,' she'd insisted, wide-eyed around the table as we'd all roared with laughter in our paper hats, 'I'd got someone else's shoe!' I'd remembered what fun she could be and had caught Tim looking at her too, remembering why he'd married her.

Yes, Felicity had been the cement our family needed, no one doubted that, and no one had been surprised when she and Dad eventually tied the knot. Even after he was married Dad couldn't stop parading her like a prize heifer; proudly showing us the new research book she'd written, pointing out the letters after her name, teasing me that I wasn't the only one in the family married to an academic. He'd happily host faculty dinner parties for her too, pulling corks and grinning benignly as molecular science chat went on around him.

'Mum would have loved all that,' I'd said wistfully to Ant in the car on the way home from one such dinner. 'All she wanted was a bit of culture in the house.'

'That's not culture,' he'd smiled. 'That's scientists.'

I'd dimly grasped the distinction, but all clever people were cultured to me. I think of all of us, though, Ant had

been slightly suspicious of Felicity to begin with and I'd wondered if there'd been a tinge of rivalry, both coming from the same University pool. In time, though, he'd warmed to her too, seeing what a profound difference she made to Dad, who bounded around the farm like one of his young calves, like a new man. Which was why, one bright August morning, it was such a shock that he was a dead man.

Grief-stricken as we all were, we knew immediately it was Felicity who needed help. After the funeral she retreated to the farmhouse, pulling up the drawbridge, putting the answer machine on, hunkering down for days. We'd worried and rallied, Caro and I bringing lunch to the farm on Sundays, which she usually cooked so effortlessly, trying desperately to keep some semblance of normality going, some cheerful banter as she sat, toying listlessly with her food, or not sitting at all, shuffling around in the background as we ate – no clip-clopping now – sifting through letters of condolence, looking pale. After a few months it was no real surprise when, one Sunday, she announced the house was too big for her and held too many painful memories and that she was moving to 47 Fairfield Avenue, down the road from Mum, who, at number 16, had inherited Cynthia's house when she'd died. They weren't necessarily soul mates back then – Mum was just doing Felicity a good turn – but over time, proximity and a shared past – after all, they'd both been married to the same man – they forged an unlikely alliance. Tuesday nights found Mum in Felicity's sitting room at the backgammon board, where gin and tonics were served promptly at six; they took it

in turn to provide the sandwiches. Thursday night was book club night, and on Sunday's, if they weren't with Caro or me, they lunched together in town. Oh, and some mornings had coffee too.

I smiled now as I cycled passed Mum's little terraced house at one end and pedalled towards Felicity's more substantial property at the other. Were they there today, I wondered. If Felicity wasn't teaching, in all probability yes, but I wouldn't stop. I glanced through the heavily draped sitting-room window. I was five minutes late as it was, and coffee with those two only led to drinks. I wouldn't get away without joining them for a hefty sharpener.

I pushed my bike through Cornmarket, pedalled on down St Aldates, calling out a cheery hello to Ron, who'd been our porter at Balliol but was now at Christ Church, and who was patiently trying to explain to a group of uncomprehending Chinese that they couldn't simply step over his chain and stray into his quad. He shrugged despairingly at me and I grinned back. There were tourists swarming everywhere at the moment, particularly in the main streets, but not down here – I swung a left, free-wheeling down a little alleyway – not in the tiny trattoria Ant and I favoured, slightly crummy but off the beaten track, and only really frequented by staff and students; the *cognoscenti*.

How lovely, I thought, to have a husband who still wanted to have lunch with me. For years, on alternate Fridays, because he only had one lecture, I'd cycle in and have a bowl of soup with him at Lorenzo's.

'I might even catch the end of your lecture,' I'd called