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Ghostwritten

Written by Isabel Wolff

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ISABEL WOLFF

Ghostwritten

HARPER

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1

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PROLOGUE

31 August 1987

Holidaymakers speckle the beach, reclining behind brightly striped windbreaks, hands held to eyes against the late afternoon sun as they gaze at the glittering sea. On the horizon squats a huge grey tanker; in the middle distance a scattering of white-sailed yachts, their spinners billowed and taut. At the shoreline a young couple in surfing gear are launching a yellow canoe. He holds it while she climbs in, then he jumps on and they paddle away, the boat rocking and bumping through the swell. Two little girls in pink swimsuits stop paddling for a moment to watch them then dash in and out of the water, shrieking with laughter. Behind them, a family is playing French cricket. The ball soars towards the rocks, pursued by a dog, barking wildly, its claws driving up a spray of wet sand.

On the cliff path behind the beach, people are queuing at the wooden hut for tea and biscuits, or an ice cream,

or bucket and spade or a ready-inflated Lilo, which is what a couple of teenage boys are buying now. 'Don't take it in the sea,' warns the woman behind the counter. The taller boy shakes his head then he and his friend carry the airbed down the worn granite steps to the beach.

Here, the sand is pale and dry, glinting with mica. As they head for the water, the boys throw a covetous glance at a blonde woman in a black bikini, who's lying on a white towel, perfectly still. She's enjoying the warmth of the sun and the sound of the sea pulling in and out, as steady as breathing. A sandfly lands on her cheek and she brushes it away, then pushes herself up, resting on her elbows. She gazes at the headland, where the grass has dried to a pale gold: then she looks at the dark-haired man sitting beside her, and gives him an indolent smile. Now she turns on her front, reaches behind to unclip her bikini, then hands him a tube of Ambre Solaire. The man hesitates, glancing at the woman's two children who are building a sandcastle a few feet away, then he removes the cap and starts rubbing the cream onto the woman's shoulders. As his palm strokes her skin, she sighs with pleasure.

Her daughter, kneeling in the sand, looks up. Seeing the man's hand moving over her mother's waist, the girl reddens, then stumbles to her feet. 'Let's go rock-pooling,' she says to her little brother.

He shakes his blond head and continues digging. 'No.'
'But I want you to.'

'I'd rather stay with Mum.'

The girl picks up her plastic sandals and bangs them together. 'You have to come with me.'

‘Why?’

She puts on the right shoe. ‘To help me.’

‘Don’t want to help you.’

‘Well you’ve *got* to . . .’ She shoves her left foot into the other sandal, bends to do it up, then grabs the bucket that the boy was filling and empties it. ‘I’ll carry this; you take the net.’

The boy shrugs his narrow shoulders, then stands. He hitches up his red swimming trunks, which are hand-me-downs and much too big; he picks up the net lying nearby.

Their mother lifts her head. ‘You don’t have long,’ she says. ‘We’ll be leaving at six, so you’re to come back when you hear the bell from the tea hut. Did you hear me?’ she adds to her daughter. ‘Hold his hand now. You must hold his hand.’ The girl gives a sullen nod then starts to walk towards the rocks that spill down from the low cliff to the sea. Her brother follows her, dragging the net, its stick leaving a sinuous trail, like the tail of the yellow kite which he now notices, swaying high up, against the blue. He cranes his neck to watch it, one eye closed against the sun.

The girl glances behind and sees that he’s not following her. ‘Ted!’ she calls. ‘Come *on!*’ She wants to get as far as possible from their mother and her so-called ‘friend’. ‘*Teddy!*’ The little boy tears his gaze from the kite and follows his sister, jumping onto her footprints, leaving no tracks of his own. A toddler wobbles across his path, naked except for a sun hat, then tumbles over, wails, and is hastily scooped up.

Now they’re passing a boy and girl who are digging. The trench they’ve made is six foot long, and so deep that they’re visible only from the waist up.

Ted stops, entranced. 'Look, Evie!' She turns. 'It's 'normous.'

'It is,' she agrees seriously. 'Must have taken ages,' she says to the girl who is about her own age, although tall and long-limbed. She's wearing a white T-shirt with a large black 'J' on it. Evie wonders what it stands for. Julie? Jane?

'It did take ages,' the girl replies. Her face is a pale oval framed by long dark hair. She tucks a hank behind her ear and nods at the rampart of displaced sand. 'We've been digging all afternoon, haven't we, Tom?'

Tom, a thickset boy of about eight, straightens up. 'We're making a tunnel.' He leans on his spade. 'Like that Channel Tunnel they're building.'

'It was my idea,' the girl adds. 'We've done it all by ourselves.' She turns to Tom. 'Mum'll be surprised when she sees it.'

Tom laughs. 'She'll be amazed.'

'You making a real tunnel?' Ted asks him.

'Yes.' Tom points to a deep recess at the back of the hole.

Ted peers at it. 'Can I go in?'

'Maybe,' Tom shrugs. 'When it's finished. But we'll have to be quick because the tide's coming up.'

'The time's coming up?' Ted looks at the sea.

'The *tide*, silly,' says Evie. 'Come on, Ted, we'd better go . . .'

On the other side of the beach, the children's mother closes her eyes as her companion's hands caress the swell of her hips. 'That's lovely,' she says. 'Can you hear me purring?' she adds with a laugh. Someone nearby is listening to Radio One. She can hear the Pet Shop Boys. 'Always on My Mind'.

Her boyfriend lies down beside her. ‘You’re always on *my* mind, Babs,’ he murmurs.

She puts her hand to his chest, spreading her fingers against his skin. ‘This is the best holiday I’ve had for years . . .’

By now her children have reached the rocks – jagged grey boulders thinly striped with white quartz. They clamber up, and Ted peers into the first pool. He stares at the seaweed, some brown and knobbly, some as green and smooth as lettuce. He pokes his net at a sea anemone and, to his delight, it retracts its maroon tendrils. Then he spies a shrimp and thrusts the net at it. ‘Caught something!’ he shouts, but as he inspects the mesh his face falls – all that’s in it is a brown winkle. ‘Evie!’ he calls, dismayed to see that she is fifty or sixty feet away. ‘Wait for me!’ But Evie keeps on jumping across the rocks, the bucket swinging from her arm.

As Ted follows her he looks out to sea and spots a yellow canoe with two people in it, lifting and twisting their paddles. He hears a distant roar, and sees a motorboat rip across the water, the wake fanning out in widening chevrons that make the canoe rock and sway. Then he returns his gaze to Evie. She’s peering into a pool. ‘Evie!’ he yells, but she doesn’t respond.

Ted steps onto the next boulder but it’s crusted with tiny black mussels that cut into his feet. The rock beside it looks smooth, but when he stands on it, it wobbles violently, and his thin arms flail as he tries not to fall. Sudden tears sting his eyes. The rocks are sharp, and his trunks won’t stay up and his sister won’t wait for him, let alone hold his hand like she’s supposed to. ‘Evie . . .’ His throat aches as he tries not to cry. ‘Eeeviiiiiii!’

At last she turns. Seeing his distress, she makes her way back to him. ‘What’s the matter, Ted?’ She stares at his feet. ‘Why didn’t you wear your beach shoes?’

He sniffs. ‘I forgot.’

Evie heaves an exasperated sigh then turns towards the sea. ‘Then we’d better go this way – the rocks are easier. Mind the barnacles,’ she adds over her shoulder. ‘Ooh *there’s* a good pool.’ It’s long and narrow, like a little loch, with bands of leathery-looking weed that sway to and fro. As Evie’s shadow falls onto the surface, a small brown fish darts across the bottom. ‘Give me the net!’ Ted passes it to her and takes the bucket as Evie crouches down, thrusts the net under a rock and swiftly withdraws it. There’s a glint of silver. ‘Got it!’ she yells. ‘Fill the bucket, Ted! Quick!’

Ted dips the bucket in the pool then hands it to her. Evie tips the fish in and it swims to the bottom then scoots under a shred of bladderwrack. ‘It’s *huge*,’ Evie breathes. ‘And there’s a shrimp!’ She feels a sudden euphoria – her loathing of her mother’s ‘friend’ forgotten. ‘Let’s get some more.’ As she dips the net in the water again she hears, faintly, the bell that the woman in the tea hut rings when she’s closing.

A few yards away the waves are breaking over the rocks; the two children can feel the spray on the backs of their legs.

Ted shivers. ‘Is it high time yet, Evie?’

Evie remembers Clive’s hands on their mother’s flanks. She thinks of his hairy chest and his thick arms, with their tattoos, and of the grunts that she hears through the bedroom wall.

‘It isn’t high tide,’ she answers. ‘Not yet . . .’

Ted picks up the net again. 'The bell's ringing.'

Evie shrugs. 'I can't hear it.'

'I can, and 'member what Mum said, she said—'

'Let's find a crab!' Evie yells. 'Come on!'

Thrilled by the idea, Ted follows his sister, relieved that she's going more slowly now, even if it's only to avoid spilling their precious catch. Here the rocks are not sharp with mussels, but treacherous with seaweed, which slips like satin beneath Ted's feet. He longs for Evie to hold his hand, but doesn't like to ask in case it makes him seem babyish.

'We should have brought some ham,' he hears her say. 'Crabs like ham. We'll bring some tomorrow, okay?'

Ted nods happily.

On the beach, the man flying the kite is reeling it in. The mother of the girls in the pink swimsuits is calling them out of the sea. They run towards her, teeth chattering, and she wraps a towel around each one while the encroaching waves lick at their footprints. The family that were playing French cricket are packing up: the father hurls the ball and the dog tears after it.

People are folding their chairs, or collapsing sunshades and packing up baskets and bags as the sea advances, then retreats, then pushes forward again.

'Five more minutes, Clive,' Barbara says.

He winds a lock of her hair around his finger. 'So what's happening tonight?'

'Well, I thought we'd walk to Trennick and get some fish and chips; we could buy a nice bottle of wine, and *then* . . . I'll get the kids into bed early.'

'You do that,' Clive whispers. He kisses her. 'You do that, Babs.' Barbara smiles to think that she's only

known Clive for eight weeks. She remembers the rush of desire when she saw him – the first time she'd felt anything for a man in years. She thinks of how she'd loathed the job – sitting at her desk all day with nothing to see through the window but lorries and trucks with *JJ Haulage* on them; the only thing on her wall a road map of the UK. Just as she was wondering how much more of it she could stand, Clive had walked in. Tall and dark, with the shoulders of an ox, he'd reminded Barbara of a drawing of the Minotaur in one of Evie's books. He'd come about his payslip – five overnights to Harwich that were missing. Flustered, Barbara had promised to correct it; then he'd suggested, cheekily, that she could 'make it up to him'. She'd laughed and said maybe she would . . .

She'd told him that she had two kids – though no ex, God rest Finn's soul; but Clive said that she could have had ten kids in tow and it wouldn't have mattered. The fact that – at thirty-eight – he's ten years older than she is makes Barbara feel light-headed.

The tricky thing had been introducing him to Evie and Ted. Ted had taken little notice of him, turning back to his Lego, but Evie had been hostile, and when Barbara told them that Clive would be coming on the holiday, she'd run to her room, slamming the door. But, as Barbara had said to her, Evie had friends – why shouldn't Mummy have a friend? Why shouldn't Mummy have a bit of happiness? Didn't Mummy deserve it after all she'd been through? But Evie had simply stared at her, as though trying to drill a hole in her soul. Well she'll just have to get used to him, Barbara decides, as Clive kisses her fingertips . . .

Suddenly Barbara realises that the bell has stopped ringing. She sits up.

On the rocks, Ted is getting tired. But now Evie has found another pool, a few feet from the water's edge.

'There'll be crabs in here,' she says authoritatively. 'Okay, Ted, you hold the bucket. Be careful,' she warns as she passes it to him. She takes the net. 'What's the matter?'

'I want to hold the net.'

'You're too young.' Confident that this has settled the matter, she returns her gaze to the pool.

Ted thumps the bucket down on a ledge. 'I'm five!'

'Well I'm nine, so it's better if I do it. It's not easy catching crabs.'

'It's my turn. You caught the fish – *and* the shrimp. So it's my turn with the net now and—'

'Shhhh!' Evie is holding up her left hand, her eyes fixed on the water. 'I saw one,' she hisses. 'A big one.'

'Let me get it.'

Evie leans forward, very slowly, then jabs the net at a clump of weed. As she lifts it out, a khaki-coloured crab, the size of her hand, is dangling from the mesh with one claw.

Ted lunges for the net. To his amazement he manages to wrest it from her; as he does so, the crab falls back into the water then pedals under a rock.

Evie's mouth chasms with outrage. 'You idiot!'

Ted's chin dimples. 'I'm not.'

'You *are*.' She glares at him. 'You're an idiot – and a baby: a stupid little *baby*! No wonder Mum calls you "Teddy Bear".'

His face crumples. 'Sorry, Evie . . .' He offers her the net. 'Catch it again. Please . . .'

Evie's tempted, but then she notices how close the waves now are. 'No. We've got to get back.' She tips the bucket into the pool and the fish and shrimp dart away. Then she sets off for the beach, which looks improbably distant, as if viewed through the wrong end of a telescope. She can just see Tom and his sister, flinging sand out of that hole as though their lives depended on it. She turns back to Ted. He's still standing by the pool, his fringe blown by the breeze. 'What are you doing?'

'I want to get the crab!' Ted's eyes glisten with tears. 'I want to show it to Mum.'

'You can't.'

'I *can!*' A sob convulses his thin ribcage. 'I can get it, Evie!' He squats down and thrusts the net into the pool, frantically.

'It's too late! You ruined it – now come on!' Ted doesn't move. 'I'm wait-ing.' Her hands drop to her hips. 'Right! Ten, nine, eight . . .'

Ted glances at her.

'Seven, six, five . . .'

He looks longingly at the pool 'But . . .'

'Three, two . . . *one!* I'm going!'

Still sobbing, Ted starts to descend, but Evie is already springing across the rocks, the soles of her shoes slapping the stone. 'This way,' she calls as she moves higher up, towards the cliff. 'Put your hand on that rock there.' She points to it, then leaps across a gully. She jumps onto the next rock, then the next, stepping from boulder to boulder until, at last, she's yards from the beach. Evie jumps onto the sand, surprised at how relieved she feels. There's the girl with the 'J' T-shirt, sitting by the trench, observing Tom with a blend of curiosity and admiration. Evie stands

beside her as he wriggles into the tunnel, then she walks on, looking for shells. She stops to pick up a piece of sea glass but decides that it's too new-looking to keep. As she straightens up she can hear gulls crying, and the barking of a dog. Then she sees her mother coming towards her, in her dress now, scanning the rocks, one hand to her eyes, lips pursed. Evie lifts her left arm and waves. Her mother waves back, smiling with relief. Then her expression changes to one of consternation, then alarm. She starts running towards Evie.

Evie turns and looks behind. Her heart stops.

ONE

I guess it was inevitable that Nina's wedding would change things between Rick and me, though I could never have guessed by how much. Up until then, it had been so easy being with Rick – we'd fitted into each other's lives as though we'd always known one another. And now we were going to a wedding – our first one together – and suddenly being with Rick was hard.

'They've got great weather for it,' he remarked as I locked the door of our small north London flat. The early haze had given way to a pristine blue sky.

'A good omen,' I said as we walked to the car.

Rick beeped open his old Golf. 'I didn't know you were superstitious, Jenni. But then I don't know everything about you.' There was a slight edge to his voice.

'Well, I *am* superstitious.' I put our gift, in its silvery bag, on the back seat. 'But then I was born on Friday the thirteenth.'

Rick smiled. 'That should make you immune.'

We drove west, talking pleasantly, but with an

unfamiliar reserve, born of the anguished conversations that we'd been having over the past two or three days.

We sped down the A40, and were soon driving along rural roads past fields still stubbled and pale from the harvest. It was very warm for mid-October, and clear – an Indian summer's day, piercingly beautiful with its golden light, and long shadows.

Nina's parents lived at the southern end of the Cotswolds. Over the years I'd visited the house for weekends, or the occasional party – Nina's twenty-first, and her thirtieth, which was already five years ago, I reflected soberly. For fifteen years, she and Honor had been my closest friends. And today it was Nina's wedding, and before long, no doubt, there'd be a christening.

Rick glanced at me. 'You okay, Jen?'

'Yes. Why?'

He changed down a gear. 'You sighed.'

'Oh . . . no reason. I'm just a bit tired.' A bad sleeper at the best of times, I'd lain awake most of the night. As I'd stared into the darkness, I'd longed for Rick to hold me and whisper that everything would be alright, but he'd turned away.

'So where do we go from here?' For a moment I thought that Rick was talking about us. 'Which way?'

I spotted the sign for Bisley. 'Go right.'

Minutes later we turned into Nailsford Lane, where a clutch of white balloons bobbed from a farm gate.

'Looks like we're the first,' Rick remarked as we drove into the parking field, which was empty except for an abandoned tractor. He parked in the shade of a huge copper beech; as he opened his door I could hear its leaves rustle and rattle. 'Is it going to be a big do?'

‘Pretty big – about eighty, Nina told me.’

‘So who will I know, apart from her and Jon?’

I pulled down the visor and checked my reflection. I’m not sure – she’s invited quite a few of the people we knew at Bristol; not that I’ve stayed in touch with that many . . .’ I winced at my red-veined eyes and pale cheeks. ‘I’ve only really kept up with Nina and Honor.’ I wound my long dark hair into a bun, then pinned onto that the pale pink silk flower that matched my dress.

Rick pulled a blue tie out of his jacket pocket. ‘So will Honor be there?’

‘Of course.’ Rick groaned; I glanced at him. ‘Don’t be like that, Rick – Honor’s lovely.’

‘She’s exhausting.’

‘Exuberant,’ I countered, wishing that my boyfriend was a bit keener on my best friend.

He grimaced. ‘She never stops talking. So she’s in the right job, not that I listen.’

‘You should – her show’s the best thing on Radio Five.’ As Rick looped and twisted the blue silk, I suppressed a dark smile. He’s tying the knot, I thought.

Reaching into the back for the gift, I saw more cars arriving, bumping slowly over the field. We made our way across the grass, which was studded with dandelion clocks, their downy seeds drifting like plankton. We strolled up Church Walk then pushed on the lych gate, which was garlanded with moon daisies, and went up the gravelled path.

Jon was waiting anxiously by the porch with his brothers, all three men in morning dress with yellow silk waistcoats. They greeted us warmly and we chatted for a minute or two; then the photographer, who had been

sorting out his camera on top of a tomb, offered to take a picture of Rick and me.

‘Let’s have a smile,’ he said as he clicked away. ‘A bit more – it’s a wedding, not a funeral,’ he added genially. ‘*That’s* better . . .’ There was another volley of clicks then he squinted at the screen. ‘Lovely.’

Tim handed Rick and me our Order of Service sheets and we walked into the cool of the church.

I’d been to St Jude’s before, but had forgotten how small it was, and how simple the interior, with its plain walls, wooden roof and box pews. There was the smell of beeswax and dust and age, mingled with the scent of the oriental lilies that festooned the columns and pulpit. It was also very light, with clear glass, except for the East window, which depicted Christ blessing the children. The sun streamed through its coloured panes, scattering jewelled beams across the whitewashed walls.

‘Lovely church,’ Rick murmured as we sat down.

‘It is,’ I agreed, though today its beauty was a shard in my heart. Rick and I glanced through our service sheets as the church filled up, heels tapping over the flagstones, wood creaking as people sat down, then chatted quietly or just listened to the Bach partita that the organist was playing.

Jon’s parents went to their seats. Behind them I recognised a colleague of Nina’s, and now here was Honor, in a green ‘bombshell’ dress that hugged her curves and complemented her creamy skin and blonde hair. She blew me and Rick an extravagant kiss then sat near the front.

Now Jon and his older brother, James, took their places together, while their younger brother, Tim, ushered in a few latecomers. Nina’s mother, in a turquoise opera

coat and matching hat, smiled benignly as she made her way to her pew.

I turned and caught a glimpse of Nina. She stood in the porch, in the white silk dupion sheath that Honor and I had helped her choose, her veil drifting behind her.

As the Bach drew to an end, the vicar stepped in front of the altar and welcomed everyone. Then there was a burst of Handel, and we all stood as Nina walked down the aisle on her father's arm.

After the opening prayers we sang 'Morning Has Broken'; then Honor stepped up to the lectern to read the sonnet that Nina had chosen.

'My true love hath my heart, and I have his,' she began, her dulcet voice echoing slightly. *'By just exchange one for the other given. I hold his dear, and mine he cannot miss. There never was a better bargain driven . . .'*

As Honor read on, I felt a sting of envy. The lovers understood each other so well. I thought I'd had that with Rick . . .

'My true love hath my heart – and I have his,' Honor concluded.

The vicar raised his hands. 'Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the face of this congregation, to join together this Man and this Woman in holy Matrimony . . .' I looked at Nina and Jon, side by side in a pool of light, and wondered whether these words would ever be said for Rick and me. 'Nor taken in hand wantonly,' the vicar was saying, 'but reverently, discreetly, advisedly and soberly, and in the fear of God, duly considering the causes for which Matrimony was ordained.' At that I felt Rick shift slightly. 'First, it was ordained for the procreation of children . . .'

I stole a glance at him, but his face gave nothing away. ‘Therefore, if any man can show any just cause, why they may not lawfully be joined together, let him now speak, or else, hereafter, forever hold his peace.’

I tried to follow the service but found it suddenly impossible to focus on the music, or the Address, or on the beauty and solemnity of the vows. As Nina and Jon committed themselves to each other, with unfaltering voices, I felt another stab of pain. The register was signed, the last hymn sung and the blessing given; then, as Widor’s Toccata mingled with the pealing bells, we followed Nina and Jon outside.

We showered the couple with petals and took snaps with our phones; then the photographer began the formal photos of them while we all milled around by the porch.

‘Great to see you! Fantastic weather!’

‘Lovely service – much prefer the King James.’

‘Me too. Well read, Honor!’

‘Should we make our way to the house?’

‘Not yet. I think they want a group pic.’

Rick and I, keen to get away from the crowd, strolled through the churchyard; we looked at the gravestones, most of which were very old and eroded, blotched with yellow lichen.

Rick stopped in front of a slate headstone. ‘That’s odd. It’s got a pineapple on it.’

I looked at the carved image. ‘A pineapple means prosperity, as do figs, and I guess this was a prosperous area, probably because of the wool trade.’

We walked on, in silence, past stones that had angels on them, and doves and candles, the symbolism of which was clear.

We could hear the chatter of the guests, a sudden burst of Honor's unmistakable laughter, then the photographer's voice. *Could you look at me, Nina?*

Rick approached another grave, by a yew. He peered at it. 'This one's got a bunch of grapes carved on it.'

'Grapes represent the wine at the Last Supper.'

Rick glanced at me. 'How do you know all this, Jen? I didn't think you were religious.'

'I had to research it for one of my books. It was years ago, but I've remembered a lot of it.'

Now look at each other again . . .

'Here's a rose,' Rick said, pointing to another headstone. 'I assume that means love?'

Oh, very romantic . . .

'No. Roses show how old the person was when they died.' I studied the worn emblem. 'This is a full rose, which was used for adults.' I read the inscription. 'Mary Ann Betts . . . was . . .' I peered at her dates. 'Twenty-five. The stem's severed, to show that her life was cut short.'

'I see . . .' Our conversation felt stiff and formal, as though we were strangers, not lovers.

Can we have a kiss?

'A partially opened rose means a teenager.'

And another one. Lovely.

'And a rosebud is for a child.'

Hold his hand now.

Rick nodded thoughtfully. 'A sad subject.'

'Yes . . .' *Okay, all stand together, please – nice and close!*

Rick and I rejoined everyone for the group photo, for which the photographer climbed onto a stepladder, wobbling theatrically to make us all laugh. We smiled

up at him while he clicked away then, hand in hand, Nina and Jon led us down the path, across the field, to the house.

The Old Forge was just as I remembered it – long and low, its pale stone walls ablaze with pyracantha and Virginia creeper. A large marquee filled the lawn. In the distance were the hills of Slad, the plunging pastures dotted with sheep, their bleats carrying across the valley on the still air.

We joined the receiving line, greeting both sets of parents, then the bride and groom.

Nina's face lit up and we hugged. 'Jenni . . .'

I had to fight back sudden tears. I didn't know whether they were tears of happiness for her or of self-pity. 'You look so beautiful, Nina.'

'Thank you.' She put her lips to my ear. 'You next,' she whispered.

Jon kissed me on the cheek, then clasped Rick's hand. 'Good to *see* you both! Thanks for coming!'

'Congratulations, Jon,' Rick said warmly. 'It was a lovely service. Congratulations, Nina.'

Now we moved on into the large sunny sitting room where drinks were being served. I put our gift on a table amongst a cluster of other presents and cards. A waiter offered us a glass of champagne. Rick raised his glass. 'Here's to the happy couple.'

'They are happy' – I sipped my fizz. 'It's wonderful.'

'How long have they been together?'

'About the same as us. They got engaged on their first anniversary,' I added neutrally, then laughed at myself for ever having thought that Rick and I might do the same.

I looked at Rick, so handsome, with his open face, short dark hair and blue gaze. I tried, and failed, to imagine life without him. We'd agreed to talk things over again the next day. Before I could think about that, though, a gong summoned us into the marquee, which was bedecked with white agapanthus and pink nerines, the tables gleaming with silver and china. We found our names, standing behind our chairs while the vicar said Grace.

Rick and I had been placed with Honor, and with Amy and Sean, whom I'd known at college but hadn't seen for years, and an old schoolfriend of Jon's, Al. I was glad that Nina had put him next to Honor; she'd been single for a while now, and he was very attractive. Also on our table was Nina's godfather, Vincent Tregear. I vaguely remembered him from her twenty-first birthday. A near neighbour named Carolyn Browne introduced herself. I steeled myself for the effort of making small talk with people I don't know; unlike Honor, I'm not good at it, and in my present frame of mind it would be harder than usual.

I heard Carolyn explain to Rick that she was a solicitor, recently retired. 'I'm so busy though,' she confessed, laughing. 'I'm a governor of a local school, I play golf and bridge; I travel. I was dreading retirement, but it's really fine.' She smiled at Rick. 'Not that you're anywhere *near* that stage. So, what do you do?'

He unfurled his napkin. 'I'm a teacher – at a primary school in Islington.'

'He's the deputy head,' I volunteered, proudly.

Carolyn smiled at me. 'And what about you, erm . . .?'

'Jenni.' I turned my place card towards her.

‘Jenni,’ she echoed. ‘And you’re . . .’ She nodded at Rick.

‘Yes, I’m Rick’s . . .’ The word ‘girlfriend’ made us seem like teenagers; ‘partner’ made us sound as though we were in business, not in love. ‘Other half,’ I concluded, though I disliked this too: it seemed to suggest, ominously, that we’d been sliced apart.

‘And what do you do?’ Carolyn asked me.

My heart sank – I hate talking about myself. ‘I’m a writer.’

‘A writer?’ Her face had lit up. ‘Do you write novels?’

‘No,’ I replied. ‘It’s all non-fiction. But you won’t have heard of me.’

‘I read a lot, so maybe I will. What’s your name? Jenni . . .’ Carolyn peered at my place card. ‘Clark.’ She narrowed her eyes. ‘Jenni Clark . . .’

‘I don’t write under that name.’

‘So is it Jennifer Clark?’

‘No – what I mean is, I don’t write under *any* name.’ I was about to explain why, when Honor said, ‘Jenni’s a ghost.’

‘A ghost?’ Carolyn looked puzzled.

‘She ghosts things.’ Honor unfurled her napkin. ‘Strange to think that it can be a verb, isn’t it? I ghost, you ghost, he ghosts,’ she added gaily.

I rolled my eyes at Honor, then turned to Carolyn. ‘I’m a ghostwriter.’

‘Oh, I see. So you write books for people who can’t write.’

‘Or they can,’ I said, ‘but don’t have the time, or lack the confidence, or they don’t know how to shape the material.’

‘So it’s actors and pop stars, I suppose? Footballers? TV presenters?’

I shook my head. ‘I don’t do the celebrity stuff – I used to, but not any more.’

‘Which is a shame,’ Honor interjected, ‘as you’d make far more money.’

‘True.’ I rested my fork. ‘But I didn’t enjoy it.’

‘Why not?’ asked Al, who was on my left.

‘It was too frustrating,’ I answered, ‘having to battle with my subjects’ egos, or finding that they didn’t turn up for the interviews; or that they’d give me some brilliant material then the next day tell me that I wasn’t to use it. So these days I only do the projects that interest me.’

Honor, who has a butterfly mind, was now discussing ghosts of the other kind. ‘I’m *sure* they exist,’ she said to Vincent Tregear. ‘Twenty years ago I was staying with my cousins in France; it was a warm, still day, just like today, and we were exploring this abandoned house. It was a ruin, so we could see right up to the roof . . . And we *both* heard footsteps, right above us, on the non-existent floorboards.’ She gave an extravagant shudder. ‘I’ve never forgotten it.’

‘I believe in ghosts,’ Carolyn remarked. ‘I live on my own, in an old house, and at times I’ve been aware of this . . . presence.’

Amy nodded enthusiastically. ‘I’ve sometimes felt a sudden chill.’ She turned to Sean. ‘Do you remember, darling, last summer? When we were in Wales?’

‘I do,’ he answered. ‘Though I believe it was because you were pregnant.’

‘No: pregnancy made me feel hot, not cold.’

‘A few years ago,’ said Al, ‘I was asleep in my flat, alone, when I suddenly woke up, convinced that someone was sitting on my bed.’

I shivered at the idea. ‘And you weren’t dreaming?’

He shook his head. ‘I was wide awake. I can still remember the weight of it, pressing down on the mattress. Yet there was no one there.’

‘How terrifying,’ I murmured.

‘It was.’ He poured me some water then filled his own glass. ‘Has anything like that ever happened to you?’

‘It hasn’t, I’m glad to say. But I don’t dismiss other people’s experiences.’

‘I’ve always been sceptical about these things,’ Sean observed. ‘I believe that if people are sufficiently on edge they can see things that aren’t really there. Like Macbeth seeing the ghost of Banquo.’

‘Shake not thy gory locks at me!’ intoned Honor, then giggled. ‘And Macbeth certainly is on edge by then, isn’t he, having murdered – what – four people?’ Then she went off on some new conversational tangent about why it was considered unlucky for actors to say ‘Macbeth’ inside a theatre. ‘People think it’s because of the evil in the story,’ she prattled away as a waiter took her plate. ‘But it’s actually because if a play wasn’t selling well, the actors would have to quickly rehearse *Macbeth* as that’s always popular, so doing *Macbeth* became associated with ill luck. Now . . . what are we having next?’ She picked up a gold-tasselled menu. ‘Sea bass – yum. Did you know that sea bass are hermaphrodites? The males become females at six months.’

Al, clearly uninterested in the gender-switching

tendencies of our main course, turned to me. ‘So what sort of books do you write?’

‘A real mix,’ I answered. ‘Psychology, health and popular culture; I’ve done a diet book, and a couple of gardening books . . .’

I thought of my titles, more than twenty of them, lined up on the shelf in my study.

‘So you must learn a huge amount about all these things,’ Al said.

‘I do. It’s one of the perks.’

Carolyn sipped her wine. ‘But do you get any kind of credit?’

‘No.’

‘I thought that with ghostwritten books it usually said “with” so-and-so or “as told to”.’

‘It depends,’ I said. ‘Some ghostwriters ask for that. I don’t.’

‘So your name appears nowhere?’

‘That’s right.’

She frowned. ‘Don’t you mind?’

I shrugged. ‘Anonymity’s part of the deal. And of course the clients like it that way. They’d prefer everyone to think they’d written the book all by themselves.’

Carolyn laughed. ‘I couldn’t *bear* not to have any of the glory. If I’d worked that hard on something, I’d want people to know!’

‘Me too,’ chimed in Honor. ‘I don’t know why you want to hide your light under a bushel *quite* so much, Jen.’

‘Because it’s enough that I’ve enjoyed the work and been paid for it. I’m happy to be . . . invisible.’

‘You were always like that,’ Honor went on. ‘You

were never one to seek the limelight – unlike me,’ she giggled. ‘I enjoy it.’

‘So are you still acting?’ Sean asked her.

‘Not for five years now,’ she answered. ‘I couldn’t take the insecurity any more, so I went into radio, which I love.’

‘I’ve heard your show,’ Amy interjected. ‘It’s really good.’

‘Thanks.’ Honor basked in the compliment for a moment. ‘And you two have had a baby, haven’t you?’

‘We have,’ Amy answered. ‘So I’m on maternity leave . . .’

‘And what are you working on now, Jenni?’ Carolyn asked.

I fiddled with my wine glass. ‘A baby-care guide.’

‘How lovely,’ she responded. ‘And are you a mum?’

My heart contracted. ‘No.’ I sipped my wine.

‘Doesn’t that make it difficult? Writing a book about something you haven’t been through yourself?’

‘Not at all. The client’s talked extensively to me about her experience – she’s a midwife – and I’ve written it up in a clear and, I hope, engaging way.’

‘I must buy it,’ Amy said to me. ‘What’s it called?’

‘*Bringing Up Baby*. It’ll be out in the spring. But I always get given a few complimentary copies, so if you give me your address I’ll send you one.’

‘Oh, that’s kind. I’ll write it down . . .’ Amy began looking in her bag for a pen.

‘You can contact me through my website,’ I suggested. ‘Jenni Clark Ghostwriting. So . . . how old’s your baby?’

At that Sean took out his phone and swiped the screen. ‘She’s called Rosie.’

I smiled at the photo. ‘She’s gorgeous. Isn’t she lovely, Honor?’

Honor peered at the image. ‘She’s a little beauty.’

‘She’s what, six months?’ I asked.

Amy’s face glowed with pride. ‘Yes – she’ll be seven months a week on Wednesday.’

‘So is she crawling?’ I went on, ‘Or starting to roll over?’ Beside me I could feel Rick stiffen.

‘She’s crawling beautifully,’ Amy replied. ‘But she’s not rolling over yet.’

Sean laughed. ‘It’ll be nerve-wracking when she does.’

‘You won’t be able to leave her on the bed or the changing table,’ I said. ‘That’s when lots of parents put the changing mat on the floor – not that I’m a parent myself, but of course we cover this in the book . . .’ Rick had tuned out of the conversation and was talking to Carolyn again. Al turned to me. ‘So can you write about any subject?’

‘Well, not something I could never relate to,’ I answered, ‘like particle physics – not that I’d ever get chosen for a book like that. But I’ll do almost any professional writing job: corporate reports, press releases, business pitches, memoirs . . .’

‘Memoirs?’ echoed Vincent Tregear. ‘You mean, writing someone’s life story?’

‘Yes – usually an older person, just for private publication.’

‘Do you enjoy that?’ Vincent wanted to know.

‘Very much. In fact it’s the best part of the job. I love immersing myself in other people’s memories.’

Vincent looked as though he was about to say something, but then Carolyn began asking him about golf,

Amy was telling Rick about yoga, and Honor was chatting to Al about his work as an orthodontist. She was drawn to him, I could tell. Good old Nina for putting them together. Suddenly Honor looked at me, grinned, then tapped her teeth. ‘Al says I have a *perfect* bite.’

I raised my glass. ‘Congratulations!’

‘Not just good,’ Honor said. ‘Perfect!’

‘Don’t let it go to your head,’ Al said.

She laughed. ‘Where else is my bite supposed to go?’

Soon it was time for the speeches and toasts; the cake was cut, then after coffee there was a break before the evening party was to start.

Amy and Sean had to leave, to get back to their baby. Vincent Tregear also said his goodbyes. As the caterers moved back the tables, Rick and I went out into the garden.

We sat on a bench, watching the sky turn crimson, then mauve, then an inky blue in which the first stars were starting to shine.

‘Well . . . it’s been a great day,’ Rick pronounced. The awkwardness had returned, squatting between us like an uninvited guest.

‘It’s been a lovely day,’ I agreed. ‘We should . . .?’

‘What?’ he murmured.

My nerve failed. ‘We should go inside. It’s getting cold.’

Rick stood up. ‘And the band’s started.’ He held out his hand.

So we returned to the marquee where Jon and Nina were dancing their first waltz. Soon everyone took to the floor. But as Rick’s arms went round me and he pulled me close, I felt that he was hugging me goodbye.