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**Opening Extract from...**

# **A Perfect Home**

Written by Kitty Glanville

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**A PERFECT HOME**

**by**

**KATE GLANVILLE**

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To Alex and all the other fabulous women who have inspired me to pursue my dreams.

## Chapter One

*'Years of hard work and imagination have created a stunning family home in the heart of the English countryside.'*

A butterfly settled briefly on the crisp, white washing, its wings quivering in the air. It looked so delicate, so exquisitely beautiful. Claire wanted to touch it, to feel the velvet fluttering in her palm. Unable to help herself, she reached out – but in that second it was gone. She looked around, shading her eyes with her hand against the late afternoon sun. Then she saw it, flying in a haphazard zigzag across the flowerbeds, over the flagstones and towards the house. It looked as though it might fly through the open doors of the conservatory but, as if pulled by an invisible string, it suddenly ascended until it was high above the steep pitch of yellow thatch, a dot against the cornflower sky before it vanished completely.

Claire took a deep breath and carried on working her way along the washing line. The scent of sage and lavender and cut grass mingled on the warm breeze, which brushed her cotton skirt against her legs and blew through the long strands of hair escaping from a clasp at the back of her neck.

She felt unusually calm as she un-pegged the sheets and pillowcases and folded them into the wicker basket at her feet. The children had been fed and homework completed, a fish pie was cooking in the Aga for William's supper, she had packed up ten appliquéd cushion covers and thirty lavender hearts to give to Sally for the gallery and the

boxes of stock to take to the school fête were already neatly stacked in the back of the car. Claire looked at her watch; it wasn't even six o'clock. The washing was now done and she had deadheaded the roses around the porch to try to get a second flush of flowers before the photo shoot for *Idyllic Homes* magazine in five weeks. All that was left was to make two dozen fairy cakes for the fête tomorrow and put the children to bed, then she could pour herself a large glass of chilled Chardonnay and relax. For once she was in control.

Claire walked through the living room with the washing basket. She stopped to look at a selection of cushions arranged on the leather sofa. Each one was appliquéd with a little patchwork house made of felt; lines of silk embroidery traced the doors and windows and the roofs were made from faded corduroy, the gardens were a colourful concoction of antique ribbon and lace with gingham trees and pearly button-headed flowers. Claire had arranged the cushions on the sofa to decide if she liked the design. With the washing basket in her arms, she looked at them for the umpteenth time that day, trying to visualise how they might look in the gallery in town where she had recently started selling her work. Sally, Claire's best friend who worked in the gallery part-time, had finally been entrusted to do the window display. Anna, the gallery owner, had come up with the theme of 'home' for the display and it had been Sally's idea that Claire should design a range of cushions that would be central to her design.

The little fabric houses were not unlike Claire's own: symmetrical and square at the front, a flower-covered central door. It was a child's idea of a house. A doll's house. A perfect house.

Claire's house had once been a farm, but the farmland was long gone, leaving only a garden and small orchard around the eighteenth-century building. Its neatly

proportioned stone walls, painted in a rich buttermilk cream, sat beneath a dark, honey-coloured thatch. The roof arched around two dormer windows on the second floor which gave the effect of heavy-browed eyes staring out impassively.

In May, wisteria bloomed along the front in a blush of pink and from late June lipstick-red roses blazed around the thatched porch. The back of the house rambled in a hotchpotch of extensions added over the previous two hundred years. The thatch clung to the additions in smooth, undulating curves, blanketing them like royal icing on a cake. The biggest extension was the large kitchen that William had built the year Oliver was born, and next to it was his latest project, a Victorian-style conservatory.

‘It’s so charming,’ visitors would enthuse when they first saw the house. But every time Claire pulled into the drive she never got rid of the sense that it was watching her, judging her, making her feel she didn’t quite deserve to live there.

Claire wasn’t sure about the cushions – too twee perhaps? Too fussy? Something behind the sofa caught her eye – something wet and red and out of place. Claire picked up the dripping box of defrosted red mush. Her heart sank when she saw the pool of liquid on the floorboards. What would William say?

‘Emily, Oliver, Ben!’ she shouted. ‘Who’s taken raspberries out of the freezer and left them on the new oak floor?’

‘Not me,’ said Oliver from the other end of the room, where he lay draped across a jacquard-covered armchair eating chocolate Hobnobs straight from the packet. He was wearing a battered fisherman’s hat of his father’s; it was much too big and fell lazily over his eyes. From underneath it he watched animated cyber-warriors showing

off their martial arts skills in the defence of the universe.

‘Not me,’ echoed Ben, sitting cross-legged much too close to the cyber-warriors, naked apart from a bulging nappy and a smearing of melted chocolate around his mouth.

‘Oliver, please could you find a more suitable programme for Ben to watch?’ Claire asked as she peeled a half-sucked biscuit from the floor. ‘This will give him nightmares, and put those back in the cupboard.’

‘But Mum,’ Oliver protested. ‘This is my favourite programme and I *need* these, I’m starving.’

‘Ben did it.’ Emily appeared in the French windows, a long daisy and buttercup chain in her hands. ‘He must have put the raspberries there after I gave them to him yesterday. He was meant to put them in the fridge to defrost and tell you that they were there so we could have them on our cereal for breakfast.’

‘He’s only two,’ Claire sighed.

‘Nearly three,’ said Emily.

‘Why were they out of the freezer in the first place?’

‘The freezer was too full,’ replied Emily, shrugging her shoulders as she wrapped the floral chain around her thin wrist.

‘But the freezer has lots of room in it.’

‘Not enough for the rose petal ice cream that I made.’ Emily smiled at Claire, showing her missing front teeth. ‘I made it for Daddy. Milk, sugar, margarine, chocolate sauce, orange juice, Ribena and flower petals all mixed up in a cake tin. It’s frozen now; I thought Daddy could have it for tea when he gets home.’

‘How many times have I told you, Emily, no cooking without me? And what am I going to do with the raspberries now? You’ve wasted a whole box of fruit.’ She shook it to emphasize her point.

‘Careful, Mummy,’ Emily warned. ‘You’re dripping raspberry juice all over the washing.’



The phone rang. Claire thought about ignoring it. It was probably her mother, but it might be William telling her he was stopping off at Homebase to look for flathead screws or tile grout. Worst of all, it might be her mother-in-law. While she dithered, Emily jumped to answer it.

‘It’s a strange woman,’ she said in a stage whisper.

A loud, gushing voice greeted Claire as she took the handset.

‘Claire, darling, how are you?’ The woman on the other end of the line gave no time for Claire to answer. ‘Wonderful, wonderful ...’

She realised it must be the journalist, Celia Howard, from the magazine. She took a tissue and mopped ineffectually at the stain on the floor as she held the receiver under her chin.

‘Enjoying the sunshine in that lovely country home of yours? Not like us stuck here in stuffy London,’ Celia was saying. ‘*Super*. How lucky you are. Now, darling, about this photo shoot – we’ve been thinking about it in the office and we think your house would be just *perfect* for our Christmas issue. We’re writing features for that now so if we just change you to a festive shoot it will fit in wonderfully.’

‘So you’re not coming to photograph it at the end of August?’ asked Claire, relieved at the idea of a postponement. She could put off all that cleaning now.

‘That’s right darling; that date’s all off now. We work four months in advance and the Christmas issue comes out at the beginning of November so the timing for this is fabulous. I’ve arranged it all and we’ll be with you on Thursday.’

Claire stifled a cry. It was Monday afternoon – and Thursday gave her only two days to get ready and she had the school fête the next day and Oliver’s piano exam and Emily’s ballet class and she had an appointment at the dentist and Ben wasn’t booked into nursery and the plug

on the Hoover was broken; her mind spiralled into panic.

‘Celia, I don’t think I can –’

‘It’s a two-day shoot so the photographer will be with you on Friday as well,’ Celia interrupted. ‘Unfortunately I’m up to my eyes this week so I can’t come to do the actual interview until next week. Now, of course we’ll need to decorate the house in festive style. If you could get out a few decorations; just your usual ones. I don’t want you to go to any trouble.’

‘You want me to put up Christmas decorations in July?’

‘No, you don’t have to put them up, dear. Leave that to the stylist,’ said Celia. ‘She’ll bring a tree and decorate it herself.’

‘A tree?’

‘Yes, she’ll bring a Christmas tree. Unless you can get a tree locally – a good bushy one. You know, a silver Scots Pine or something like that.’

‘I think I’d better leave that to you.’ Finding the perfect Christmas tree in July would be difficult. Finding a good one in December was hard enough.

‘And could you make some beautiful Christmas stockings to hang on the mantelpiece, in your lovely Emily Love style?’ Celia went on. ‘Covered in your gorgeous pearly buttons? We could feature them as a reader offer – I’m sure you’ll get lots of orders. Oh, and some mince pies would be lovely. We always have mince pies.’

‘OK,’ said Claire, though it really wasn’t OK. She felt a tight knot of anxiety forming in her stomach. Where was she going to find the time?

‘Now I told you about the *fabulous* photographer, Sienna Crabtree, that we were going to be using for the shoot?’

‘Yes, she sounds great.’ Claire desperately tried to rearrange all the things she was meant to be doing, in her mind.

‘Sienna really is wonderful, but she isn’t available now,

so I'm sending a photographer called Stefan Kendrick. He's very good, recently back from working abroad. He's a *brilliant* photographer and a big hit with the female staff round here and some of the men are rather smitten too. You'll absolutely love him, darling.'

Claire made a face at the phone. She didn't care how gorgeous he was; she just wanted someone to help her tidy the house from top to bottom, wipe the jam-smeared doorknobs, scrub the kitchen floor, dust the Cornish ware on the dresser and most of all someone to help her get the raspberry juice out of the floor boards before William came home.

'Must dash,' said Celia. 'A million and one things to do. I wish I had your life in the heavenly countryside – *totally* stress-free, I'm sure. Lots of love.'

Celia was gone before Claire had a chance to reply. She stayed squatting behind the sofa, staring at the soggy tissue and pink stain, trying to understand how she had suddenly found herself getting ready for Christmas during a July heat wave. She looked down at the bulge her stomach made above the waistband of her skirt and hoped she wouldn't be expected to be in the photographs. She'd felt fat and frumpy since Ben had been born; there never seemed to be the time to lose that extra stone or get a proper haircut.

She licked raspberry juice from her fingers and wished she'd never let Sally get her into this in the first place.

It had been a month since Sally had persuaded Claire to send the pictures to *Idyllic Homes* magazine.

'The most important thing for any e-commerce site is to get the images right,' said Sally's husband Gareth who was designing Claire a website for her new business, Emily Love. 'Then you can leave it to me to work my magic on everything else.'

Claire had photographed a selection of her designs

around her house; the pale colours and antique furniture made a perfect backdrop for the cushions, bags, and aprons which Claire appliquéd with vintage fabric and decorated with embroidery, ribbons, lace, and buttons.

‘These pictures are fab,’ Sally enthused looking over Gareth’s shoulder as he and Claire sat at the computer in Sally and Gareth’s cramped, chaotic study. They tried to ignore the screeches and screams coming from the rest of the tiny terraced cottage as the children rampaged from room to room. ‘You should send them to a magazine and get some publicity for Emily Love.’ Sally picked up a copy of *Idyllic Homes* from a jumbled pile of newspapers and catalogues in one corner. ‘I’ve been drooling over the things in this one.’

‘With a cup of coffee and a chocolate éclair no doubt,’ muttered Gareth. ‘While I’m out slaving hard at work.’

‘You don’t know what hard work is,’ Sally scorned. ‘You try getting those two hooligan sons of yours out of the door to school every morning then you wouldn’t be begrudging me a quick sit down with a magazine before I leave for the gallery.’ She flicked through the pages of the magazine and showed Claire a glossy two-page spread. *Swish into Summer with Our Top Ten Designs for Curtain Poles!* read the heading.

‘You could try making the beds or washing up before you leave for work instead of fantasising about fancy curtain poles,’ said Gareth.

‘You could try repairing *our* curtain pole in the living room and then I might not need to fantasise,’ Sally countered.

‘I did repair it.’

‘With gaffer tape! It’s hardly stylish is it?’ Sally gave Gareth’s long thin ponytail a tug, he yelped and gave her well-upholstered bottom a slap.

‘Stop this right now!’ Claire put on her best stern mother voice and laughed. ‘No fighting. My mother-in-law

always says it's vulgar to argue in front of others; she says you shouldn't display your dirty linen in public.'

'There's plenty of dirty linen on display on our bedroom floor,' Sally said with a huff as she folded her arms across her generous cleavage.

'Well, you could pick it up sometimes,' said Gareth.

'I could if I had a linen basket that hadn't lost its bottom when your two sons tried to use it as a tardis.'

'They're your sons too. I'll mend the laundry basket tonight.'

'With what?'

'With gaffer tape!'

'I SAID STOP!' Claire had to shout above their raised voices but she was smiling, she was used to Sally and Gareth. One moment they'd be bickering like children and the next giggling together like love-struck teenagers.

Sally tossed her mane of long blonde hair and looked at Claire. 'It's all right for you living with Mr Perfect, king of home improvements. You have your immaculate home to go back to when you leave here while I just have to live in this squalor all the time.'

'I like your house,' said Claire. 'It feels cosy. Sometimes I wish our house was a bit more like this.' She gestured at the disarray around her. 'I think William gets fussier every day. I certainly don't dare leave my dirty linen lying around any more.'

'Quit moaning,' said Sally. 'You don't know how lucky you are.'

'Talking of dirty linen, let's get back to your website, Claire.'

'Don't be so cheeky, Gareth,' laughed Claire. 'It's not dirty linen, it's vintage fabric.'

'And it's uber fashionable at the moment,' added Sally. 'That's why you should get it in a magazine.'

Fifteen minutes later they'd made up a press release, attached a selection of pictures, and pinged it off to *Idyllic*

*Homes*. Claire had practically forgotten all about it when Celia Howard, features editor for *Idyllic Homes*, phoned up two days later, saying her magazine adored the cushions ('recycling fabric is so *in* right now') but they also loved the look of the house.

'*Exquisite!*' Celia had gushed. 'We'd love to do a feature on your gorgeous house and your lovely little rural craft business. Our readers just adore that sort of thing.'

William seemed quite pleased with the idea of showing off his home.

'I'll have to finish grouting the tiles on the conservatory floor,' he had said. 'And then I'll have to re-paint the hall. It's covered in mucky handprints. You've got to stop the children touching the walls, Claire.'

He was keen to be there on the day of the shoot, though Claire suspected that this was because he wanted to make sure the stylist didn't damage any paintwork or scratch the floors.

'They're not going to bang nails into the beams are they?' he asked, as he touched up the paint on the banisters. He carefully dipped his brush in and out of a pot of Farrow & Ball Shaded White, dabbing at dots of missing paint. 'There are enough holes and chips all over this house as it is.'

'I can't see any holes or chips,' said Claire, trying to squeeze past him with a pile of ironing. 'It looks fine to me.' She stroked his head affectionately as she passed; she liked the stubbly feel of his new hair cut. He pushed her hand away.

'That's the trouble,' William answered. 'You just don't notice the state this house is getting into.'

Claire bit her lip. She couldn't face an argument when she still had the tea to make and the children to bath. She continued up the stairs counting each tread as she did so. By the time she reached the top her threatened tears had passed.

At last the shock of Celia Howard's phone call began to lessen and Claire moved out from behind the sofa. She feared the raspberry stain was there for good and pushed the sofa back to hide it. As she did so she revealed something grey and lumpy which could only have been regurgitated by Macavity the cat. She didn't know how long it had been there; it was encrusted onto the floor and in between the boards. On closer inspection it looked as though it contained at least half of what had once been a bat. Claire shuddered. She'd deal with it later, she thought, and moved the sofa at an angle to cover it.

As she picked up the basket to wash the juice-splashed washing all over again, she thought about Celia's last words '*Stress-free life*'? She had no idea.

Claire looked at the large clock on the kitchen wall – half past nine. The fish pie looked sad and dry on top of the pale blue Aga.

Claire helped herself to a portion and ate it at the same time as writing a list of all the things she had to do before the magazine shoot. She contemplated having more wine but this would break her self-enforced rule of one glass a night. After a few minutes she poured an inch or two of Chardonnay into the large glass and mixed it with some soda water. Surely a spritzer didn't really count?

The table was half covered in fairy cakes. On reflection Claire thought it had probably been a mistake to throw the defrosted raspberries into the cake mixture, which made them look soggy and unappealingly pink.

The phone rang and Claire leapt up to answer it before it woke Ben. She knew it would be her mother, Elizabeth.

'I'm not disturbing you, am I? You sound like you're eating.'

'No, it's all right, Mum,' Claire said, trying not to sigh.

'William not home yet, then?'

'I'm sure he's on his way. Actually I'm in a bit of a

rush; the house is being photographed –’

‘He’s just like your father used to be ...’

Claire wished she’d just pretended William was there.

‘... Coming in whenever it suited him, no thought to me waiting for him after a hard day at work and looking after you. In the seventies we thought the next generation would be better, but they’re all the same. Men! Better off without them, if you ask me. Honestly, Claire, I don’t know why you don’t put your foot down. You’ve got to stand up to him. That’s what I used to do.’

Claire could remember lying in bed with her hands over her ears, trying not to hear her parents shouting downstairs.

‘Of course your father was usually with another woman,’ her mother continued. ‘I always suspected that. I knew deep down but always forgave him. And look what he did in the end. Look where I ended up: dumped in a bedsit while he gallivanted off to California with his teenage bride.’

Claire didn’t dare remind her that the woman her father had finally left her for was nearly thirty. ‘It’s a two-bedroomed flat, Mum, not a bedsit. And it’s been twenty-six years since he left. You could have moved house. You could have found someone else.’

‘And let someone do it to me all over again? No thank you, I’m not that stupid.’ Claire closed her eyes. She was used to this. She’d listened to her mother’s tirades since she was ten years old and her assault on marriage hadn’t lessened when Claire became a bride herself.

Elizabeth had been baffled by her daughter’s wish to get married, especially to an accountant. Since Claire’s father had left, she’d brought her daughter up to believe that marriage was a pointless institution that could only fail.

Claire had been determined to prove her wrong. Her marriage, unlike her parents’, would work. Happily ever



after, just like in the fairy tales.

‘I’ll see you at the school fête tomorrow,’ said Elizabeth.

‘You don’t need to come, Mum. William has promised to take the afternoon off to look after the children while I’m on my stall.’

‘And you believe him?’

‘Mum! I’m sure he’ll try his best to be there.’

‘Well, I’m coming anyway, Claire. I’m longing to see all your things displayed on your stall. This will be a big day for you, the first time you’ve shown your work in public.’

‘It’s a primary school summer fair, Mum, not a major exhibition at the V&A.’

‘It’s important; three years at art college shouldn’t be wasted on just being a housewife.’

‘Yes, Mum,’ said Claire, and she added *polish banisters* to her list.

‘Nightmare evening,’ William said, suddenly seeming to fill the kitchen. ‘The train was late, then I went to get the wood for the living room shelves but they didn’t have the right thickness. Can you believe it? It’s a standard measurement. So I had to go miles out of my way to bloody B&Q.’ He handed a bunch of yellow carnations to Claire and pulled loose his tie.

‘I’d better go, Mum, William’s home.’ Claire put down the phone and smiled up at her husband, wondering how she could incorporate the carnations into the Christmas decor. ‘Thank you for the flowers. Glass of wine?’

William was already opening a bottle of red, twisting the corkscrew down hard, before pulling out the cork with a muffled pop. He poured himself a large glass.

‘Let me guess,’ he said nodding towards the phone. ‘Your mother – as usual.’

‘She’s lonely, especially since she retired from teaching.’

‘I’m not surprised she’s lonely.’ He sniffed at the fish pie. ‘Who’d want to be with someone so miserable?’

‘Please don’t be cruel, William,’ she said, pouring water into a glass vase. ‘She hasn’t had it easy. It’s not like it is for your parents. They’ve have been lucky. They have each other and a lovely home and lots of things to keep them busy.’

‘That’s right; you wouldn’t find my mother moping about finding fault with her life.’

Claire held back the desire to say she was too busy finding fault with everybody else’s.

‘Fish pie?’ she asked, putting on her brightest smile.

‘I’ll have it later. What are these?’ He picked up a fairy cake.

‘Raspberry buns. Do you want one?’

He shook his head. ‘I’m going to put the new shelves up.’

‘It’s nearly ten o’clock. Isn’t it a bit late? You might wake the children.’

‘It’s all right for you at home all day, Claire, but I’ve got to get things done when I can if you want this house to look perfect.’ He collected the keys for his tool shed and headed for the back door.

Claire wanted to say she didn’t want it to be perfect, didn’t *need* it to be perfect. She was happy with it how it was. If only William could sit back and enjoy it, enjoy his family. Enjoy her, like he used to before they had the children, before Jack had died. She started arranging the carnations in the vase. William stopped, his hand on the door handle, and turned to look at her, his eyes softening. He suddenly walked back across the room.

‘Sorry, darling. I don’t mean to sound so irritable. It’s been a long hard day and having to go to B&Q was the final straw.’

Claire reached up to kiss his cheek and wrapped her arms around him; the muscles in his back felt tense.

‘I could give you a massage,’ she offered.

‘Maybe later. Tell me how your day’s been?’

‘You won’t believe what the magazine people want to do,’ she said, her cheek still pressed against his pinstriped shirt. ‘They’re going to come on –,’

‘Isn’t that a bit tall for those flowers?’ he interrupted her mid flow. ‘I imagined you would put them in that Moorcroft vase my mother gave you for your birthday.’

‘I think I might need that for the holly.’

‘Holly?’ He disentangled himself from her embrace. ‘Why would you have holly at this time of year?’

‘I was just trying to tell you.’ Claire bent down to search in the dresser cupboard for a tin to put the cakes into. ‘The magazine people are coming to photograph the house on Thursday and they want it to be a Christmas shoot. Christmas in July! I’m worried we’ll never get the house ready in time.’

She turned around to an empty room. The thought struck her that William didn’t need to have an affair like her father had done – the house was already his mistress.

‘Claire!’

William was back. His face had turned the sort of blotchy red that she always knew meant trouble.

‘What the hell has been going on in the living room? Did you know that the cat’s been sick and there’s a huge stain on the floor?’

‘Oh, that was an accident with Ben and some raspberries. And Macavity –’

‘I’ve only just laid that floor – it took me weeks to sand and varnish. Now I’ll have to do it all over again.’

Claire took a deep breath.

‘The stain is behind the sofa. No one will notice,’ she said.

‘I’ll notice. Every time I walk in there I’ll know it’s there.’

‘I’m sure it will fade with time.’ Claire tried to sound

optimistic.

William ran his fingers through his close-cropped hair. 'Can't you just try to look after the place a bit more?'

'I do, I really do but ...' Claire began, but he held up his hand to stop her like a policeman holding up a line of traffic. He picked up his wine glass and left the room.

A surge of rage welled up inside Claire and, picking up a fairy cake, she threw it towards the empty doorway. It fell short and rolled across the quarry tiles to where Macavity sat inelegantly licking his back leg. He sniffed it for a few seconds and wandered away towards the fish pie on the Aga.

Claire sat down as the rage turned into a familiar lethargy. After all these years the house was finished; William had made a beautiful home, and now Claire felt that he almost resented having to share it with his family.

She looked at the flowers on the table and thought of her grandmother's florist stall in the little northern mining town where she had lived. As a child Claire would sit on a stool in the corner and watch her grandmother making up bouquets and wreaths in the freezing early morning air of the market. *All the flowers have something to tell us*, she used to say. *They all have their own special message, their very own language.* Claire tried to remember – red carnations were for longing and white for faithfulness but what were yellow? She closed her eyes and could see the reels of shiny satin ribbon that her little fingers had longed to unravel and the rolls of pastel-coloured wrapping paper laid out on the trestle table. Her grandmother's soft northern accent filtered into her mind: *You don't ever want to be given yellow carnations, Claire. Only disappointment comes with those.*

She slowly put the fairy cakes, one by one, into the tin. Had she become a disappointment to William? Or was the disappointment life itself? Ever since Jack had died he seemed to have become obsessed with the house, shutting

her out, burying himself in DIY. It had been years since they visited Jack's grave together, she couldn't remember the last time William had even mentioned his name.

After a few minutes she heard drilling coming from the living room and then the sound of Ben crying upstairs. Emily appeared in the doorway, her long toffee-coloured hair tangled, her sleepy eyes half closed.

'Ben's awake,' she mumbled.

'I know,' said Claire. 'I'll be up a minute. You go back to bed.'

'Did Daddy have his ice cream?' Emily walked up to the table. She looked at the cupcakes and then at Claire. 'Don't worry, Mummy. I won't tell anyone you made them.'

'I'm starving.' Oliver stood beside them in his rumpled stripy pyjamas, the fisherman's hat still on his head. 'Is there anything to eat?'

'You've brushed your teeth. You'll have to wait till breakfast. Now go to bed please.'

'I'll brush them again, I promise. I'll never get back to sleep without some food.' Oliver collapsed onto a kitchen chair as if weak with hunger, despite having eaten two helpings of spaghetti bolognese and a bowl of ice cream for tea.

'Have one of these, then,' she said, picking up a fairy cake.

'No, I mean proper food,' he said wrinkling up his nose in disgust. 'You know, like from a shop.'

'Claire! There's chocolate all over the armchair. How did it get there?' William shouted from the living room. Claire looked up at the ceiling and tried to count to ten. She gave up at five. 'And there are crumbs. Has someone been eating biscuits in here?'

'Come on,' said Emily to her brother. 'Let's go.'

'I think I've trodden on a cake,' said Oliver, as he

moved towards the door and flicked damp sponge off his bare foot in a spray of soggy cake crumbs. William stood in the doorway. The children squeezed past him.

‘Is there no end to the mess you all create?’ he called after them.

‘They’re children,’ said Claire as she fetched the dustpan and brush. ‘It’s a family home, not a show house, can’t you just try and lighten up a little?’

‘Lighten up?’ William looked incredulous. ‘All I’m asking is that everyone sticks to the house rules. Do you think my mother would have let me eat a chocolate biscuit in the living room when I was a boy?’

‘No, I’m sure she wouldn’t.’ Claire squatted on the floor sweeping up the cake crumbs. She resisted the urge to say that William’s mother probably didn’t let William or his father eat anything unless they were sitting at the dining table with damask napkins and wearing full evening dress.

William turned to go back in the living room then stopped.

‘Those cushions on the chesterfield?’

‘The new ones with the houses on them?’

‘Yes.’

Claire sighed. ‘Don’t worry William, they’re not staying there, they’re going to the gallery for Sally’s window.’

‘That’s a shame.’

Claire looked up from her sweeping, surprised. ‘Is it?’

‘Yes. I like them. They’re very good.’ He smiled at her. ‘Well done.’