Secret Relations

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Chapter One

Two first cousins were reclining in their best clothes on a high stack of dusty hay-bales and looking out through the open shutters of an old barn at a garden on the far side of a meadow. From their viewpoint, the lawn in the garden – backcloth to a swelling number of figures – appeared uniform emerald and the redbrick manor house set behind it diminutive like a toy.

The barn was still stuffed with heat and the sweet smell of hay. It had felt wonderful to fling open the stiff shutters to dazzling light. If it weren't for Max, they'd be in the garden now, fielding personal questions, pretending to be pleased to see distant family members. They'd been visiting this favourite place all of their lives, but it was only seven years since they'd been regarded as adult enough to join in the ritual of the summer party.

'Remember when you jumped on that pitchfork?' asked Kitty with a smile.

Charlie looked strangely happy, understanding that she was reminding him of a time when life had seemed simple, with even the bad bits bringing them closer. The accident had been thirteen years ago when they were ten. 'Jump!' Liza (of course!) had shrieked and, obediently, Charlie had leapt into six foot of space above a deep, innocent-looking mass of hay. All of them had turned ashen at the sight of his pain, and Liza had cried hardest. But it was Kitty who'd comforted him and messed up her favourite dress. Uncle Hector had the back seat of his new Daimler spoilt, too, and – once Charlie's knee was stitched and bandaged in hospital – became as fierce as he'd been tender. Charlie could have been killed, he'd told the cousins, and then nobody would ever have been allowed to come and stay with him again. Barns were for storing cattle food, and it ruined hay to be jumped on. One of the innumerable troubles about children, he complained – as usual ending up *con brio* – was that THEY NEVER LISTENED. 'And by the way,' he went on, still appearing stern but moving into joking mode because occasionally it was perfectly acceptable to swear, 'WHO'S GOING TO CLEAN UP MY BLOODY CAR FOR ME?'

'I love this,' said Charlie wistfully. In another seven years, in 1981, he'd be thirty and the prospect of all that he was expected to achieve before then filled him with panic. Kitty had confided that she dreaded the future, too. For her, the pressure was different, of course, though equally intense, she maintained – 'Because of Ma being married at eighteen.'

'What *does* she look like!' Kitty exclaimed suddenly, and they both watched as a third first cousin approached across the meadow. Why was she wearing a voluminous cardigan in blistering June? And, for some reason, both hands were clasped under her stomach.

'He will come, won't he?' said Charlie, as urgently as if they'd been discussing this all along.

'I think so.'

'What did he say exactly? Tell me again, Kit.'

It had been like talking to a helpless child, at first. She found she could still think of Max like that when deprived of the pleasure of seeing him. She'd telephoned late the night before as if – with the tender protectiveness he always brought out in her – she'd divined the exact moment when, finally, his mother had gone to bed.

'You can't not come!'

Silence from the other end.

'It's the party!'

Still no response.

'*We'll* be there, Max!'

She heard him sniff very faintly and dug the nails of her left hand into her palm in sympathy, striving to find the right words.

'We'll have a laugh! We always do!'

The spectre of merriment hovered for a moment before creeping away in shame.

'You don't even need to see anyone else,' Kitty rushed on, mortified with herself. 'We can just stay in the barn.'

'Uncle Hector . . .' Max began miserably.

Kitty had only an hour since given their great-uncle a promise ('I don't want Max told about this conversation,' he'd impressed on her). But now, without compunction, she said, 'Max, Uncle Hector has phoned me specially to say I must make sure you come! And you know what a state he gets into before his party.'

Was he touched? It seemed not. 'Didn't he tell you?' was all he muttered.

'Tell me what?'

'The thing is . . .' His voice tailed away miserably.

'*What*, Max?'

Max sounded desperate, also bewildered. 'He's written to Mummy saying *she* can't come.'

'Oh!' Kitty was really taken aback. This was so unlike Uncle Hector, to whom family was everything, whose kindness was legendary. What had got into him?

'Obviously my father won't be coming to the party now,' Max went on, with an odd new formality. 'But Mummy keeps saying how much she'd been looking forward to it and I don't know if I should . . .' His voice wavered.

'Max!' Kitty told him very firmly. 'Don't you see? What you need is a break from all that! And Uncle Hector's made it possible.'

Then Max had actually said, 'Thanks, Cuz,' in an uncharacteristically heartfelt sort of way. So there was no sense of unease, on her part, about encouraging him to defy his mother – only exhilaration.

'Is Max here?'

'Not yet,' said Kitty, looking down at her cousin Liza.

Liza pouted. She gave the impression that her trip across the meadow had been pointless. The sun gleamed on her naturally curly long pale hair, which had been ironed dead straight for this important family occasion. Rather surprisingly, in common with so many of the other young women at the party, she'd opted for Stepford Wife garb – with a high-necked ankle-length dress under her unsuitable cardigan. She looked a picture of the angelic young relative. 'He is coming, isn't he?'

'Aren't you boiling?'

'Who talked to him?'

'I did,' said Kitty.

Liza's raised eyebrows conveyed much. Now if it had been she who'd spoken to Max instead! Then she asked, 'Have you got any champagne up there?'

'How?' asked Charlie very reasonably, hoping to make Liza feel foolish. Uncle Hector's manservant, Merriweather, was the keeper of the champagne. If they wanted a drink, then obviously they must join the party.

'Can't believe this!' said Liza. In her turn, she could make Charlie and Kitty feel cautious to the point of dull. 'Hang on a sec.' She was about to retrace her path across the meadow then appeared to have a last-minute thought. She lifted up her cardigan and removed something. 'Look after this, will you?' she said very casually.

It was a black and white mongrel puppy, probably no more than three months old. Separated from Liza's warmth and the rhythm of her breathing, it immediately started whimpering.

Kitty put a hand to her mouth and glanced at Charlie.

Dogs were banned from the party. For some mysterious reason, Uncle Hector loathed them. If he got to hear about this, none of them would ever be invited again. In among the benevolence were flashes of alarming strictness. He'd maintain it was about standards. This time Liza had gone too far.

Kitty and Charlie descended the ladder at speed.

'You must be out of your mind!' Charlie told her.

'Isn't it the most darling thing you've ever seen in your whole life?'

'That's not the point!'

'Exactly!' Kitty agreed equally sternly. But when Liza thrust

the puppy into her arms, her attitude softened just as Liza had anticipated.

Liza peeled off her cardigan and flung it on the grass and then she told a story of a rescue, with herself as heroine. She'd found the puppy chained to a beggar on Waterloo Bridge, apparently. 'You shouldn't make money out of animals,' she informed her cousins sanctimoniously, even though – torn between the desire to impress them and a profound knowledge of their reactions – she was about to reveal how much she'd paid to secure the dog's freedom.

Charlie was appalled. 'Five quid!' he kept repeating. Unlike Liza, he and Kitty were good with money. 'You're hopeless, Liza! Hopeless!'

Liza moved swiftly on. 'It's such a baby. I couldn't possibly have left it at home on its own.'

'What are you going to do with it when you go out to work?' asked Kitty.

Liza smiled enigmatically. Her mother would look after it, of course. More immediately, she'd not considered what would happen to the puppy when it was time for everyone to assemble for lunch. She hadn't even worked out if it was male or female, she told her cousins very innocently.

However, now that Kitty was taking care of it, she was going to steal a bottle of champagne for them all. After that, she'd be on far more solid ground.

Uncle Hector stood in a pool of noise on the edge of his lawn, welcoming his enormous family. Periodically, he'd let out his distinctive ecstatic roar – the laughter of a convivial very deaf person in some pain. 'HAA-HAA-HAAAA!' No wonder he was radiating such top-volume delight. The capricious

barometer had told the truth, for once. His guests could stay in the garden all day, admiring its perfection (rather than seek refuge in his house and ruin his parquet with their stiletto heels). And, after lunch, the string quartet he'd hired would start playing in the gazebo.

But under the genial surface, anxieties nibbled. As usual, there'd been months of preparation and now, at the start of the party, the lawns were properly dense and green, free of dandelions and molehills. True, being pierced by a multitude of stilettos might aerate them, but would his precious grass survive the crush? Then, would the musicians he'd hired be up to scratch? (And how would he know if they weren't?) Most worrying of all, might this be the party that finally caused Merriweather to give in his notice?

And now there was a new concern to be added to the perennial ones – his great-nephew Max. When he thought of Max's parents (of whom, two weeks ago, he'd have maintained he was jolly fond), his nice pink face stiffened into lines of alarming harshness. Selfish was not the word, no! And to compound their crime, they'd GOT THE FAMILY INTO THE NEWSPAPERS – a filthy rag, to render it truly unforgivable.

Uncle Hector's ancient manservant, Merriweather, bound like a mummy in a spotless white apron reaching to his ankles, stood behind a long trestle table bearing ranks of gleaming glasses brimming with champagne. Behind him were barrels full of ice cooling dozens of bottles. He had a grumpy authoritative air, like the temperamental conductor of a super-professional orchestra. All round him hummed an intricate web of young staff brought in for the occasion: stacking silver trays with

foaming goblets, scurrying through the crowds, appearing at elbows while adroitly dodging them.

After the guests had been welcomed by Uncle Hector, they made a point of greeting his servant effusively. Hadn't he murmured worriedly to each one, 'You will say hello to Merriweather, won't you?'

Max heard Uncle Hector's laughter in the distance once he'd switched off the engine of the prized green MG his father had given him for his twenty-first. 'HAA-HAA-HAAAA!' It triumphed above a twitter of birdsong and, nearer at hand, the muffled outrage of spaniels and Labradors confined to cars on a wonderful day. It even made him smile, for a change.

But as he prepared to leave the big field where guests were always directed to park, his sense of wellbeing fell away. What was he doing here? For a moment, he really considered driving back to London. But Partridge had seen him.

Uncle Hector's ruddy-faced head gardener was orchestrating the parking, as usual: beckoning on familiar drivers, lining up their expensive vehicles in neat rows, watching expressionlessly as they bade tender farewells. 'I know, it's *mean*. But we've left the windows open, and water. And kind Partridge will keep an eye on you. And when it's time for the Mozart we'll be back to take you for a w-a-l-k.'

'Morning, Partridge.'

'Morning, sir!'

It felt strange to be addressed like that by a much older person. Max thought, 'It's only here I call people by their surnames but it feels okay.' It hadn't happened to him since school (where, of course, it had been totally different). Here, it

felt like dressing up: trying on a magnificent robe and gaudy crown that had once belonged to the family for real.

It seemed oddly natural too because, inexplicably and secretly, he'd always thought of this beautiful peaceful place as his. He watched, in very detached fashion, as a French bull terrier stood up in a front seat and started worrying at expensive-looking suede upholstery. He wondered if the other cousins felt the same.

As always, the house's grand rosy presence had come upon him suddenly, just as he believed that he was lost. Both prospect and refuge, it had held a strangely appealing mix of expectation and affection for as long as he could remember. Inside, thrift and generosity ruled in equal measure. Max thought wistfully of leaving the baking forecourt and ducking into the porch, cluttered with objects accorded respect quite incommensurate with their worth – the ancient trug overflowing with tangled twine, the rusty secateurs, the iron shoe-scraper clotted with mud which had once belonged to Uncle Hector's father. If he entered the house's cool stone-flagged interior, he could inhale one of the scents he identified with happiness – a mixture of beeswax from the furniture and the dried lavender heaped in the big blue and white porcelain bowl on the chest in the hall. Maybe he could briefly sit down at the mahogany table in the empty dining-room, or perhaps even run up the highly polished staircase and slide down its banister, pretending to be a child again. For all its bizarre rules – 'Monstrous boy! You've put the grape scissors into the corkscrew compartment *again*!' – this place was deeply soothing.

Always before, he'd looked forward to the family party. Besides the champagne and the salmon, it meant a shared

laugh at the most ridiculous of the relatives: Crazy Claude with his stuffed Cullens bags, Droopy Julie with her multitudinous bra straps and thick make-up applied without skill or proper light, hairy-chinned Harriet, author of hilarious Christmas newsletters. ('And there's the dypso and the nympho,' Max's father would remind his family as he turned his Rolls-Royce into the drive leading to the house. 'What's dipso and nimfo?' Max the child had asked in his high-pitched voice. 'Who's the nympho?' his mother had inquired with an odd edge to hers.) There was usually the chance to meet a far-flung relative and be told solemnly (for family should never be mocked): 'THIS IS YOUR FOURTH COUSIN ONCE REMOVED WHO LIVES IN DAKOTA AND IS IN SHIPPING AND KNOWS ALL ABOUT BEGONIAS.' At the same time, there was a puzzling sense of reassurance at being part of an enormous clan (though there were remarkably few people he actually wanted to talk to), even a mystifying desire for approval. Best of all, it was a chance to relax in the company of his three favourite cousins, so close to him in age, who happened to be his very best friends.

But this year was different. Maybe, from now on, every social occasion would be. For the first time in his young life – to his absolute dismay – Max felt like a curiosity.

He took his place in the line of guests snaking across the lawn, waiting to be greeted by Uncle Hector. He told himself that those before and behind, all distant relatives, might not have heard the gossip yet – even though, just a couple of days ago, it had been served up in a waspish paragraph by Nigel Dempster. As he stared at his best black shoes pressing into the

turf, he could hear the musicians tuning their instruments in the distant gazebo – raucous murmurings like the scary prelude to an argument.

'Just *look* at the herbaceous border!' sighed a cousin of his mother's, a woman in a homemade hat with a black veil like the netting used to protect soft fruit from birds. Max's father called her 'the fly-catcher', for some reason – he often gave the family names. Then she said: 'Tcch, hip's no better,' and Max followed her glance to his grandfather, hobbling across the grass in the distance.

'Hello Max,' said her husband (dubbed 'the button-manufacturer' by Max's father because his money derived from a majority shareholding in a London department store). 'Family not here?' (Which was a ridiculous way of inquiring about Max's parents, since there was nothing *but* family at this party.)

'Fuck you!' thought Max savagely. It didn't even occur to him that the question might have been well-intentioned.

He said politely, his face quite blank: 'Excuse me.' He'd go in search of his three cousins straight away and say hello to Uncle Hector later on.

But, somehow or other, out of the corner of his eye, Uncle Hector had absorbed this little drama. Immediately, but very courteously, he terminated his own conversation and, with real pleasure in his voice, called: 'Max!'

He didn't embrace his great-nephew – the older members of the family weren't tactile – but he radiated affection. As usual, he propped his huge bulk on a silver-topped stick, which bowed under the strain, and winced every so often as if caught unawares and then laughed even louder. He was never without pain, but didn't believe in complaining, though when guests stayed they could hear groans issuing from his bedroom in the

early mornings – a crescendo of anguished mooing, Hector believing himself unheard, railing against fate (and probably galloping inflation, too). During active service in the last war, his right leg had been blown off below the knee by a mine. It was one of the reasons for his great popularity among children. It was a special treat to be allowed to compare the hard pink surface of his artificial leg with the mottled hairiness of the real thing.

'WHERE ARE MY PRUNING SHEARS?' he roared as he tweaked gently at a strand of Max's hair. 'HAA-HAA-HAAA!'

Max lifted his shoulders as if trying to sink into them, hung his head so his long black locks fell over his face like curtains.

'And I suppose that now you're just going to disappear for the whole day with those WRETCHED COUSINS OF YOURS?'

There was sudden panic in Max's dark eyes, which, a moment ago, had seemed quite blank.

'Do whatever you like, dear boy.' Uncle Hector beamed. He touched Max on the shoulder, only to remove his hand immediately as if he'd received an electric shock. 'As long as you DON'T INTERRUPT THE MOZART.'

Then his brow furrowed up with anxiety once more. 'Do remember to say hello to Merriweather, won't you?'

Max passed swiftly and gracefully across the lawn through knots of guests, looking neither to left nor right, hidden by wings of hair, greeting nobody. He knew what was there: tiers of relatives all dressed up and braying at each other, Merriweather being bolshy while a fleet of young waiters did all the work, deckchairs facing the gazebo for afterwards, and an enormous marquee where they'd very soon be summoned. 'I don't want lunch,'

thought Max who, only a short time before, had believed himself to be starving.

He heard his name being called and, out of the corner of one eye, registered Kitty's parents.

'Max!' called Kitty's mother, more urgently. He'd have to stop.

He retraced his steps: stood looking down on Aunt Suki and Uncle Simon, sprawling on the grass. They were famously happy. Kitty's mother was wearing a long creamy dress and a straw hat with a garland of artificial pink roses. Kitty's father was stroking her back. Their sixteen-year-old son, Phil, was relaxing within their golden sphere.

'Max,' Aunt Suki repeated, smiling at him in a very friendly sort of way.

'Kitty's asked me to tell you they're waiting for you,' said Uncle Simon, with the same half-comforting, half-worrying mixture of affection and concern. He started tugging at his tie, more peevishly than seriously.

'Okay,' said Max curtly.

'Top secret location, though I have my suspicions. Wherever it is, Phil's banned . . .'

Max glanced at his young cousin, but he didn't look at all put out. Just sixteen, it was the first year he'd been admitted to the party, though he was taking the honour very casually. He lay on the grass in his suit and tie, eyes half slits through which he was observing the girls, a fuzz of dark hair shadowing his upper lip, a glass of champagne within reach. When had Max's life ever been that uncomplicated?

'Have a good time, darling,' said Aunt Suki. And then, as an afterthought, 'Don't forget to say hello to Grandma and Grandpa.'

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