



Catherine Alliott

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The Secret Life of Evie Hamilton

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The Secret Life of Evie Hamilton
by
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 mini bus 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 *improper*. 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 damndest 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.

‘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 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. I 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.