

the Party
Crasher

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PENGUIN BOOKS

ONE

I know I can do this, I *know* I can. Whatever anyone else says. It's just a matter of perseverance.

'Effie, I already told you, that angel won't stay,' says my big sister Bean, coming up to watch me with a glass of mulled wine in her hand. 'Not in a million years.'

'It will.' Firmly I continue wrapping twine round our beloved silver ornament, ignoring the pine needles pricking my hand.

'It won't. Just give up! It's too heavy!'

'I'm not giving up!' I retort. 'We *always* have the silver angel on the top of the Christmas tree.'

'But this tree is about half the size of the ones we normally have,' points out Bean. 'Haven't you noticed? It's really spindly.'

I briefly survey the tree, standing in its usual alcove in the hall. Of course I've noticed it's small. We usually have a huge, impressive, bushy tree, whereas this one is pretty puny. But that's not my concern right now.

'This *will* work.' I tie my final knot with a flourish, then let go – whereupon the whole branch collapses, the

angel swings upside down and her skirt falls over her head, exposing her knickers. Drat.

'Well, that looks super-festive,' says Bean, snorting with laughter. 'Shall we write "Happy Christmas" on her pants?'

'*Fine.*' I untie the angel and step back. 'I'll brace the branch with a wooden stick or something.'

'Just put something else on top of the tree!' Bean sounds half amused, half exasperated. 'Effie, why are you always so stubborn?'

'I'm not stubborn, I'm *persistent.*'

'You tell 'em, Effie!' chimes in Dad, passing by with a bundle of fairy lights in his arms. 'Fight the good fight! Never say die!'

His eyes are twinkling and his cheeks are rosy, and I smile back fondly. Dad gets it. He's one of the most tenacious people I know. He was brought up in a tiny flat in Layton-on-Sea by a single mother, and he went to a really rough school. But he persevered, got to college and then joined an investment firm. Now he is where he is: retired, comfortable, happy, all good. You don't achieve that by giving up at the first hurdle.

OK, so his tenacity can sometimes segue into irrational obstinacy. Like that time he wouldn't give up on a charity 10K run, even though he was limping and it turned out he'd torn a calf muscle. But as he said afterwards, he'd raised the money, he'd got the job done, and he'd survive. Dad was always exclaiming 'You'll survive!' during our childhood, which was sometimes cheering and sometimes bracing and sometimes totally unwelcome. (Sometimes you don't want to hear that you'll survive. You want to peer at your bleeding knee and wail and have someone say kindly, "There, there, aren't you brave?")

Dad had obviously been at the mulled wine before I even arrived today – but then, why not? It's Christmas-time *and* it's his birthday *and* it's decorating day. It's always been our tradition, to decorate the tree on Dad's birthday. Even now we're all grown-up, we come back to Greenoaks, our family home in Sussex, every year.

As Dad disappears into the kitchen, I edge closer to Bean and lower my voice. 'Why did Mimi get such a small tree this year?'

'Don't know,' says Bean after a pause. 'Just being practical, maybe? I mean, we're all adults now.'

'Maybe,' I say, dissatisfied by this answer. Our step-mother, Mimi, is artistic and creative and full of quirky whims. She's always loved Christmas decorating, the bigger the better. Why would she suddenly decide to be practical? Next year, I'll go tree shopping with her, I decide. I'll remind her subtly that we always have a massive tree at Greenoaks and there's no reason to stop that tradition, even if Bean *is* thirty-three and Gus is thirty-one and I'm twenty-six.

'At last!' Bean interrupts my thoughts, peering at her phone.

'What?'

'Gus. He's just sent over the video. Talk about cutting it fine.'

About a month ago, Dad said he didn't want presents this year. As if we were going to take any notice of that. But to be fair, he does have a lot of jumpers and cufflinks and things, so we decided to be creative. Bean and Gus have put together a video montage, which Gus has been finalizing, and I've done my own surprise project, which I can't wait to show Dad.

'I expect Gus has been pretty busy with *Romilly*,' I say, winking at Bean, who grins back.

Our brother Gus has recently landed this amazing girlfriend called Romilly. And we're not *surprised*, we're definitely not *surprised*, but . . . well. The thing is, he's Gus. Absent-minded. Vague. He's handsome in his own way, very endearing, and very good at his job in software. But he's not exactly what you'd call 'alpha'. Whereas she's some kind of amazing powerhouse with perfect hair and chic sleeveless dresses. (I've looked her up online.)

'I want to have a quick look at the video,' says Bean. 'Let's go upstairs.' As she leads the way up the stairs, she adds, 'Have you wrapped up your present for Dad?'

'No, not yet.'

'Only I brought some extra wrapping paper, just in case you needed it, and ribbon. I've ordered the hamper for Aunt Ginny, by the way,' she adds. 'I'll tell you what you owe me.'

'Bean, you're brilliant,' I say fondly. Which she is. She's always thinking ahead. She's always getting stuff done.

'Oh, and something else.' Bean delves into her bag as we reach the landing. 'They had a three-for-two offer.'

She hands me a Vitamin D spray, and I bite my lip, trying not to laugh. Bean is turning into this crazed health-and-safety officer. Last year she kept getting me cod-liver-oil capsules and before that it was green tea powder.

'Bean, you don't need to buy me vitamins! I mean, thanks,' I add belatedly.

We head into her room and I look around it affectionately. It's been the same since I can remember, with the

hand-painted furniture she's had since she was five – twin white wooden beds, a chest, wardrobe and dressing table, all decorated with Peter Rabbit. Throughout our childhood she kept intending to upgrade to something cooler, but she could never quite bear to say goodbye to it, so it's still here. I associate it so strongly with her, I can't even see Peter Rabbit without thinking 'Bean'.

'Did you think of inviting Dominic along today?' asks Bean as she opens up her iPad, and I feel a glow at the sound of his name.

'No, it's a bit early for "meet the family". We've only had a few dates.'

'But good dates?'

'Yes, good dates.' I smile happily.

'Excellent. OK, here we go . . .' She sets up her iPad on the dressing table and we both watch a whizzy title sequence reading *The one and only . . . Tony Talbot!* A still photo appears next, of Dad in his local Layton-on-Sea paper when he was eleven and won a maths prize. Next comes a graduation photo, followed by a wedding photo with our birth mother, Alison.

I gaze at her pretty, wide-eyed face, feeling the weird sense of disconnect I always do when I see pictures of her, wishing I could feel more of a bond. I was only eight months old when she died, and three when Dad married Mimi. It's Mimi I remember singing to me when I was ill, baking cakes in the kitchen, being there, always. Mimi's my mum. It's different for Bean and Gus – they have dim memories of Alison. Whereas I have nothing except family resemblance – which, to be fair, I have big-time. We all take after her, with our wide faces, strong cheekbones and eyes set well apart. I look permanently startled and Bean's big blue eyes always seem questioning. Meanwhile Gus

generally looks absent, as though he's not paying attention (which is because he never is).

A series of old home videos begins on the screen and I lean forward to watch. There's Dad holding a baby Bean . . . a family picnic . . . Dad building a sandcastle for a toddler Gus . . . Then a video I've seen before: Dad walking up to the door of Greenoaks and theatrically opening it, the day it became ours. He's often said it was one of the biggest moments of his life, buying a house like this. 'A boy from Layton-on-Sea made good,' as he puts it.

Because Greenoaks isn't just any old house. It's *amazing*. It has character. It has a turret! It has a stained-glass window. Visitors often call it 'eccentric' or 'quirky' or just exclaim, 'Wow!'

And OK, yes, there might be those very few, mean, misguided people who call it 'ugly'. But they are *blind* and *wrong*. The first time I ever overheard Greenoaks described as 'a monstrosity', by a strange woman in the village shop, I was shocked to my core. My eleven-year-old heart burned with indignation. I'd never come across an architectural snob before; I didn't know they existed. And I passionately loved everything about my home; everything that this unknown, mean grown-up was mocking. From the so-called 'ugly brickwork' – it is *not* ugly – to the mound. The mound is a slightly random, steep hill that we have in the garden, to one side of the house. The woman laughed at that, too, and I wanted to yell, 'Well, it's brilliant for bonfires, so there!'

Instead, I stalked out of the shop, throwing a resentful glance at Mrs McAdam, who ran it. To her credit, she looked a bit shocked and called out, 'Effie, love, did you want to buy anything?' But I didn't turn back, and I still don't know who that mocking stranger was.

Ever since then, I've watched people's reactions to Greenoaks with a close eye. I've seen them step back and gulp as they survey it and scrabble for positive things to say. I'm not saying it's a test of their character – but it's a test of their character. Anyone who can't find a single nice comment to make about Greenoaks is a mean snob and dead to me.

'Effie, look, it's you!' exclaims Bean, as a new video appears on the screen, and I peer at the toddler me, staggering around the lawn, holding an eight-year-old Bean's hand. 'Never mind, Effie,' she says cheerfully, as I tumble down. 'Try again!' Mimi always says Bean taught me to walk. And ride a bike. And plait my hair.

We've scooted straight past the dark year of Alison's death, I register silently. This video is just of the happy times. Well, why not? Dad doesn't need to be reminded of that. He found happiness with Mimi and he's been content ever since.

The buzzer rings, and Bean ignores it, but I look up, alert. I'm expecting a parcel with Mimi's Christmas present in it. I arranged for it to arrive today especially, and I don't want Mimi opening it by mistake.

'Bean,' I say, pressing Pause on the iPad screen. 'Will you come to the gate with me? I think that's Mimi's sewing cabinet arriving, and I want to bring it in secretly. But it's quite big.'

'Sure,' says Bean, closing the video down. 'So, what do you think?'

'Amazing,' I say emphatically. 'Dad's going to *love* it.'

As we hurry down the stairs, Mimi is winding greenery through the bannisters. She looks up and smiles at us, but her face seems a bit strained. Perhaps she needs a holiday.

'I'll get the gate,' I say hurriedly. 'It's probably a package.'

'Thanks, Effie love,' says Mimi in her soft, comforting Irish brogue. She's wearing an Indian block print dress and her hair is caught back in a hand-painted wooden clasp. As I watch, she ties a deft knot with red velvet ribbon and, needless to say, nothing collapses. Typical.

As Bean and I crunch over the gravel drive to the big iron gates, the afternoon air is already taking on a wintry, dusky gloom. A white van is parked outside and a guy with a shaved head is holding a cardboard box.

'That can't be it,' I say. 'Too small.'

'Delivery for the Old Rectory,' says the guy as we open the pedestrian gate. 'They're not in. Mind taking it?'

'Sure,' says Bean, reaching for it, and she's about to scribble on his device when I grab her hand, stopping her.

'Wait! Don't just sign. I signed for a package for my neighbour and it was this glass vase which was broken, and they couldn't get a refund because I'd signed and they blamed me.' I stop breathlessly. 'We need to check it first.'

'It's fine,' says the guy impatiently and I feel my hackles rise.

'You don't know that.' I rip the lid open and draw out the invoice. '*Yoga sculpture,*' I read. '*Assembly included.*' I look up, feeling vindicated. 'You see? It's not fine! You're supposed to assemble it.'

'I'm not assembling nothing,' says the guy, giving a revolting sniff.

'You have to,' I point out. 'It says so on the paper. *Assembly included.*'

'Yeah, right.'

'Assemble it!' I insist. 'We're not signing for it till you do.'

The guy glowers at me silently for a moment, rubbing his shaved head, then says, 'You're a stubborn pain in the arse. Has anyone ever told you that?'

'Yes,' I reply, folding my arms. 'Everyone.'

'It's true.' Bean nods, grinning. 'You'd better assemble it. What's a *yoga* statue, anyway?' she adds to me, and I shrug.

'I'll get my tools,' says the guy, now glowering at both of us. 'But this is bollocks.'

'It's called being a good citizen,' I retort.

After a minute he returns with his tools and we watch curiously as, with impatient huffs, he starts screwing together metal parts into . . . What is that, exactly? It's some kind of representation of a person . . . no, two people, male and female, and they seem to slot together . . . *what* are they doing?

Hang on.

Oh my God. My stomach rolls over and I glance at Bean, who seems transfixed. Does *yoga sculpture* actually mean *X-rated sex sculpture*?

Okaaay. Yes, it does.

And quite frankly, I'm shocked! Andrew and Jane Martin wear matching padded waistcoats. They exhibit dahlias at the summer fete. How can they have ordered *this*?

'Is his hand meant to go on her tit or her bum?' the guy queries, looking up. 'There's no instructions.'

'I'm . . . not sure,' I manage.

'Oh my God.' Bean comes to life as the guy pulls the final, most graphic male body part out of the box. 'No! No way. Could you please stop a moment?' she adds

shrilly to the guy. Then she turns to me and says in an agitated undertone, 'We *can't* take this round to the Martins. I'll never be able to look them in the eye again!'

'Me neither!'

'We didn't see this. OK, Effie? We did *not* see this.'

'Agreed,' I say fervently. 'Um, excuse me?' I turn back to the guy. 'Slight change of plan. Do you think you could take it all apart again and put it back in the box?'

'You *are* bleeding joking,' says the guy incredulously.

'I'm sorry,' I say, in humble tones. 'We didn't know what it was.'

'Thank you for your trouble,' adds Bean hastily. 'And happy Christmas!' She reaches in her jeans pocket and finds a crumpled tenner, which mollifies the delivery guy slightly.

'Bloody shambles,' he says, briskly unscrewing the parts again. 'Make your bloody minds up.' He regards the naked female figure with disapproval. 'Anyway, you ask me, she'll give herself knee trouble, messing about like that. She wants a couple of pillows, cushion the joints.'

I glance at Bean and away again.

'Good idea,' I manage.

'Can't be too careful,' adds Bean, with a tremor in her voice.

He stuffs the last metal body part back into the box and Bean scribbles on his electronic screen, and as he gets back into his van we glance at each other again.

'Knee trouble,' says Bean, her voice almost exploding.

'The Martins!' I rejoin in slight hysteria. 'Oh God, Bean, how will we *ever* talk to them again?'

The van finally drives away, and we both dissolve into gales of laughter.

'I'll tape it up again,' says Bean. 'They'll never know we opened it.'

She's just reaching down to pick up the box when something catches my eye: a figure about ten metres away, walking towards us along the village road. It's a figure I'd know anywhere, from the dark hair to the pale, strong chin, to the long-legged stride. Joe Murran. And just the sight of him causes my hysteria to melt away. Instantly. As if it never happened.

'What?' says Bean, catching my expression, and she turns. 'Oh. *Oh.*'

As he nears us, there's a clenching in my heart. A python's grip. I can't breathe. Can I breathe? Oh, stop it, Effie. Don't be ridiculous. Of course I can *breathe*. Come on. I can see my ex-boyfriend without actually perishing on the spot.

'Are you OK?' murmurs Bean.

'Of course!' I say quickly.

'Right.' She sounds unconvinced. 'Well, tell you what, I'll take this box in and you two can . . . catch up.'

As she disappears towards the front door, I take a step backwards so that I'm standing on the gravel of the drive. On home territory. I feel like I need the ballast of home, of Greenoaks, of family love.

'Oh, hi,' Joe says as he approaches, his eyes unreadable. 'How are you?'

'Fine.' I shrug nonchalantly. 'How are you?'

'Fine.'

Joe's eyes shoot to my neck and I instinctively put a hand to my beaded necklace – then curse myself. I shouldn't have reacted. I should have blanked him. *What? Sorry? Did I once wear something around my neck*

with some kind of significance between us? Forgive me, I don't quite remember the details.

'Nice necklace,' he says.

'Yes, Bean gave it to me,' I say carelessly. 'So it's quite special. You know. Meaningful. I love it, actually. I never take it off.'

I could probably have stopped at 'Bean gave it to me'. But I made my point. I can tell that from the look on Joe's face.

'Work going well?' he says, with stilted politeness.

'Yes, thanks.' I match his politeness. 'I've moved department. I'm mostly organizing trade events now.'

'Great.'

'And you? Still aiming towards heart surgery?'

I speak with deliberate vagueness, as though I'm not quite sure what stage of his medical career he's at. As though I didn't once sit with him, helping him study till two in the morning.

'That's the plan.' He nods. 'Getting there.'

'Great.'

We lapse into silence, Joe's brow knitted in one of his customary intent frowns.

'What about . . .' he begins at last. 'Are you . . . with anyone?'

His words are like salt on sore skin. What's it to him? Why should he be interested? *You don't get to ask about my love life, Joe Murrans*, I want to retort hotly. But that would be giving myself away. Also, I have something to boast about.

'Yes, I *am* with someone, actually,' I say, putting on my most dreamy expression. 'He's really great. So great. Good-looking, successful, kind, *reliable* . . .' I add pointedly.

'Not Humph?' says Joe warily, and I feel a flicker of

annoyance. Why does he have to bring up Humph? I went out with Humphrey Pelham-Taylor for three weeks as an act of revenge on Joe and yes, it was petty and yes, I regret it. But does he really think that Humph and I would ever have been a thing?

'No, not Humph,' I say with elaborate patience. 'His name's Dominic. He's an engineer. We met online and it's going brilliantly. We're so well matched. You know when it just *works*?'

'Great,' says Joe, after a long pause. 'That's . . . I'm glad.'

He doesn't look glad. In fact, he looks kind of tormented. But that's not my problem, I tell myself firmly. And he probably isn't tormented at all. I thought I knew Joe Murran once, but I clearly didn't.

'Are *you* with anyone?' I ask politely.

'No,' says Joe at once. 'I'm . . . No.'

We lapse into another silence, during which Joe hunches his shoulders and thrusts his hands into his coat pockets.

This conversation really isn't working. I take a few deep breaths of the crisp winter air and feel sadness overcome me. On that awful night, two and a half years ago now, I didn't just lose the love of my life. I lost the friend I'd had since we were both five years old. Joe grew up here; his mum is still headmistress of the village school. We were playmates. Then teenage boyfriend and girlfriend. Together through university. Young adults, planning to make a life together.

But now we're . . . what? Barely able to look each other in the eye.

'Well,' says Joe at last. 'Happy Christmas.'

'Same. Happy Christmas.'

I watch as he walks away, then turn and trudge back across the drive to the house, to find Bean hovering outside the front door.

'Are you OK, Effie?' she asks anxiously. 'Whenever you see Joe, you get all . . . prickly.'

'I'm fine,' I say. 'Let's go in.'

I've never told Bean about that night. Some things are just too raw to share. In fact, I try not to think about it, full stop.

I need to focus on the here and now, I tell myself. All the good things. Decorating the tree. Christmas around the corner. All the family gathered together at Greenoaks.

Feeling lighter already, I follow Bean inside, shutting the door firmly against the weather. I look forward to this day every single year, and I'm not letting anything spoil it. Least of all Joe Murran.

An hour later, my spirits are even higher, which might have something to do with the two glasses of mulled wine I've downed. We've finished the Christmas tree and are assembled in the kitchen, watching the video that Bean and Gus made for Dad, on the propped-up iPad. I'm curled up in the ancient wicker chair in the corner in a contented haze, watching myself, aged four, in a smocked flowery dress made by Mimi. It's a summer's day on the screen and I'm sitting on a rug on the lawn, unstacking my Russian dolls and showing each one carefully to Dad.

I turn to Dad now to see if he's enjoying it and he smiles back from his chair, toasting me with his glass of mulled wine. That's a typical charming Dad gesture. My best friend Temi thinks Dad should have been an actor, and I know what she means. He has looks and poise and people are naturally drawn to him.

'Ephelant, you were *adorable* when you were little,' says Bean fondly. My whole family calls me 'Ephelant' when they're not calling me Effie – it was my baby-word for 'elephant'. No one ever calls me by my proper name, Euphemia (thank *God*) but then, no one calls Bean 'Beatrice', either, or Gus 'Augustus'.

'Yeah, shame you turned out like you did,' adds Gus, and I absently reply, 'Ha, ha,' without moving my eyes from the screen. I'm captivated by the sight of my pristine Russian dolls, new out of the box. I've still got them – five hand-painted wooden matryoshka dolls that stack inside each other, with lustrous painted eyes, rosy cheeks and serene smiles. They're knocked about now, and stained with felt tip, but they're the most precious souvenir I have of my childhood.

Where other children had a teddy, I had my dolls. I would take them apart, arrange them in a row, make them have 'conversations' and talk to them. Sometimes they represented our family: two big parents and three smaller children, with me the tiniest doll of all. Sometimes they were different versions of me. Or else I gave them the names of friends from school and acted out the quarrels of the day. But more often, they were just a form of worry beads. I would stack and unstack them, barely seeing them, letting the familiar ritual comfort me. In fact, I still do. They live by my bed to this day and I still sometimes reach for them when I'm stressed out.

'Look at your *dress*,' Bean is saying now, gazing at the screen. 'I want one!'

'You could make one,' says Mimi. 'I still have the pattern. There was an adult version, too.'

'Really?' Bean's face lights up. 'I'm *definitely* making that.'

Yet again, I marvel at how Bean has taken on Mimi's creative mantle. They both sew and knit and bake. They can turn a space into a magical domain, with a velvet cushion here and a plate of oatmeal cookies there. Bean works at home in marketing, and even her office is beautiful, all hanging plants and art posters.

I buy cushions and oatmeal cookies. I've even tried a hanging plant. But it never looks the same. I don't have that flair. However, I have other skills. At least, I think I do. (Is being a stubborn pain in the arse a skill? Because that's what I'm best at, apparently.)

Our kitchen is the prime example of Mimi's creativity, I think, my eyes drifting fondly over it. It's not just a kitchen, it's an institution. A work of art. Every cupboard is a panel of intricate forest, drawn in Sharpie, built up over the years. It all started with a tiny mouse that Mimi drew to cheer me up when I'd cut my knee, aged about three. She sketched the mouse in the corner of a cupboard, winked at me and said, 'Don't tell Daddy.' I gazed at it, enchanted, unable to believe that she had drawn something so amazing, and *on the furniture*.

A few weeks later, Gus was upset over something and she drew him a comical frog. Then, over the years, she added drawing after drawing, creating elaborate forest scenes. Trees to mark birthdays; animals at Christmas. She let us add our own little contributions, too. We would draw them holding our breath, feeling momentous. A butterfly . . . a worm . . . a cloud.

The panels are pretty filled up with drawings now, but Mimi still squeezes in new touches, now and again. Our kitchen is famous in the village and it's the first thing our friends want to see when they come over.

'No one else has a kitchen like this!' I remember Temi

gasping when she first saw it, aged eleven, and I immediately replied, bursting with pride, 'No one else has a Mimi.'

On the iPad screen now is a montage of Dad at various parties we've had over the years and I feel waves of nostalgia as I watch Dad dressed up as Father Christmas when I was eight . . . Dad and Mimi in black tie, dancing at Bean's eighteenth . . . So many happy family celebrations.

Happy Birthday, Tony Talbot! appears on the screen as a final frame, and we all applaud exuberantly.

'Really! Children!' Dad seems overcome as he smiles around the kitchen. He has a sentimental streak, and I can see his eyes are damp. 'I don't know what to say. That's an incredible present. Bean, Gus, Effie . . . Thank you.'

'It's not from me,' I say hastily. 'That was Bean and Gus. I made you . . . this.'

Feeling suddenly shy, I present him with my gift, wrapped in Bean's paper. I hold my breath as he unwraps the large, flat book and reads out the title.

'*A Boy from Layton-on-Sea.*' He looks at me questioningly, then starts leafing through the pages. 'Oh . . . my goodness.'

It's a kind of scrapbook I've put together of Layton-on-Sea in the era of my dad's childhood, sourcing old photos, postcards, maps and newspaper cuttings. It became totally engrossing as I was making it – in fact, I could probably do a thesis on Layton-on-Sea now.

'The arcade!' Dad's exclaiming, as he flips over the pages. 'The Rose and Crown! St Christopher's School . . . that takes me back . . .'

At last he looks up, his face suffused with emotion. 'Effie, my love, this is wonderful. I'm so touched.'

'It's not artistic or anything,' I say, suddenly aware that I just stuck all the clippings in and Bean would probably have done something super-creative with them. But Mimi puts a hand on my arm.

'Don't do yourself down, Effie, darling. It *is* artistic. This is a work of art. Of history. Of love.'

Her eyes are glistening, too, I notice with surprise. I'm used to Dad's sentimentality, but Mimi's not really a weeper. Today, though, there's definitely a softening around her edges. I watch as she picks up her mulled wine with a trembling hand and glances at Dad, who shoots a meaningful look back.

OK, this is weird. Something's up. I'm only just noticing the signs. But what?

Then, all at once, it hits me. They're planning something. *Now* it all makes sense. Dad and Mimi have always been the kind of parents who have private chats and then make fully fledged announcements, rather than floating suggestions first. They've got a plan and they're going to tell us and they're both kind of emotional about it. Ooh, what is it? They're not going to adopt a child, are they? I think, wildly. No. Surely not. But then, what? I watch as Dad closes the book and glances yet again at Mimi, then addresses us.

'So. All of you. We've actually . . .' He clears his throat. 'We've got a bit of news.'

I knew it!

I take a sip of mulled wine and wait expectantly, while Gus puts down his phone and looks up. There's a long, weird beat of silence and I glance uncertainly at Mimi. Her clasped hands are so tense her knuckles are showing white, and for the first time I feel a slight sense of unease. What's up?

A nano-second later, the most obvious, terrifying answer comes to me.

'Are you OK?' I blurt out in panic, already seeing waiting rooms and drips and kindly doctors with bad news on their faces.

'Yes!' says Dad at once. 'Darling, *please* don't worry, we're both fine. We're both in great health. It's not . . . that.'

Confused, I peer at my siblings, who are both motionless, Bean looking anxious, Gus frowning down at his knees.

'However.' Dad exhales hard. 'We need to tell you that . . . we've come to a decision.'