

Prologue

June

The kiss, like everything else about the day, was picture perfect. Not too chaste, not too intimate. The groom, an ideal several inches taller than the slender woman beside him, took his bride's face in his hands, tender and possessive. He laid his forehead against hers for a second or two, before their lips met. Her eyes shone with tears of joy. There was an appropriate collective sigh amongst the congregation. It was like watching a Hallmark card come to life.

First married kiss over, the beaming newly-weds turned to face the congregation, their cheeks touching, her retousse nose wrinkling in shy self deprecation, and the veil that had been lifted from her face a few minutes earlier framed them both in a cloud of fairytale tulle.

The vicar raised her hands in an expansive gesture. 'Ladies and gentlemen, Mr and Mrs Hammond', and the whole church erupted into spontaneous applause.

In the second pew on the groom's side questions raced through Susannah's brain so fast she could barely put them in order.

- 1 Since when did we applaud in church?
- 2 How is it that my little brother is old enough to get married?

- 3 Was I really ever as naïve as they appear?
- 4 Just when did I get so cynical, and so bitter?

The answers didn't come quite so quickly. Except about the clapping. It was modern. Not for the first time, Susannah found herself strangely at odds with the practices of her own generation. This wasn't a performance. This was a solemn, dignified ceremony.

Her 'baby' brother Alexander was 30. Not young to marry, by most people's standards. It was the fact that his being 30 meant that she was 39 that choked her a little bit. She remembered him being born so vividly – a living Tiny Tears, a nine year old girl's dream come true.

Yes, yes – of course she'd been that naïve – all that, and more. Naïve and delirious with the same joy she'd seen on their faces, and certain, so very certain, that she'd be married forever. She'd stood at that very altar, exactly where Alex and Chloe stood now, and she imagined she'd felt exactly as they did (though she also remembered a disconcerting sensation that the strangely uncomfortable garter she was wearing was slipping down her thigh towards her knee). The certainty was the part that had deserted her. She couldn't have lived without him. Back then, she'd have viewed it almost as a physical impossibility – that her heart, the one she'd just finished giving him, would literally stop beating in her chest if he wasn't beside her. She wasn't certain about anything any more.

And the getting cynical and bitter part? That . . . that question she couldn't answer. If she'd known it was happening – if she'd stood apart from herself and watched – she wouldn't have let it? Would she?

Chloe was radiant. Really. Everyone said it about every bride – it was one of the required words for days like today – but it wasn't true about every bride – at least not as true as it was about Chloe today. (Had everyone said it about her? Was it true, about her?) Chloe was Canadian, and, actually, she always 'glowed' with North American wholesome health. All straight white teeth and smooth blonde waves. She looked, Susannah acknowledged, particularly lovely today. Her dress was a long sheath of heavy ivory duchesse satin. Elegant and timeless, it suited Chloe perfectly. As she passed, she shook her bouquet slightly at Susannah in triumphant greeting, and Susannah felt herself shaking her clenched fists in response, her shoulders hunched.

Alex's chest was puffed with pride. Chloe's arm was through his, and he had clasped her fingers with his other hand. He kept looking from her to their guests, and quickly back to her, as though he still couldn't believe she was his wife, at last.

It was hard not to believe in these two, watching them now. Even for Susannah.

Maybe Alex and Chloe would be okay. Some people were, weren't they?

Susannah's mother Rosemary turned, now, to her only daughter. Her face was wet with what Susannah had called 'happy tears' when she was little, and she dabbed carefully at her eyes with a white lacy handkerchief saved for just such an occasion.

'Wasn't that wonderful?'

Susannah smiled indulgently, which was easier said than done, given that she found her teeth were clenched. Another required word. 'It was. Wonderful!'

'And didn't she look beautiful?'

'Absolutely!'

This q & a could take a while. Although most of her mother's qs seemed to be rhetorical, and she probably needn't bother with the as. This and the photos. Susannah wondered how far she was from her first glass of champagne. Too long, almost certainly. Perhaps she should have slipped a hip flask into her clutch.

'I'm so thrilled they did it Here.'

This was not news. St Gabriel's Parish Church was at the geographical centre of the village and the spiritual centre of Rosemary Hammond's life, inextricably linked to her and her family. She felt a glow of pleasure and satisfaction, remembering how own marriage here on the May Day England had won the World Cup in 1966. All three of her children had been christened and confirmed here, and both her parents were buried beside each other, though twelve years apart, in the churchyard outside. Before she and her husband had joined the French invasion and bought a house there, she never missed a Sunday service, except when she was away on holiday, and twice, after the hysterectomy she'd had in 2005, and on almost every Friday afternoon for the last fifteen years, she'd

dusted and polished the pews with three or four of her friends. Clive, her husband, always called it ‘Dusting for Jesus’, and was always rewarded with a harmless flick of the yellow duster as she left.

Alastair, the eldest and the first of her children to marry, had married from Kathryn’s home near Cambridge. Of course. It was the right thing to do, although Rosemary knew, and was slightly resentful of the fact, that no one in Kathryn’s family seemed particularly religious, and Kathryn herself had never even met the Vicar who performed the service before they started planning the wedding. Rosemary hadn’t liked the flowers much (gerberas – so casual), and she was pretty sure that the pulpit hadn’t seen Pledge for a few weeks.

Alastair and Kathryn’s daughters were Alex and Chloe’s bridesmaids today. Millie and Sadie were tripping excitedly down the aisle behind Chloe, delighted by the swoosh of their tulle petticoats and the elaborately styled hair they’d had done at the hairdressers.

Susannah had married Sean here, seventeen years ago. She had joked about eloping in the early days of her engagement, but Rosemary knew she would never do that to her. Susannah was her only daughter, after all – her only chance to really organize a wedding. Rosemary had been day- dreaming about her little girl’s wedding since the day she’d been born. Saving for it, too – squirreling away money from her housekeeping. There hadn’t been any money when she and Clive had married – not for extras – ‘bells and whistles’ Clive called them. She’d been determined that Susannah should have them all.

Floral arrangements at the end of each pew, not just at the altar, real champagne, and not just one glass for the toast . . .

But Alex's wedding had been a bonus. Alex had been a bonus all his life, in fact, conceived nine years after Susannah, and about six years after she'd stopped hoping it might happen, and determined to be content with the two children God had already given her and Clive. Chloe, bless her, had wanted a traditional English wedding, and she'd loved St Gabriel's since she'd spent her first holiday with the Hammonds, three years earlier, and they'd all traipsed up there for Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve. Alex had proposed three months ago, on a walking holiday in Scotland, taken to celebrate their both finishing their articles at two top City firms. They'd telephoned from a pub, and Chloe had said, then, straight away, drunk on happiness and sentiment, and a couple of whisky macs, that she wanted to marry at St Gabriel's, that she couldn't imagine doing it anywhere else. It had all been a bit of a rush, if Rosemary was honest. They'd been lucky this Saturday was free. It was the first one since Easter the Reverend Trevor had had free, and would be the last one until after October half term. She suspected – though she hadn't asked, since it seemed like bad luck, that there might have been a cancellation . . .

St Gabriel's was a very picturesque, Four Wedding and A Funeral type of church, and always in demand, and no amount of polishing, or praying could get you a Saturday at short notice in the summer.

It had all been worth it, though, all the hard work to get it organised. The pews shone, the flowers were truly gorgeous. Back at the house, the marquee looked heavenly, and

somehow made the house look more heavenly too, the champagne was on ice, and the string quartet was warming up. Chloe's parents had insisted on writing a generous cheque, and the 'bells and whistles' had truly rung, and been blown. Chloe's mother had said, that morning, when she'd arrived at the house to see the marquee before the service, that she half expected Hugh Grant to pop up from behind an urn in morning dress, and Rosemary took this to be high praise. Rosemary watched the tall, straight back of her younger son, and her beloved granddaughters, and felt suffused with joy. She squeezed her husband's hand, and he stroked back, a bit choked himself. The two of them had been married for more than 40 years. These were the wonderful days that they had dreamed of in the years when 'O' levels and mortgage payments and squabbling siblings had sometimes seemed overwhelming. The moments of joy that he always joked had to be paid for.

'What is wrong with this picture?' Susannah asked herself, looking around at her siblings and her parents and her nieces and nephew. Only one thing. One blot on this picture perfect landscape. Next to her euphoric mum and dad, her sister-in-law Kathryn was making her baby, Oscar, giggle by blowing raspberries against his neck, while he reached for the feathers on her hat, the ones that tickled his nose when she bent her face to him. It was her. She was the only one who didn't fit.

Susannah's eyes filled with sudden tears. Christ. Looking down immediately, she opened her handbag, and fumbled amongst the detritus within for a tissue. She felt a tear run down the side of her nose, where she feared it might imminently mingle with snot. These

were not the pretty, appropriate tears one should cry at a wedding. These were just a minute or so away from being full blown shoulder shaking sobs, and she was determined that wasn't going to happen. She dug the fingernails of her left hand into her palm, and clenched her teeth again. Susannah was an ugly crier, and she knew it. A minute of proper crying would leave an hour of red swollen eyes and an even redder nose. And would mean looks, and questions, and questions she could do without today.

Her brother Alastair took her arm at the elbow, squeezing quite hard, and pushed a plaid cotton handkerchief into her hand.

'Oh no you don't.'

The others had filtered into the aisle, and joined the melee of guests heading towards the steps of the church. Susannah's brother pulled her by the arm in the opposite direction from all of them, back towards the altar, and she let herself be led.

'Wait just a minute.' His voice was firm, but not unkind. He could have been talking to Sadie.

The choir was changing out of their surplices in the small vestibule at the back of the church. 'Don't mind us . . . taking the short cut,' he announced, as he led Susannah through them to a door which opened into the quiet graveyard. He didn't let go of her elbow until he'd guided her onto a bench, and then he sat down beside her. Susannah pulled her pillbox hat off, and ran her fingers through her hair.

'Thanks.'

He sat back, not answering her, but running his finger between his collar and his neck, and pushing his hair back from his forehead. For a few moments they sat in a silence

punctuated only by Susannah's occasional sniffing, and by the hum of noise from the front of the church.

Alastair crossed one long leg. 'I had my first cigarette on this bench. Thirteen years old. Threw up ten minutes later . . . just over there.' He gestured to a tree 10 yards away.

Susannah smiled. He'd never been much of a smoker. She had been – 10 a day, for almost exactly the three years she was away at university, as though it were a course requirement, until graduation, when she'd stopped as suddenly as she'd started. He'd always tortured her about it, given half the chance. Mum and Dad had never known, despite his threats: he'd never betray her.

'And I might have lost my virginity on this bench, too, if Sally Harris hadn't had extremely tight jeans and a 10pm curfew.'

She laughed out loud. 'Sally Harris. God!'

'Apparently her dad had had to pull the zipper up with a coathanger before she came out, and I think she was honestly afraid if she took them off she might never get them back on and she'd have had to go home in her knickers . . .'

'At least that's what she told you . . .'

'They were bloody tight, too. I could hardly get my hand in . . .'

'Eew. That's so disgusting.'

He smirked at her. 'Stopped you blubbing, though, hasn't it?'

'Stopped me eating at the reception, too, I should think . . .'

'Well that won't hurt you either, Chunky.'

He'd called her Chunky, and only Chunky, for some two years, when she was about ten until twelve, and had been, it would be fair to say . . . chunky. She'd slimmed down that summer , and been unvaryingly slim ever since, but he still called her Chunky sometimes when they were on their own.

She slapped his chest. 'Oy.'

That was Alastair. The archetypal big brother. When they were younger, when they'd lived together as children, he'd often been dismissive, or unkind, and sometimes given the outward impression that all he did all day was think of ways to torture her, but let anyone else – anyone – mess with her, and he morphed instantly into her rescuer. Her champion. He still was, she supposed.

'So?' He was looking right at her now, one eyebrow raised.

'So what?' She didn't quite meet his gaze.

'So . . . why the tears?'

'Everyone cries at weddings, don't they? Mum was getting through the Kleenex like it was going out of style. Kathryn too . . .'

'Right. So you're not saying?'

'Saying what?' Just because he'd rescued her, didn't mean she had to tell him.

'Okay – just because I rescued you, doesn't mean you have to tell me.' It was spooky how he did that. 'But if you want to . . . I'm all ears. And this is your window of opportunity, because I've got Kath's permission to drink all afternoon, and I fully intend to be insensible by the time they cut the cake . . . Oscar has been on a bloody bender the

last four or five nights, and I'm exhausted, so I'm going to go quick. So . . . if you want to talk, the Doctor is in . . .'

'I suppose I must have been thinking about Sean.'

'Bullshit.'

'Do doctors usually talk to their patients like that?'

'They should do if they don't.'

'So why don't you believe me?'

'Because – I haven't seen you cry over Sean in years. I'm not buying it. Those weren't nostalgia, regret tears. Those were very much present tense tears, if you ask me.'

'Really? How do you know so much..?'

'Look, sis – you might not want to say, but you don't have to be a genius to clock that something isn't right. You haven't been around much for months now. You've avoided all the family stuff – not just the wedding . . . you didn't come to Oscar's christening.'

She started to speak, to reiterate the excuse she had used and had been so sure had been believed, but Alastair raised his hand to stop her. 'And that doesn't matter. That's not what I'm saying. And today you've shown up, but Doug's not with you . . . yet again . . .'

'He had the kids . . . last minute.' She sounded pathetic, even to herself.

Again, the hand. The hand was quite annoying, actually, even if it was entirely justified . .

. 'Maybe he did. Maybe he didn't. Maybe it's none of my damn business. But I'm worried about you, Suze. That's all. We're all a bit worried about you.'

'Have you 'all' been talking about me, then?' She hated the thought of that. All of them sitting around in their various states of contentment, talking about her. The only one who didn't seem happy.

‘It’s not like that. I don’t mean mum and dad. God knows, mum hasn’t heard a word that isn’t about Alex and Chloe’s wedding for weeks now. And you know Dad. He never gives much away. I mean me and Kathryn. And actually, she’s been busy with the baby. Okay. I mean me.’

‘Great.’ She almost giggled. ‘So no one else cares a damn about me, then?’

They both smiled at her contrariness.

Alastair put an arm around Susannah, and she leant her head on his shoulder.

‘I’m just saying . . .’

‘I know.’

They sat there for a few minutes, without speaking, in the warm sunshine. Susannah felt her heart rate slow, and the urge to cry slowly recede until she was quite calm. Then Alastair sat up. ‘We should get back. After you’ve done something about that mascara gloop . . . They’ll be furious if they can’t find us for the photos . . .’

‘You’re right.’ She fished in her bag for a compact, and licked the corner of his handkerchief before dabbing away the black smudges beneath her eyes.

‘Usually.’

‘I don’t know how Kathryn puts up with you.’ She reapplied her lipgloss, then closed the handbag, and handed the handkerchief back to Alastair, who looked revolted, then balled it up and shoved it in his pocket.

‘What do you mean put up with me? She worships the very ground I tread.’

The two of them stood up and began to wander towards the sound of the crowd, hand in hand.

‘Poor deluded girl.’ This was the familiar banter of her childhood.

‘And I’m amazing in bed. Sally Harris had no idea what she was missing.’

She snorted. It was comforting, distracting, and helpful. Just before they rounded the corner, he squeezed her hand and then dropped it gently.

‘Think you can keep the wailing and gnashing of teeth at bay now?’ He rolled his eyes at her in mock exasperation. So unfair.

‘Think I can. Just about.’

‘Good. Do. For God’s sake. Put that prissy hat back on. And stay off the booze, will you? Nothing worse at a wedding than a middle aged woman on her own, drunk and trying to get off with one of the ushers.’ He nudged her with his shoulder.

‘I’ll try to remember that.’

Their mother descended on them as they appeared, looking mildly irritated, and a little flushed. She tutted at them, and smoothed a strand of Susannah’s hair that was escaping the elastic holding the hat on her head, as though she was a recalcitrant child. She didn’t appear to notice that there had been tears. ‘Where have you two been?’ She didn’t wait for an answer. She never really did. ‘We’ve finished Chloe’s lot. Hardly any of them, of course. You’re up. Groom’s family. Come on . . . he’s got the ladder out for us . . .’

Douglas was supposed to be here. It was her fault he wasn’t, she supposed. She’d told him not to come. She hadn’t meant it – ‘don’t bother coming’, she’d said. He knew she hadn’t meant it, too. But he still hadn’t come.

He'd crossed a line. Not coming today, when he knew perfectly well that people would wonder why. There would be a place laid for him in the marquee, on her table. His name, in perfect calligraphic script. An empty chair. He knew she'd have to explain his absence, to nosy aunts and concerned friends and well meaning strangers. That her explanation, however plausible, however light and funny her delivery, would probably not be believed. That crossed a line – made something private public. He knew how she hated that. But then they were crossing lines more and more, the two of them, lately. And lately she didn't even know where they were drawing the lines. She used to know where they were – the lines. She used to know how he'd react, how he'd behave in any given situation. They'd learnt the rhythm of each other. She wasn't so sure anymore. Of him, or of her. She wasn't ever certain. Once upon a time, they hadn't quarreled. Then, when they did, she'd never have gone to bed without making it up. Then they'd begun to fall asleep angry, or resentful, edging ever further from the centre of their king size bed, back to tense back. Now, twice in the last few months, she'd slept in the spare bedroom. And, although on the first occasion, when they'd both had too much wine, he'd come in the middle of the night to try and coax her back to their bed, the second time, when they'd both been sober, he hadn't. Crossing lines.

The nervous young photographer was running through his small repertoire of corny lines, trying to make everyone laugh for his family shot. Apparently, though, he wasn't as good at it as four year old Sadie, who was currently lifting her bridesmaid dress over her head, displaying her round tummy, and her days of the week knickers. 'I wouldn't mind so

much if she wasn't wearing Wednesday,' Kathryn laughed, as she tried to hold onto a wriggling and increasingly irate Oscar, and smooth down Sadie's dress at the same time.

'That's it. Got it. Thanks everyone.' The relief in the photographer's voice was obvious. This was only his fourth wedding, and none of the others had had quite so many people, or a flashing bridesmaid. Looking at him, red cheeked and sweating, Susannah wondered how the poor devil was going to make it through the reception. This lot was hard enough to corral sober. A couple of glasses of champagne, and it would be like herding cats.

Susannah's parent's home was a five minute stroll from the church, across the common and down a small lane. People had begun wandering in that general direction, led by a neighbour, thirsty, and hoping for at least a vol au vent before the next round of picture taking. A small crowd of villagers, uninvited but still keen to see the bride, and the guests in their wedding finery, had gathered around the entrance to the churchyard during the service. Susannah remembered doing the same thing when she'd been a young girl. When curly perms and bell sleeves were all the rage for brides, and the grooms all had sideburns and Kevin Keegan haircuts. There'd been a wedding most Saturday's in the summer. She'd watch the guests arrive, the bride climb out of the smart car, smooth her dress nervously before she took her father's arm. Then she'd cycle to the village shop and spend her pocket money on fruit salad sweets and sherbet fountains and Smash Hits magazine, returning in time to watch as the newlyweds stepped out into the sound of the bells. She loved the dresses and the bridesmaids and the flowers, the beribboned cars (and once a carriage pulled by two dappled horses) and all the guests resplendent in hats and

high heels. She loved the bells; she thought it was the happiest sound in the world. Mostly she loved the bit when the couple kissed in a shower of confetti or rose petals.

As Chloe and Alexander made their way through their guests – they were walking over to the house too (endlessly romantic, Chloe loved that – she said she'd feel like a heroine in a Thomas Hardy or a Jane Austen novel) – the elderly ladies of the WI cooed and aahed at them. 'You look smashing, love.' 'God Bless.' It was old fashioned, but it was lovely. Their well wishes seemed, to Susannah, more poignant and more affecting than those of the people who'd had the copper-plate invitations on their mantels for six weeks, who'd spent their fifty pounds on the John Lewis wedding list and bought a new dress for last year's too expensive hat. These were the real romantics, just as she'd been, once. They'd no other reason to be here at all. They weren't Alexander's college roommate, or Chloe's senior partner, or somebody's elderly aunt.

Then she saw someone she knew amongst them, and her breath caught in her throat. She hadn't thought to see her. As soon as she did, she wondered why it hadn't occurred to her that she might. They'd been here together, the two of them, after all, more than once, standing outside the church, waiting to see brides, a million years ago.

Most of the people at the gates were unfamiliar to her now – she hadn't lived here for years, and she came back fairly irregularly, only stopping at mum and dad's house when she did visit. But this was someone she'd once known well, though it had been almost two decades since they'd last met. Lois Rossi. Older, and definitely a little plumper. Her

hair, which she'd once worn in a shiny brunette bob that swung across her shoulders, was now shining silvery, and shorter. Smiling broadly, and right at her. Susannah wondered if she recognized her, almost looked over her shoulder to check who else the smile might be intended for. Maybe it was generic.

Behind Lois, much, much taller, and this time she was absolutely certain it was on her the same deep brown eyes were focused, was her son.

Roberto Rossi. Rob.

The tall, dark, handsome boy she'd fallen in love with – for the first, exquisite time – when she was 17 years old. And now the man she hadn't seen for almost twenty years.

For a moment, Susannah didn't know what to do. She wanted to run, but she was rooted to the spot, as though their collective gazes had trapped her, made her incapable of movement. And she was standing on grass in 4' heels, so it wouldn't so much be running, as airating . . . She looked around for her brother but she couldn't see him, or anyone she knew. She was standing still, frozen in a moment, while hordes of hat-wearing strangers were spilling past her – friends of Chloe and Alex's, she supposed – all laughing and chatting noisily. A thronging sea of pastel and feathers in a heady fog of perfume and hairspray. It almost made her dizzy.

There had been a time, many years ago, when bumping into Lois, or Rob, had been her greatest preoccupation and fear when any trip to her parent's home had been mooted. She'd once pulled into the Texaco filling station on the outskirts of the village with the petrol gauge reading 'you should have filled up thirty miles ago, you moron', only to see Rob's father Frank at the opposite pump. She'd hared out again without actually stopping, desperate not to make eye contact with him, and sputtered to a humiliating dead stop about five miles later. She and Sean hadn't been to hear their banns read at St Gabriel's for the same reason. Lois and Frank had been away on holiday for the wedding itself – not that they'd have come to wish her well, she didn't think. Not after what had happened.

The fear had subsided, as fears usually do. Her visits home had tapered off too. She'd been too happily self absorbed to come, at first. Too humiliated, once things started to go wrong, and too wretched to do much of anything once it really all fell apart with Sean.

And she and Douglas hadn't been frequent visitors in recent years either. The kids, Doug's beloved boat in Chichester Harbour, her job . . . life pulled them in so many directions. And it just sped up. Weeks, months, seasons, years . . . passed. Mum and Dad were retired, and spent a few months each year at the place they'd bought in France. (A major triumph, from Dad's point of view – he had doubted even his persuasive persistence would convince mum to leave the village, and St Gabriel's.) When they were home, they were happy to 'gallivant', as Dad called it. Mum always said she'd cooked enough Sunday dinners for a lifetime, and she was pleased to have someone else slave

over a stove on her behalf. And then Alastair and Kathryn had hogged them, too – luring them for Christmas and Easter and mini breaks in Cornwall with their succession of ever more adorable grandbabies.

And so by now she'd forgotten to look over her shoulder, or wear her big Jackie O sunglasses. And so now she'd seen them. That figured. Could this day get any more difficult?

Lois Rossi was walking towards her, her arms outstretched. God. Yes, it could. It could get worse. Now she remembered. Frank, Lois's husband, was ill. Really ill.

He'd been diagnosed with motor neurone disease about three years ago. Mum had told her – part of the litany of village gossip she ran through whenever she saw her, most of which was about members of the congregation Susannah wouldn't know if they fell on her. She'd thought about writing to Lois, when she'd heard. But what would she say? If someone had died, the platitudes flowed easily enough. But it wasn't so easy to know what to write about Frank – she didn't know much about the disease, except that it was devastating and that Stephen Hawkins was pretty much the only person, so far as she knew, who had survived it for any real length of time. For most people, she was sure, it was a death sentence. Mum's story had come with no details. And so she hadn't written. And now, as they moved towards each other across the grass, she really wished she had. Writing something about it would have been infinitely easier than trying to think of the right thing to say, now, here, in the middle of all of this wedding gaiety.

Lois spoke first, as she tramped forward. 'Susannah!' That was all she said. And then, up close to her, she opened her arms even wider and pulled Susannah into a still familiar embrace. Susannah felt almost weak with relief. Of course, she reasoned, of course Lois wouldn't still be angry with her. Maybe she never had been. Not all these years later. Lifetimes later.