

## Chapter 1

The whole thing was triggered by the sort of pathetically small marital dispute that most people have from time to time.

Linda was in bed, reading a delightfully amusing novel about an old woman wryly reviewing her life and relationships: it had been quite some life, packed with unlikely romantic adventures, all a far cry from the reality of Linda's life, or any real person's life for that matter. Anyway, it was giving her a much needed giggle or two when she heard the scrunch of the big BMW on the gravel, the quiet thud of the closing door, the crunch, crunch like munching cornflakes as her husband walked from the drive to the front porch. Nearly at the end of a chapter, she carried on reading, half-listening to his progress, the key in the lock, the opening and shutting of the door. Her attention slid from the book when something she still expected didn't happen. Up until a few weeks before there'd have been a gentle woof and thumping of plumed tail on banister rails, and Jim's quiet voice responding to Dottie's enthusiastic nuzzling with her wet black nose, telling her to stay down because he didn't want her long hairs on his smart business suit. Thinking of the elderly border collie dog still brought a lump to her throat. For nearly fifteen years Dot had been welcoming the family home and she'd been something responsive to talk to in the otherwise unoccupied house and garden. Unlike the kids and Jim, Dot never argued or stomped off in a huff, Dot was never too busy to listen. She wondered if Jim felt the absence as he went through to the kitchen where he would leave his briefcase and check the mail. Within a few minutes he was switching off lights and coming up the stairs.

'Good meeting?' she asked, as he came into the bedroom.

'Okay. Yes. Good,' he replied, bending to exchange a peck of a kiss. She could smell wine on his breath but had no reason to worry: he was always responsible about drinking and driving. 'Usual crowd. All on good form. Interesting speaker, just back from India and hoping to raise funds for a school.'

As a vicar's daughter, she had grown up with missionary tales of hardship in Africa and India and found it depressing that, despite all the saving of ship-ha'pennies, jumble sales, and 'adopting' of orphans and whole villages, things seemed to have become worse rather than better in the half century of her life. She wasn't indifferent to what was going on, but had reached a point of acceptance that nothing she could do was going to make a jot of difference. If he heard her say it, her father would look at her large, comfortably furnished, five-bedroom house and shake his head sadly.

'All well at the office?' she asked, having not seen nor spoken to him since his departure for work at seven-thirty that morning.

'Yes, fine.' Whilst pulling off his jacket and tie and unbuttoning his shirt, he gave a brief account of the day's events. He had always revelled in the cut and thrust of high finance and had the sort of charisma that motivated people, so it was no surprise that he had made it to Chief Executive and fully expected, by the end of the summer, to be appointed Chairman of the investment consultancy where he'd been a rising star for nearly thirty years.

He undressed without thinking, folding his trousers into the trouser press and hanging his jacket on the hanger, dumping his shirt, underpants and socks on the floor and pulling on his sky-blue shortie pyjamas. He was still a good-looking man but weightier than he used to be. When people commented about his increased girth, he laughingly blamed her for being too good a cook. She always accepted it with a smile and a shrug but really it was down to his lack of self-discipline when eating out, and too little exercise. His dark-steel hair was still thick and only slightly receding from

his temples; his bright hazel eyes, cheerfully edged with rays of little lines, declared his friendly, humorous personality. He disappeared into the en suite bathroom, as always without quite shutting the door, from whence came the ritual noises of peeing into the pan from a great height, flushing cistern, teeth cleaning, gargling and face splashing. She envisaged the soapy splashes that would be left halfway up the mirror and around the back of the taps, the toothpaste tube without its cap, abandoned on the glass shelf, the towel slung over the edge of the bath instead of the rail.

He flicked off the light and shut the door as he came back into the bedroom. 'You'll need to make a diary note for the first weekend in July. For the Dutch return visit. Three days, as usual.' His thoughts had obviously reverted to his Rotary meeting.

'Dutch visit?' She distinctly remembered telling him that if a return visit was planned, he could count her out.

'I meant to tell you last week. Unfortunately, we'll have to stay with the Van Hopstrops.'

And that's what started it. It was the 'I meant to tell you'; not 'I meant to ask you', but *tell* you, that made her particularly angry.

'I thought I'd made it plain that I didn't want to go,' she said as his weight upset the equilibrium of the bed. The previous year's experience of entertaining the then president of the Rotary Friendship Club and his hypochondriac wife had made for an interminably long, long weekend. Because of her various allergies and intestinal disorders, Gerda Van Hopstrop had been unable to eat anything Linda put in front of her; she couldn't sleep with a down duvet, or on a firm bed; she didn't trust tap water but was allergic to Perrier. Nobody had thought to forewarn Linda about any of this. And if that hadn't been bad enough, Gerda could only travel in the front of the car, didn't trust the air conditioning not to be recycling everybody's germs, so had to have the windows open. Linda had been consigned to a buffeting draught in the back alongside Claus Van Hopstrop, unable to hear any conversation and with her vision limited by the front seat headrest and Gerda's enormous shoulders. She had made it very plain to Jim, immediately upon the Hopstrop's departure, that under no circumstances was she going to accept the inevitable invitation for a return match.

'We have to go,' he said, neither admitting nor denying his recall of events. 'As immediate Past President, I have to.'

'You go if you feel you have to, but I'm not the Rotarian: I don't have to.' She pulled her pillows from sitting to sleeping position and thrust her head into their softness.

He sighed. 'We'll talk about it in the morning.' Turning his back, he pulled the duvet over his shoulders and reached to switch out his bedside light.

'There's nothing to talk about,' she responded, yanking back her share of the duvet. 'I'm not going.' And because she was angry, she added, 'And I'll tell you something else, I'm not going on your proposed golfing holiday with your friends, either!'

'Oh, for Pete's sake! What's brought all this on?' He turned over, supported his head on his hand and scowled down at her.

'You,' she answered, glaring back at him. 'You keep doing this. You're always making arrangements to do things that you want to do with your friends, without ever *consulting* me.'

'I thought they were *our* friends.'

'Jim, why don't you *listen* to me? You play golf with the guys, you all have fun, but during the day I'm stuck with their wives who are not friends I'd choose to

spend a whole week with. They're fine in small doses, at dinner parties and the like, but not all day, from breakfast to dinner, every day for a whole week.'

'What's wrong with them?'

'Absolutely nothing...'

'So what's your problem?'

'I've told you before. They never want to *do* anything. All they want is to lounge by the pool sunning themselves or to be pampered in the beauty parlour.'

'I thought you enjoyed that. That's why we always go to places with those facilities.'

'I don't not enjoy it, but given the choice, I'd rather do what *I* want for my holiday.'

'Which is?'

'Dammit, Jim, you know very well. I've been telling you for years. I like walking holidays like we used to do with the kids. I want to go back to the Lake District, I want to go to Scotland, I want to do the Coast to Coast walk.'

'It's you that doesn't listen. I keep telling you, those sort of jaunts will have to wait until I retire. It's not something you can undertake unless you're fit for it and I haven't got time to get the practice in.'

'Huh! You find plenty of time to practice golf!'

'Humph!' he grunted, throwing himself onto his side with his back to her.

End of conversation.

In less than five minutes the rhythm of his breathing changed and she knew he was asleep. He didn't stir as she reached to turn out her light. She couldn't sleep. She lay on her back staring into the darkness, wondering if she was being selfish and unreasonable. He worked hard, had provided well for the family and for years had gone along with the idea of family holidays and doing what was best for the kids. Now that they were no longer a consideration, why shouldn't he have the holidays that suited him? But, by the same token, she also worked hard so didn't she qualify, just once in a while, to have a holiday of her choice? She eventually slept, but on and off, and during her long periods of wakefulness found herself anguishing over the cause of their tiff. By the time dawn broke, she had made up her mind that compromise was the answer. He should do his thing and she would do hers. She reasoned that as she had no problem with him going away on his Rotary weekend and golfing holiday, why should he have any objection to her going in another direction?

The next day, being Saturday, she let him have an extra couple of hours' sleep beyond that of his working day while she went for her ritual morning walk. Dot's lead was still on the hook by the back door. Whenever she was asked if she would have another dog, which was often, she said no. They'd bought the puppy for the kids but in reality the dog had become her responsibility, and her soul-mate. Right from the start it had been her with whom Dot had identified, which was understandable. In those days the kids had been at school, Jim at work, and she had been the one at home all day to take the dog for walks and feed her. None of the others had had to give the dog a second thought as they went their separate ways, but for her, when she went to catering college and then to work, the dog had been a major consideration. And at the end, it had been Linda who had been left with making the decision to have the dog put to sleep, and only Linda who had been there to hold Dot when she released her last long breath. She didn't feel she could go through all the anguish and pain again. Still feeling the loss, she pulled on her coat, laced up her shoes and headed up the lane alone.

The Kent countryside was not as challenging as Scotland or the Lake District and she managed the five mile circuit, which included a long steepish hill, without difficulty. As she walked, she planned her holiday. A week in the Lake District was favourite, maybe Keswick, revisiting the fells she had walked with the kids.

She felt better when she arrived home, invigorated and determined. She made a pot of tea and took it, along with the half rainforest of morning papers, up to their room.

'Morning,' she said cheerfully, opening the curtains to let the spring sunshine flow across Jim still cocooned in cream cotton duvet.

He yawned and turned onto his back, squinting at the light and stretching out his dark-haired arms, no doubt looking forward to the day ahead. Golf, of course, a few hours of rugby or football on television and then some Rotary friends for dinner in the evening. Linda's day would be spent cooking and preparing for the evening, which wasn't a problem; she actually preferred the preparation bit to the live entertaining. They were always a good double act: Jim was a brilliant host, very affable, generous with the drinks, attentive, and ever ready with an opinion or anecdote to entertain if the conversation flagged; Linda concentrated on the presentation of the table and the food.

'I've been thinking,' she said, as he sat up and settled against the pillows drawing the papers onto his lap. 'About holidays...'

'Oh, Linda,' he groaned. 'Not now. Not first thing in the morning.' He unfolded the bundle of papers, looking for the finance supplement.

'Okay, but let me just say this, so you can think about it.'

He raised pained eyes from the headlines with a look that said, 'If you must'.

'I think that as we both want different things for our holidays, we should go our separate ways. That way we'll both be happy.'

He took a long patient breath, then released it slowly as he said, 'My initial reaction is that a holiday without you isn't my idea of happiness. Like I said, let's discuss it later.'

'Right-oh.' She smiled, determined to remain cheerful. She hadn't expected immediate concurrence, in fact, quite the reverse. Obviously he would need time to weigh up the pros and cons of this deviation from their norm.

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There were several occasions during the day when he could have brought the matter up: like when they were sitting in the conservatory with pre-golf coffee and toast, but he appeared to have forgotten all about it and sat reading the paper, as he habitually did, while she did the crossword in the previous day's paper and waited patiently for his considered response, and later in the afternoon when he returned and she took him a cup of tea and home-baked cake, but he was too interested in channel-hopping and catching up with the latest football scores to talk to her about anything.

Whilst lying in a bath full of bubbles she thought irritably about the lost opportunities. It just about summed up where she fitted in his life: somewhere after the newspaper, television sport, golf, etcetera, etcetera. Certainly her needs weren't rating very highly. What really irked was that he seemed to have forgotten all about the previous evening's altercation and her proposed compromise; there was absolutely no evidence that he was giving it even so much as a passing thought. He hadn't appeared to notice that she had been silently waiting for him to raise the subject, or that during those moments of contact throughout the day she hadn't made any of the usual little pass-the-time-of-day comments, nor made any more than polite responses to his observations on the content of his newspaper or progress of the rugby match.

Sometimes she wondered whether he was really aware of her presence: she was something like the dog, something to toss a passing remark to without having to listen to a reply. Well, she resolved, scrubbing furiously at the hard skin on her feet, if he thought she was going to come to heel on this one, he had another think coming.

'You look lovely,' he remarked as she came down the stairs wearing a shift-style cornflower blue dress that flattered her still firm and shapely curves.

'Thank you.' That's it, she thought, pat me on the head. Good dog. Dog to be proud of. Healthy diet and regular exercise had ensured that she remained in good shape, if not the sleek size twelve she'd been when she married, but a shapely size fourteen which was in proportion to her five foot six in height. Her complexion was good and her blue-grey eyes still bright; her hair, which had been long and natural honey-blond when they met, was now a nape-length bob liberally streaked with silver and more often than not tucked behind her ears. A lot of their friends had been surprised to learn that her birthday last June had been the big five-0, boosting her ego no end by saying she could easily pass for forty. It was nice of them to say so, but sadly it wasn't true; she wasn't blind to the lines around her eyes and mouth, nor the wrinkles in her neck, nor the thread veins in her legs.

There were last minute things to do in the kitchen and then their guests arrived. They were all sitting in the large, restfully beige lounge with pre-dinner drinks when, inevitably, the subject of the Dutch trip was raised, as she knew it would be. The four guests, Michael and Maureen, Keith and Barbara talked enthusiastically about previous exchange visits and how well they'd got on with their hosts or guests.

'You, poor things, had the frightful Gerda Van Hopstrop to deal with,' Barbara recalled sympathetically.

'We'll give as good as we got on the return visit, won't we Linda?' Jim smiled across the length of the coffee table, his eyes holding hers. Recognising in his bright and breezy comment that he had been waiting for this moment to corner her into capitulation, she tilted her head and smiled as though to an exasperating but endearing small child.

'But darling, I told you last night: I shan't be going.' She slid her smile slowly from him to their guests and shrugged apologetically. 'I've made other arrangements.'

'Oh, no!' Maureen cried, 'You can't... You must come.'

Michael laughed, 'Aha! The dreaded Gerda too much for you, eh?'

'I don't know how you survived it,' Barbara shook her head.

Pleased with this unsolicited support, she smiled triumphantly at Jim. Arguing in public had never been their scene and she knew he wouldn't make an issue, at least, not immediately. She didn't feel bad about making her point in front of their friends: after all, hadn't he just tried to use them to manipulate her?

'We'll miss you,' Keith said, patting her thigh.

'Well, don't you worry about Jim,' Maureen laughed and slid her arm through his, 'I'll look after him.'

'Thank you, Mo.' Jim put his arm around her shoulder, hugged her and kissed her cheek. She blushed and fluttered her dark eyelashes at him.

He was that sort of man: women flirted with him and came over all unnecessary when he responded. Linda felt sorry for them. She supposed they imagined him to be as near perfect as his looks. All the indicators were there: successful career, lovely home, smart car, three good kids - well, she thought they were good even if he didn't entirely agree - and although he was perhaps not quite the athletic sportsman he once had been, he was still in reasonable shape and oozed charm. Did they imagine that as everything else about him was so good, it followed

he would be the perfect mate? Did they fantasise about swapping their place with Linda? She would love a fiver for every time she'd heard one their friends tell her how lucky she was. Once upon a time she would have agreed with them.

She laughed. 'Well, I shall leave him in your capable hands.' The timer on her oven beeped. 'I think we could go through for dinner now.' She didn't need to escort them to the dining-room, they knew the way and would arrange their own seating based on who sat where and beside whom at the last dinner they'd all attended.

Jim followed her to the kitchen. His smile had gone. 'Thank you for that! You might have waited until we'd discussed it before making your announcement.'

'Like you discussed it before making yours?' she said more light-heartedly than she felt. 'Don't be so grumpy. You'll be amongst friends. Anyway, I doubt my absence will be noticed.'

'I'd notice it.' He changed tactics, putting his hand gently on her arm, pulling his brows together in perplexed concern and saying softly. 'What's got into you, Linda? This isn't like you.'

It would have sounded pathetic for her say that actually, she hadn't been feeling herself for several weeks, not since she'd had to have the dog put to sleep. It would probably sound contrary, considering Dot's perambulations had been gradually reducing over the last year, but now that the dog had gone she felt a desperate need to get out of the house. She wanted to get away, but from what, she wasn't really sure. Tears stung the back of her eyes, so she turned away to concentrate on taking the tray of salmon and dill tartlets from the oven. 'Nothing's got into me, Jim. I just don't want to go to Holland, and that shouldn't be a surprise to you because I told you so last year. Excuse me.' She moved round him with the hot tray.

He drew a deep breath and silently shook his head in a way that said he didn't understand. She wondered just what she would have to do to make him understand what seemed like a very simple to comprehend statement. Letting it pass, she quickly placed the tartlets onto the plates already dressed with a little salad and gave him two to carry through to the dining room.

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The dinner party had been a success and other than a parting remark from Keith to the effect that he hoped she would change her mind, nothing more was said about the Dutch trip. Surprisingly, none of them had asked what her prior engagement was. It rather underlined her opinion that as long as Jim was there, whether or not she was made very little difference. By the time their guests had gone, they had been tired and the subject remained dormant. Feeling that she had said her piece, she didn't bring it up again and neither did he. She had no doubt that as far as he was concerned she was just having a little puff, and that in the end she would go with him to Holland. Besides, it was too lovely a morning to be spoilt by discord and he seemed happy enough, whistling along to an old Mark Knopfler CD, *Local Hero*, a long-standing joint favourite, whilst polishing the glasses. Morning sun streamed across her pale green kitchen. It was her domain, the only room in the house where she had had one hundred percent say in its design and decor. She had flatly refused to have an Aga, however trendy and however much their friends raved about how wonderful they were; as far as she was concerned, hers was a modern house with a functioning, productive kitchen, open plan to a family room which had perfectly adequate central heating. As they had designed the house themselves, well, Keith had been the architect but they'd told him exactly what they wanted, she'd opted for a walk-in pantry rather than lots of wall cupboards, which left plenty of wall space for pictures and shelves for her cookery books and ever-growing collection of pottery jugs.

The phone rang while she was emptying the dishwasher. Jim picked it up.

'Hello, darling!' His delighted greeting told her that it was Fiona, their eldest daughter. He would hotly deny that he had a favourite amongst his children, but his tone when speaking to Fiona was quite different to that which greeted Suzy, their youngest, or Rob, their only son and middle child. Fiona, the career girl, spoke his language. He discarded the tea towel and strolled into his study with the phone attached to his ear, laughing and chatting about stocks and shares. About fifteen minutes later he wandered back into earshot through the sitting-room and into the kitchen, still talking and smiling. 'I'll pass you over to your mother. Nice to hear from you, darling. Love you. Lots of kisses.' Smiling proudly, he handed over the receiver and departed through the back door into the garden.

'Hi, Mum.'

'And hi to you, stranger.' It was weeks since she'd seen Fiona although they exchanged a call at least once a week. 'I'm fine. And you?' She stopped wiping down the dark green worktops to stand by the sink, looking out through the window and watching Jim stroll down to the pond, bucket of fish food swinging from his hand, apparently blind to the burgeoning progress of the herbaceous border as he went. She could never step into the garden without finding something exciting to stop and wonder at: the first snowdrop, the first daffodil, lupin, rose, or a weed that needed pulling, or a snail that needed relocating, or something self-sown to be identified.

'Brill. I've just been telling Dad, I've been promoted to Business Manager. I'll have my own portfolio of clients, some really big ones. Not bad, eh?'

Not bad indeed for a girl of twenty-six. It was all a far cry from her own days in the bank when the lads got all the available promotions and girls were left on the tills.

'Congratulations. Are you staying with your branch?'

'For now, yes, which is great. I like being in London.'

'Takes all sorts,' Linda laughed.

'Mu-um..?' Fiona's voice was hesitant. 'Are you sure you're all right? Dad seems to think you're out of sorts. He suspects you're having a mid-life crisis.'

She laughed to cover her irritation. 'A man's answer to everything when he has failed to understand his wife after over a quarter of a century of marriage!' A quarter century. It sounded such a long time. Jim had reached the pond and was scattering handfuls of the food across the top of the water, no doubt counting the koi carp as they emerged from beneath the lily leaves. Personally, she couldn't see the fascination for what to her amounted to big goldfish: they had no personality, not like dogs.

'Is everything all right?'

'Yes, darling. Everything's fine.'

'Are you really thinking of doing the C to C, or are you just winding him up?'

Linda opened her mouth, then shut it. The Coast to Coast walk had been only one of several options she'd thrown into the frame during Friday night's brief tiff, but because Jim had latched onto the most extreme in order to rally the support of his daughter, she decided to play along with it. 'Yes. I'm serious. Ever since Rob did it, I've been saying I'd like to do it.' She grinned and added, as a challenge, 'I don't suppose you'd like to do it with me, would you?'

'Er... no, actually, I've outgrown the pleasures of tramping around in the rain and besides, I've already got my holiday planned. I'm going on a vineyard tour of Italy in August.'

'That'll be nice.' She listened as her daughter rattled confidently through an itinerary that should ensure alcohol poisoning by the end of it.

'It's a pity Rob's not about,' Fiona reverted to the pre-Italy topic, 'he'd have gone with you. Where is he now? Have you heard from him?'

'Australia, last we heard, which was a week ago. He was grape-picking. He plans to go from there to New Zealand for a couple of months.'

'Doesn't sound like he's any nearer to getting himself a proper job,' Fiona echoed her father's oft-repeated opinion.

'No, darling, but he's gaining a wealth of experience. It's what he wants to do. He's supporting himself and not harming anybody so...'

'Just worrying the life out of you,' Fiona chipped in critically.

She chuckled. 'Well, I do worry, yes. I worry about all of you, for different reasons.'

'Why do you need to worry about me?'

'Because you're my daughter.' She didn't want to get into conversation about the daily threats that faced over-confident, pretty young blondes in big bad cities: the spectre of Suzy Lamplugh often walked the winding corridors of her mind on sleepless nights.

'I worry about you, too, Mum. That walk isn't a Sunday afternoon stroll, you know: it's nearly two hundred miles across the country's wildest terrain.'

'Sounds wonderful. If Rob survived it, and enjoyed it, I'm sure I will.' She hadn't the slightest intention of doing it, at least, not unless she could persuade Jim to join her and there was more chance of pigs flying than him doing that.

'He was still at uni, a fit young bloke of twenty. You're middle-aged.'

'Thank you for that, dear. I'll have you know that people in their seventies complete the walk, and probably older. I'm only fifty and fit. I can read a map and use a compass.'

'But you're not going to carry all your gear on your back and sleep in a tent, like Rob did, are you?'

'For heaven's sake, Fiona, don't you remember the holidays we had when you were small? We walked for miles with kids and packs on our backs.'

'Not tents and things...'

'There are such things as Hotels, Inns, B&Bs and hostels.' She assumed there were, anyway. Maybe tomorrow, when Jim was back at work, just out of curiosity, she'd go onto the internet and look into it. The idea of teasing him into believing she was serious was beginning to sound more and more appealing, as was the fantasy that she could persuade him to join her.

Fiona spluttered. 'I can't imagine you dossing down in a hostel dormitory with a load of schoolgirls!'

'And why not?'

'Well... you've become used to better things.'

'In my time I've done my fair share of roughing it. I camped with the Girl Guides and the church youth club. I actually enjoyed it.' And the truth be known, she looked back on those holidays with far more pleasure than some of the more recent ones in five-star hotels.

'What about Dad?'

'What about him?'

'Who'll look after him?'

'I don't believe I'm hearing this! Not from you, of all people! Miss Millennium Independent Career Girl is actually suggesting that a woman's place is in the home looking after her man? Or is equality okay for the under thirties, but Mums, well, they're different!'

'Keep your hair on. I didn't mean it like it sounded...'

'Look, darling, I'm a big girl, not yet in my dotage and quite capable of looking after myself, and Daddy is a big boy. He'll go off and have fun with his friends, and when he comes back he knows just where to find all he needs to keep body and soul together for a few days. I promise that before I leave, I'll put a load of stuff in the freezer and give him a crash course on how to use the microwave oven. Okay? Unless, of course, you'd like to come home to look after him?'

'That's not what I meant. It's just, well, you two always do things together. You're such a couple. It just seems so odd for you to go off on your own.'

'If Daddy wanted to join me, I'd love to do it with him, but it doesn't appeal to him...'

'He says he will do it, when he retires.'

'Darling, trust me, I know him better.' She knew him well enough to know that he didn't want to do it, ever, and that he believed if he delayed long enough she would give up the idea. She chuckled to keep the conversation light-hearted. 'He really is happier playing golf.'

'But...'

'Okay, darling, let's drop the subject. You can tell your father that you did your best.' She laughed but it rankled that he had discussed the issue with their daughter having deliberately avoided discussing it with her.

Fiona growled in defeat. 'Okay. So, have you seen Suzy lately?'

'Of course. I see her most weekdays. Why don't you call her? She'd love to hear from you.'

'I do, sometimes. It works both ways, you know,' she said, defensively. 'She doesn't often call me.'

'She tells me that she does, but always gets your answerphone and you don't call her back. Anyway, she and the children are fine. I'll probably see them tomorrow on my way home from work.'

'Good old Granny!' Fiona chuckled.

'Get lost!' Grandma she'd accept, but Granny sounded ancient!

'I love you too! Nice talking to you, Mum, even if you are going round the bend!'

'And nice talking to you, daughter, even if you are the most opinionated little wotsit.'

After affectionate farewells, Linda put the phone down and wondered how two girls from the same two parents, who had lived in the same houses and village, who had attended the same schools from nursery to grammar, could turn out so very different. Fiona had been one of those children who, if she fell from her pony, would get up, brush herself down and get straight back into the saddle to tackle an even higher jump. Suzy, on the other hand, was easily defeated. Whereas Fiona had sailed through school, passing exams with apparently little effort, Suzy had swotted and struggled and worried and still failed to get the grades for the university of her choice. Having no heart to fight on for another year to improve her grades, she'd dropped out and, for once going against her father's expressed wishes, had taken a job as general assistant in the local pub, cleaning, waiting and serving in the bar. There she met Phil, a monosyllabic, ringed and studded, motorbike-mad farm labourer. Within two years she was living with him and Daniel was on the way, and less than two years later Ruth had followed. Now out of the frame in the competition for her father's approval, Suzy seemed perfectly happy with her lot, but Fiona, nearly four years her senior, made no secret of her opinion that her sister was effectively sticking her fingers up at her

family because she didn't have what it took to have a 'proper' career. It would probably come as a surprise to Fiona to know that Suzy, genuinely, did not envy her sister her smart city flat, career, clubs, circle of girlfriends or the ever-changing men in her life. Whatever Fiona thought of her sister, Linda recognised that in Phil Suzy had found something which forthright Fiona might later in life find herself envying. She hoped, for Suzy's sake, that her dreams and ideals would survive the pressures of life better than Linda's had.