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Connie McCabe was an honest woman. At least, she'd always considered herself as such. It wasn't something she prided herself on: it was just her default position, as another person's might be to slide away from the truth when it didn't suit them. But she was never brutal – if asked her opinion of a friend's new dress, she wouldn't say, 'That yellow makes you look as if your liver's packed up,' when the friend was stuck in the outfit for the foreseeable. So the events of that summer shocked Connie to the core and made her question everything she thought she knew about herself.

On the 2 p.m. xxx, Connie texted her husband, Devan. They lived in a large village – almost a small town, or 'tillage', as the locals referred to it – south of the Mendips, on the Somerset Levels, and her train journey, starting from Paddington, would take close to three hours.

See you at the station x, Devan replied.

She sat back in the crowded carriage, the heating turned up way too high for the mild April day, and closed her eyes, letting out a luxurious sigh of relief. For the past ten days she'd been on call, responsible for thirty-nine people's welfare – one passenger had cried off sick at the last minute – on a rail journey through

the tulip fields of Holland. According to company guidelines, it was frowned upon to read or listen to anything – heaven forbid snooze – while accompanying her passengers across Europe. She should stay alert, poised to deal with any concerns her flock might have. So, despite loving every minute of her job as a tour manager, just sitting here, alone, with no responsibility to anyone but herself, was bliss.

Connie felt herself begin to unwind as the train travelled west, past Reading and Swindon, the countryside awash with bright blossoms and deliciously pale spring green. It had been a good tour. Only one really irritating couple who'd picked holes in everything, from the pillows to the narrow steam-train seats and rain on the day they'd toured Amsterdam. She'd been waiting for them to kick off about the colours of the spectacular tulip displays. There was always one.

Now would be the time, she thought sadly, when I'd ring Mum and fill her in about my trip. Her mother, Sheila, had died in January, in her sleep, at eighty-six, after barely a day's illness in her life. She'd been quietly independent to the last, living alone in her small South London flat with no fuss, miles from both of her daughters. But Connie would ring most days and they would chat away. Sheila was wise, someone who really listened. But she also loved a good rant, a good gossip, a good laugh. *I miss you so much, Mum,* Connie whispered silently, her eyes filling with tears, which she quickly blinked away in the crowded carriage. *And I really need your advice. I'm worried. I don't know what to do about Devan.*

Her train arrived fifteen minutes late. But there was no sign of her husband or the red Honda in the semi-circle of cars waiting on the station forecourt. She got out her mobile.

‘Hi,’ her husband said, sounding disoriented. ‘Where are you?’

‘At the station.’ She tried to keep the irritation out of her voice, but she was dying to get home and take off her ‘cruise wear’, as she called the outfits deemed suitable for her job, and have a long, hot soak in her own bath. She knew Devan had probably fallen asleep in front of some rugby match or other. It was all he seemed to do, these days, since his retirement last summer as the village GP – a post he’d held for the past thirty years.

There was a moment’s silence and she heard scuffling in the background. ‘God! Sorry – didn’t realize the time. On my way,’ Devan said, and clicked off.

‘Good trip?’ her husband asked, smiling briefly at her as she climbed into the car, but not removing his hand from the gear stick or leaning over to kiss her. His handsome face looked crumpled, his grey jumper had a large stain just below the crew neck and his chin sported a day’s growth, the stubble sprouting silvery, although it was only the very edges of his dark hair that showed signs of grey. But Connie wasn’t in the mood to comment or criticize.

‘Yes, great. Weather was a bit rubbish the day we were in Amsterdam, but otherwise it went pretty smoothly, apart from the usual PPs.’ Which stood for Perfect

Passengers and was their ironic acronym for any awkward customers on her tours. ‘The wife kicked off because there wasn’t a “pillow menu” at any of the hotels.’

Devan glanced at her, his thoughtful blue eyes, deep set beneath heavy brows – people likened him to the footballer George Best in his prime – coming suddenly to life. He had such a charming smile, which she’d instantly fallen in love with, that long-ago night in the festival medical tent. ‘Is that even a thing?’

Connie nodded. ‘These days, if you’re in four- or five-star luxury, yes.’

He gave a disbelieving snort. ‘Does it include starters and a main?’

‘Well, I’ve seen buckwheat pillows listed – filled with buckwheat hulls, apparently – and one with herbs and essential oils. So you’re not far off the mark.’

‘Preposterous.’ Devan chuckled.

They drove in silence for a while. ‘How have you been?’ Connie asked.

‘Oh, you know . . .’ Devan’s words were lost in the roar and rattle of a passing tractor.

‘Your back? Are the exercises helping at all?’

Her husband’s mouth clamped in a thin line of warning. He’d been plagued, on and off, by a degenerating disc in his lower back for the past couple of years, for which he’d been given a slew of exercises by the physio. But he never did them, as far as Connie could tell. ‘God, Connie, don’t start.’

His words were spoken softly, but she was taken aback by the veiled antagonism. She sympathized with

someone in constant pain, obviously, but it was frustrating, watching him do nothing to alleviate the problem – Devan, a doctor who'd endlessly ranted about patients not being prepared to help themselves.

It was on the tip of her tongue to retort, but she took a deep breath instead. 'Hope it stays fine for the Hutchisons tomorrow,' she said, changing the subject as the atmosphere in the car grew thick with the unsaid. 'I got Carole a kitsch pair of clogs in Amsterdam and they painted her name on the side.' Tim and Carole Hutchison owned an impressive Victorian villa at the top of the village, with spectacular views over the Somerset Levels. They always threw a spring party for Carole's birthday, and although Connie wouldn't call them close friends – in fact she thought Tim, a retired fund-manager, pompous in the extreme – an invitation to the yearly bash was much coveted and a matter of pride in the village.

Devan didn't reply at once. 'I suppose we have to go,' he said eventually, as they pulled onto the paved parking space at the side of their house and he turned off the engine. They sat in silence for a moment, a weak evening sun breaking through the clouds and bathing their still faces in light pouring through the windscreen.

Connie frowned as she turned to him. 'You love their parties. You always say it's the best champagne in the county.'

He gave a weary nod. 'Yeah, well . . .'

Connie was about to remonstrate, but she heard Riley, their beloved Welsh terrier, barking excitedly, and jumped out of the car. Biting her lip with disappointment at her

husband, she pushed open the front door, bending to enjoy his enthusiastic welcome, to bury her fingers in his soft black and caramel fur and watch the perfect arc of his tail wagging furiously at seeing her.

Every time she went away these days – even if only for a week – she hoped, in her absence, things might shift for Devan. Hoped he might begin to shake off the pall of lethargy that broke her heart. Hoped to see the light in his eyes again. Her trips were like a bubble. She would escape into another world, swept up in round-the-clock responsibility for the tour and its passengers, the extraordinary scenery, the diverse smells, the delicious local food – even the sun’s rays seeming to fall differently abroad. Her problems with Devan faded into the background for those few short days. But coming home, however much she looked forward to it, forced her to face up to reality again.

The house was as messy as Connie had anticipated – sofa cushions squashed to Devan’s shape, newspapers strewn, a dirty wine glass on the coffee table, some dried-up olive stones in a ramekin. She took a deep breath as she entered the cosy farmhouse kitchen at the back of the house, where they’d spent a lot of family time when Caitlin – named after one of Devan’s Irish grandmothers – was growing up. It wasn’t bad, she conceded, casting an eye over the worktops and range, the oak refectory table. But Devan had never got to grips with surface wiping: the cooker was spattered from the endless fry-ups in which he’d no doubt been indulging,

the worktop strewn with toast crumbs and greasy smears, tea and coffee stains ringing the area around the kettle, a pile of used teabags mouldering on a saucer.

She stopped herself seizing a cloth and getting down to it immediately, knowing she was more pernickety than some and not wanting to wade in the second she was through the door in such an obviously censorious fashion. She would unpack first, have the bath she'd been longing for. She didn't want to pick a fight on her first night back.

'Think I'll go up. Been a long day,' Connie said later, pulling herself off the sofa and yawning as she reached for her reading glasses on the side table. They'd spent the evening with a bowl of ready-meal shepherd's pie, frozen peas and ketchup in front of the next episode of a Belgian-police box set. Devan had held it over while she was away, although now she couldn't remember a single thing about who'd been bumped off or why – and was too tired to concentrate anyway.

Devan glanced up from his phone – which, these days, seemed to have become a physical extension of his hand. 'I'm sure it has,' he said absentmindedly, but made no move to join her. 'I might stay up for a bit.'

Connie felt a pang of disappointment. She just wanted to connect with him again, to be close. They had barely spoken all evening, except to catch up with trivial domestic news – such as the flush button coming loose in the downstairs loo and Rees, the gormless plumber's apprentice, coming to fix it. If she went to

bed now, she would be dead to the world by the time he crept in beside her. Then in the morning, he would still be asleep when she got up.

‘Please . . . come with me,’ she said quietly, and saw his face go still for a moment. Then he sighed and nodded.

‘Sure, OK,’ he said. But his reluctance was evident, and she was upset.

Does he worry I’m after sex or something? she wondered wryly, as she climbed the stairs to their bedroom, placing her glass of water and specs on the bedside table. But she’d stopped having expectations in that arena after a number of humiliatingly unsuccessful seductions on her part during the previous two years.

The last, months ago now, had been the worst – and such a sorry cliché. She had put on a slinky silk camisole in delicate lilac and matching knickers – saved at the back of her drawer from years ago and barely worn – then waited for him to finish in the bathroom, heart knocking as she sat on the bed, hair fluffed and loose. When Devan had seen her, he’d stopped short and stared, eyes wide, as if a woolly mammoth had landed on the duvet. From his twitchy, but resigned expression, he might have been anticipating an unwelcome appointment with the dentist.

He’d recovered sufficiently to force a smile and come over to sit beside her on the bed, picking up her hand and kissing it. But she’d seen the effort it took and she’d snatched it away, leaping up from the bed and shutting herself in the bathroom. She’d felt so utterly mortified – so unsexy, unattractive – that even the thought of it now made her cringe.

Although there had been many wonderful times in the past when they'd made love in this very bed, over the thirty-three years of their marriage. They'd always been good together, their attitude to sex one of relaxed mutual pleasure. No bells and whistles or swinging from the chandelier, neither of them trying to prove anything. Just a light-hearted lust for each other – which she sorely missed.

She realized with a jolt that it was over two years since they'd properly made love – if you didn't count that night last summer when Neil, Connie's best friend, and his husband, Brooks, had asked them over, inventing this lethal cocktail of something green and sweet and fizzy, then burned the chicken pie in the Aga. The only thing they'd eaten all evening was a handful of crisps and a piece of toast. Neither she nor Devan had known which way was up and they'd fallen into bed, heads spinning, and fumbled around in some half-hearted rendition of sex. Because although her husband had only just retired, things had been difficult between them for much longer than that: the strain Devan had been under at the surgery had taken a heavy toll.

He lay beside her now, his book – the usual weighty siege-and-massacre tome – propped on his chest. Connie tried to read, but the sentences swam before her eyes and she knew she was wasting her time. She put down the reader and her glasses and switched off the light, turning on her pillow to face her husband. Despite implying earlier that he wasn't tired, his book was swaying back and forth in his hands, his eyelids fluttering. A

small fly was spinning in the beam of the desk lamp he read by, and she watched it for a while, then gently removed his book from his hands, turning down the page corner and closing it.

Devan jerked. 'Hey, I was reading.'

'You were almost asleep.'

He sighed and didn't object, removing his second pillow and slinging it to the floor, then turning off his own light. Their bedroom faced the main street of the village, and a car passed, headlights raking the ceiling in the semi-darkness. Connie placed her palm on his chest and stroked his warm skin. She just wanted some sign of affection, but he made no move to offer any. All he did was clamp her hand to his chest to still her stroking. She could feel the tension flowing off him, like steam from a kettle.

'A cuddle would be nice,' she said.

After a moment's hesitation, Devan lifted his arm so she could lie against him, her head on his shoulder. She felt his hand pull her in, bringing her closer, and she wanted to cry.

'Love you,' she said softly.

'Love you too, Con,' he replied automatically.

She sensed his heart wasn't fully behind his words. Despite that, Connie luxuriated in his embrace. He smelt musty, but she didn't mind. His body was so comforting, so familiar, even in the state he was in, that she didn't want to let him go. When she woke around three in the morning to pee, she remembered that she'd gone to sleep in his arms, something she hadn't done for a very long time.

‘Oh, come on, Devan.’ Tim Hutchison snorted his loud, confident laugh, his jowls wobbling above his pink Ralph Lauren polo shirt, champagne flute waving in Devan’s face. ‘Admit it! You’re a true-blue Conservative at heart. All this whiny-liberal bollocks is just a throwback from your student days.’

Connie watched her husband’s mouth twitch. The discussion about immigration, despite Tim’s joshing, had been bordering on rancorous, like most current debate in the country. But the difference today was that Devan had got stuck in. As the village doctor, he’d made it his business to stay neutral – except in private – when it came to politics. ‘I don’t need to know what my patients think about the world,’ he always told Connie. ‘If I did, I might not want to treat them.’ But today he’d been truculent, almost aggressive, when Tim blamed the current crisis in the NHS – which Devan believed in passionately and knew was wobbling for a whole variety of reasons – on migrants.

Connie nudged him surreptitiously, but all she got in return was a glare. She knew he’d had a lot to drink, the delicious champagne flowing from a seemingly bottomless well. But she didn’t want him falling out with Tim, who nonetheless possessed the precision of a

brain surgeon in his ability to stick the needle in where it would have the most effect.

‘Well, if you’re a good example of conservatism, I’ll take whiny liberal any day of the week,’ Devan said.

It was spoken in the same jokey tone, but Tim’s eyebrows rose just a fraction and he turned away.

‘That was rude,’ Connie hissed. ‘He’s our host.’ They were standing by the French windows, from which there was usually a spectacular view across the Somerset Levels, but this afternoon she could barely see past the end of the garden because of low cloud, brought on by a sudden spring squall raging outside.

Devan just shrugged. ‘He’s an arse, is what he is,’ he said. ‘We shouldn’t even be here.’ He bent awkwardly to set his empty glass down against the wall on the strip of parquet floor not hidden by the vintage Turkish rug – where, no doubt, it would be knocked over and broken. She immediately picked it up, then felt his hand in the small of her back, beginning to guide her away.

The large sitting room was full, people standing around in groups and pairs, the hot air reverberating with laughter and chatter, heavy male voices and lighter female ones vying for dominance. A couple of girls from the village were weaving in and out, refilling the glasses and offering trays of unidentifiable one-bite canapés, while Carole bustled and twittered nervously around her guests.

‘We can’t go yet,’ Connie said, resisting the pressure on her back. ‘They haven’t cut the cake.’

Devan let out a pained sigh. ‘Honestly, Connie, I

can't deal with this right now. I feel as if I'm going to explode.'

She looked up into his face. He was blinking rapidly, his mouth twisting, his fists now thrust deep into his trouser pockets. She was hesitating, not knowing what to do, when a man approached them, holding out his hand to Devan, a big grin on his face. He was in his mid-thirties, she thought, blond and broad and blandly tidy in beige chinos. She heard Devan groan quietly.

'All I need,' he muttered.

'The legendary Dr Mac!' the man said, pumping Devan's hand up and down. 'Such a pleasure to see you again.'

Connie had no idea who he was.

'Will Beauregard,' he said, turning to her with his hand held out and the same cheerful grin, as he waited for Devan to respond.

Devan, Connie could see, was settling his features in a gargantuan effort to be nice. 'William,' he said, producing from the depths of his soul his very best smile – the one that had stunned people into submission so often in the past but now looked frayed at the edges. 'A pleasure indeed.'

So this is one of the new GPs, she thought. The two doctors had taken over the practice since Devan's retirement. His back problem had been cited as the reason for him going, but really it was because he couldn't cope any more with the pressure of a single-GP practice in this day and age. He'd had two permanent locums who worked part-time alongside him and a

loyal support team, but it was still too much. For years Connie had witnessed the strain he'd been under – her husband put his work before anything else. She'd thought at the time that he'd welcome being free of such a massive responsibility when he was still young enough, at sixty-one, to do all the things he'd never had time for. But so far it hadn't worked out that way.

After a few short weeks, when he was on a 'school's-out' high, Devan had begun to sink. As the days went by he did less and less, his initial enthusiasm for retirement turning into a listless rant about petty stuff: someone stopping across their parking space for ten minutes, the noise of a hedge trimmer, the next-door neighbour's climber invading the trellis on their side of the wall. This wasn't the Devan Connie knew. These petty fixations were ageing him. The vital, charming doctor had turned into an old man overnight. He'd always been so enthusiastic, so full of energy, it never entered her head that he wouldn't embrace retirement with the same verve – maybe, after a break, take on some consultancies or volunteer, write articles and contribute to journals and websites, as many of his colleagues did when they left the health service. Devan had mentioned these options over the years, although never in direct relation to himself.

'How's it going? You know you can always be in touch if you or Rob need help with anything. It can be a little overwhelming at first,' he was saying to Will, assuming the tone of elder statesman.

Will smiled his thanks. 'Our only problem is the

patients all want to be seen by the brilliant Dr Mac. We both feel like the poor relations at the moment.’

Devan gave a self-deprecating laugh, although Connie noted the gratified flush on his cheeks. ‘They complained enough when they had me,’ he joked.

Ting, ting, ting . . . The spoon tapping insistently against Tim’s glass interrupted further conversation and Connie turned to see that the cake had been brought through and placed on a round, polished walnut table in the centre of the room. It was a towering three-tier confection of chocolate icing, raspberries and white chocolate flakes, two sparkler candles in the numbers six and four adorning the top tier.

Tim, his arm round the shoulders of his timid wife – seeming, to Connie, as if he were crushing the very life out of her – began to expound on her virtues, as he did every year, and Connie switched off. She laughed when everyone else did, but surreptitiously she was eyeing the new doctor standing at her side. It was strange, after thirty years, to imagine someone else in the role that Devan had inhabited so authoritatively for so long. He was, as Beauregard suggested, a legend in the area, his diagnostic nous, dedication and impeccable bedside manner vastly appreciated by the sick and dying. *Where has that man gone?* she wondered sadly.

Connie and Devan walked the mile home across the field and down the steep lane to their house in silence. It was chilly and grey. Although the squall had passed, the wind was still strong across the Levels.

‘William bloody Beauregard,’ Devan muttered sourly, as they tramped on. ‘Sounds like something out of the American Civil War. Wasn’t there a General Beauregard who got killed for doing something brave and foolish?’

Connie laughed. ‘He seems OK. The solid, cheerful sort.’

‘He won’t be cheerful for long,’ Devan harrumphed.

She grabbed his arm, gave him a squeeze. ‘Stop it, will you? You’ve had a really good career out of that surgery.’ Her husband was silent. ‘And there’ll be two of them,’ she added.

Still no response. Then Devan said, ‘I think he’s a bit of a smug twat, if I’m honest.’

Connie snatched away her hand. She was worn out from trying to sympathize with him. ‘Fine,’ she said. ‘Be a miserable old bastard. Will was only being friendly. You could tell he really respected you and your reputation.’

Later that night she lay in bed alone. She’d had a long talk with her daughter as soon as Devan declared he was going to the pub after supper. The Skittle House – ‘Skittles’ to the locals – was on the corner of the main street, the publican a Yorkshireman called Stacy, friend to them both.

‘Are you worried?’ Caitlin had asked, after Connie had filled her in about her father’s mood. ‘He sounded very grumpy when I called him last week. Said he was really missing you.’

Connie sighed. ‘So he keeps telling me. But when

I'm here, he does nothing but avoid me. All he seems to want to do is stare at his phone, watch sport and drink too much. He's at the pub right now, despite boozing all day at the Hutchisons?'

'And he won't consider antidepressants?'

'Well, no . . . because he's not depressed, is he? According to his own expert medical opinion, your dad's merely "adjusting" to a big life change.'

'Well, I suppose he might have a point. It's not even a year since he stopped working.'

Connie had sighed, aware that Devan's distress dated much further back than that. 'I know, but . . .'

'Poor Mum. Must be hell, having him so grouchy all the time.' Caitlin paused. 'I hope he's not being mean to you.'

'God, no. Your dad would never be mean,' Connie said firmly, anxious to dispel her daughter's concern. Although she'd almost rather he *was* mean – that he'd say something she could really get her teeth into and they could have a good old-fashioned row. They'd always been good at rowing, and even better at making up. Instead, the constant drip, drip of dyspeptic sniping and lack of motivation dragged her down so much that she was beginning to dread being in his company for any length of time.

Mother and daughter had talked on for a while, mainly about Bash, Connie's three-year-old grandson – who'd apparently sprayed the sitting room with quantities of suntan lotion while his mum was making his tea, leaving pockets of gunk in the loop pile of the

sisal carpet, which Caitlin was finding impossible to get out.

Connie read after the call, finally drifting off around eleven. Devan was still not home, but Stacy sometimes had a lock-in for his mates on a Sunday night. She wasn't worried.

The sound of her mobile woke her from a very deep sleep. Devan's number came up on the screen, but it wasn't her husband who spoke. 'Connie, it's Stacy here. Slight problem. 'Fraid your old man's kaylied, can't seem to stand up on his own. Thought I'd bring him home, but he doesn't have his keys on him . . . I worried you wouldn't hear the bell.'

Connie sat up. 'God, Stacy, I'm so sorry. I'll come and get him.'

'It's no bother. If you'd just open the door.'

She thanked him and tumbled out of bed, pulling her dressing gown over her pyjamas as she hurried downstairs. She saw her husband's keys immediately, sitting on the ledge by the front door.

The following morning Devan staggered down to the kitchen around ten o'clock. Connie and Stacy had tried to give him water, then coffee, the night before, but their attempts had just met with flailing arms and angry grunts. So they'd dragged him upstairs and dropped his dead weight onto the spare bed – in what used to be Caitlin's room. Connie, mortified at her husband's behaviour, had thanked the publican profusely, then ripped off Devan's trainers and wrapped him in the

section of duvet not already squashed under his prone, fully clothed body. She'd spent a sleepless night worrying that he might vomit, choke and die. But she was too angry to sleep in the same room as his chain-saw snoring and make sure he didn't. By morning she was not in the greatest of moods.

'Hi.' Devan slumped into a kitchen chair and eyed her cautiously as she began to unload the dishwasher on the far side of the room. When she saw him sitting there, so pathetic, so wasted, she began to slam the plates and cups onto the shelves, hurl the cutlery into the drawer, clank the pans and bang the cupboard doors shut. The cacophony made her ears sing, but she didn't care.

Her husband didn't flinch, however, and when she eventually shut the last cupboard door and leaned on the other side of the kitchen table, slightly out of breath and glaring at him, he gave her a sad smile.

'Made your point.' He straightened up, still in his clothes from the day before. 'Listen, I'm really sorry about last night. I don't know what got into me. I think it was seeing that shiny new doctor, bursting with vim and vigour. It just reminded me of myself, all those years ago . . . ?'

Connie gazed at him. 'Retirement doesn't have to be grim, you know,' she said gently. Despite her irritation, she did feel sorry for him. She understood how hard it could be for anyone, going full tilt for so many years, then having nothing to get out of bed for. But that was months ago now and, if anything, he seemed even

more unhappy. The problem was, he'd never made an actual plan about what he would do when he stopped working. Suggestions had been bandied about, but neither of them had given it proper, serious thought. He'd been too stressed at the time, and since then, apparently too low.

He stared at her for a second, a calculating edge appearing in those deep blue eyes. 'Really? Maybe you should try it sometime,' he said, raising his eyebrows in question, the faint smile that accompanied it barely reaching his eyes.

Connie shook her head. This subject had been slowly building a head of steam over the past year. Now hardly a week passed when Devan didn't try his luck. 'I've told you a million times . . .' she sat down so she could meet his eye ' . . . *I'm not ready*. It's different for you. You got to the stage where you hated your work. I still love mine.'

Devan's expression hardened as she watched him rasp his fingers roughly across the day-old stubble on his chin. 'I *didn't* hate my work,' he said dully. 'I always hoped I'd keep going till I was at least seventy. It just became impossible . . . too many patients, not enough time or money.' He gave a dispirited sigh. 'I keep thinking I've made a terrible mistake, giving it all up. But then I remember the reality.'

She'd heard the same thing so often she felt she was running out of ways to respond helpfully. He was, she was certain, using her retirement as a peg upon which to pin his unhappiness. 'But there are loads of things you could do now,' she said encouragingly. 'You were

going to ring Lillian, weren't you, find out about that medical website she works for? Or you could talk to your mates at the Royal College of GPs – they're bound to have some ideas. With your expertise . . .'

Devan gave a dismissive shrug. 'There was one thing that cheered me up, Connie, when things were getting on top of me at the surgery and I knew I'd have to quit,' he said, completely ignoring her suggestions. 'It was the thought you and I would finally have time, after all these manic years of work, to do stuff together – hang out with the family, go places, see things, meet people.' He levelled his gaze at her, clearly on a mission to make her understand. 'We've always wanted to do South America, the Great Wall . . . You haven't even been to Australia yet. And little Bash, you hardly see him because you're always away. He won't be young for ever, you know.'

Connie frowned, her face set. She also looked forward to doing some of the travelling Devan was suggesting. But her summer tours didn't preclude that. She was only away – sporadically – from April to October, which left five months free. What upset her now was the below-the-belt accusation about their grandson. She was the first to admit she didn't see enough of him when she was working, but she tried really hard to make up for it during the rest of the year.

'You're not being fair, Devan. I never said I'd retire when you did.' Stupidly, she'd come to realize, she hadn't considered it might be a problem. When Devan didn't immediately agree with her, she went on more gently, 'Did I?'

He gave her a sulky look. ‘Maybe not as such. But I assumed, once I did, that you would too.’

‘We never talked about it, though, did we?’ Connie kept her tone reasonable, but his voice rose.

‘So? You’re going to keep on doing this silly job for the next ten years, just to spite me?’

‘“Silly”?’ She was hurt. He sounded like Lynne, her elder sister. Lynne was the one who’d been to college, eventually becoming head of admissions at Aberystwyth University, unlike Connie, who’d dropped out of school at seventeen. She always seemed to put patronizing quote marks round the word ‘job’, when talking about Connie’s trips.

Not that Connie needed validation for what she did. It was her dream job, always had been. She’d previously worked – not as happily – for a self-styled lifestyle guru with an emporium in Bridgwater. Fiona Raven was a chef, designer and broadcaster, who wrote cookery and party books, and produced her own range of gourmet foods, such as jars of cooking sauces, fruit compôtes and nut butters. Connie was her Girl – then Woman – Friday, a difficult job she knew she did well, but for which she got scant credit from Fiona. So as soon as Caitlin had left home – twelve years ago now – Connie had applied for a manager’s job with a railway-tours company and never looked back. Having found, so much later in life, the job she loved, she had no desire to give it all up just yet.

Now Devan reached out for her across the table. ‘I didn’t mean silly, you know I didn’t. I’m sorry.’ He

looked so weary, suddenly, that she thought he might fall asleep where he sat. ‘I think your job is great, and I know you love it. But what about us, Connie? I’m sure it hasn’t escaped your notice that we’re not getting any younger.’

‘Oh, please.’ She pulled her hand from his and stood up. *How did the conversation twist away from yesterday’s horrendous binge, so that now it appears to be all my fault?*

Shaking her head in frustration, she moved round the table, wrapped her arms around her husband’s shoulders, kissed his bent head and tried another tack. ‘I’m worried about you, Devan,’ she said softly. ‘This drinking thing, it isn’t you.’

For a moment he let her comfort him. But then he nudged her arms off and straightened, heaving himself to his feet. He looked wrecked, his tone bleak. ‘I’ve said I’m sorry.’

Connie took in a big breath to give it a final go. ‘You don’t think you should at least talk to one of the new doctors?’

The stare he gave her was withering. ‘About what?’

She didn’t dare mention depression again, as she had so many times. But this time she didn’t need to.

‘I’m sick to death of you and Caty implying I’m depressed,’ he said wearily. ‘Depression is an illness, Connie, like lung cancer or diabetes. Its symptoms are well categorized.’ He raised his hand and began ticking off on his fingers. ‘I don’t feel hopeless about the future. I’m not tearful. I’m not anxious. I still take real pleasure in lots of things – like a good glass of wine or

a rugby match.’ He gave her a tight smile. ‘I’m not depressed.’

She didn’t speak, noting there was no mention of herself in his current list of pleasures.

‘Maybe I’m not on top form at the moment,’ he went on, ‘but that’s mostly to do with my bloody back. And if you seriously think I’m going to share my innermost thoughts with either of those smug twelve-year-olds, then you’ve got another think coming.’

His look challenged her to disagree. But she still said nothing. What was the point?

‘I’m going to take a shower,’ he said, turning away.

Connie heard him slowly climb the stairs, then a minute later the sound of the shower pump from the bathroom. She sat down again, exhausted. She had no idea how best to help him. He’d always been wilful – it was what had made him a good doctor. He would fight to the bitter end to secure the care he thought a patient needed. But when it came to himself, he was blind as to how his actions were affecting himself and all those around him.

Tears pricked behind her eyes as she thought back to his repeated pleas that she should retire, or scale back her tours. She didn’t feel her age in the same way Devan clearly did. Her shoulder-length auburn hair had help from Janine at the village hairdresser, these days, and her grey eyes required drops because they were dry. She needed reading glasses, but she’d recently ordered varifocal contact lenses, *Which I must pick up before I go away again*, she reminded herself. But she was

still slim – despite the irritating pad of post-menopausal stomach fat that seemed resistant to all her efforts – and her fair, freckle-prone skin still smooth because it never went in the sun without Factor 50 and a hat. But it wasn't really about looks. Connie didn't feel like a woman in her sixties on any level. She was fit and energetic still, and she knew she was good at her job. Her tours provided so much pleasure: to give them up now might crush her.

If Devan keeps going on at me like this, she thought, it's not going to end well. She didn't examine what she meant by this, not then, but she felt her stubbornness limbering up, like a substitute on the touchline waiting to run onto the pitch. Throughout her childhood, as her mother had often reminded her, Connie's stubborn nature had been a thorn in her side.

The family were coming for Easter. Connie had been so looking forward to it – they rarely had time to make the trek to Somerset. Ash’s punishing schedule as a television producer and the demands of his extensive family in Manchester usually resulted in Caitlin coming with just Bashir. But she had been worried about how Devan would cope with having a small child in the house for two days, even though he adored his grandson.

She remembered the day they’d met Bash for the first time. It was the morning after the birth, the hospital room boiling hot, Caitlin flushed and puffy, dazed as she carefully handed Devan the baby. Connie would never forget the absolute absorption on her husband’s face, the intense love in his eyes as he tenderly cradled his grandson for the first time, the little bundle so small and frail in his man-sized arms. She had been overwhelmed, realizing that the huge love she felt for Devan, and he for her, had now spawned two further generations of love. Thinking of that moment now, she told herself nothing had really changed. But the unquestioned closeness, the feeling of being part of a loving team, no longer seemed so evident.

The days since the drunken binge had been quiet at home. Connie had not thought at the time that he’d

heard what she said, but he did seem to be making more effort, pointedly doing things about the house – like sanding the scarred kitchen table, a job he’d been talking about for months. He couldn’t keep it up for long, though, and she would come home from shopping or coffee with a friend to find him slumped in front of some match or other, one hand clutching his phone, the other cradling a glass of red wine – often fast asleep. He was utterly resistant to going out, even for a walk, and sent Connie on her own to supper with friends. ‘Tell them it’s my back,’ he’d say. And when she’d raise her eyebrows at him, he merely snapped, ‘It’s true.’

But the prospect of seeing his daughter and grandson seemed to spark him up, and Saturday morning saw a version of the old Devan, spruced up and standing straight, even coming with her to the supermarket and offering to make his famous sausage pasta for supper. Connie held her breath, hoping this resurgence would last at least till Sunday night.

As Devan fussed over which brand of penne was best, she leaned on the trolley in the supermarket aisle and remembered with a pang the first time he’d cooked her sausage pasta, about twenty years ago now. She had always been the family cook, but that January weekend she’d slipped on black ice on the pavement outside the house when she’d taken their previous dog, a rescue greyhound called Corky, for a walk just before it got dark.

Devan had examined the painful area, gently

manipulating her foot, then held a packet of frozen peas to her ankle and rubbed in pain-relief gel. He'd settled her on the sofa, her foot elevated on a cushion, then handed her a cup of tea. Caitlin, about twelve at the time, was having a sleepover with a friend, so they had the house to themselves. Devan could not have been more solicitous.

He'd stroked her head as she lay there. 'I'm doing supper. Going to surprise you.'

She'd laughed, looking sceptical. 'Beans on toast?'

He'd tapped his nose with his finger. 'Trust me, I'm a doctor.'

Over the next hour or so, Connie had been aware of waves of intense and focused industry emanating from the kitchen. Occasionally, as she dozed or read her book, Devan would pop his head round the sitting-room door, cheeks flushed with his exertions. 'Where's the sieve?' or 'Have you seen that small knife with the black handle?'

Eventually he summoned her to the table, almost carrying her into the kitchen, where candles lined the centre of the carefully laid table. The smell was mouth-watering. She noticed her *River Café* cookbook open on the side – which she'd read, but never cooked from, the ingredients mostly high-end Italian and not available locally. *He never does things by halves*, she'd thought, amused at the rooky cook's ambition.

Devan had uncorked a bottle of wine, and her tummy rumbled in anticipation at the dish of steaming penne and bowl of tossed green salad he set before her.

‘Hope it’s OK,’ he said anxiously, as she prepared to take the first bite. ‘I couldn’t get proper Italian spicy sausages, so these are just normal ones and I added more chilli.’ He watched her closely, seeming to hold his breath as she lifted her fork to her mouth.

The pasta was gorgeous, rich and robust but . . . She gasped. Her mouth was suddenly on fire, her eyes spouting water, her head feeling as if it were about to explode. She spluttered and grabbed for her glass, gulping the wine as if it were water. But it did no good, only made her choke.

She could see Devan’s stare – clearly offended – through the blur of her tears.

‘Hot . . . hot . . .’ She tried to speak, fanning her open mouth. And as she saw him lifting his own fork to his lips, she held out her hand. ‘Don’t.’

But Devan kept going, thrusting in a huge mouthful of pasta, his scornful expression implying she was being pathetic. She watched as he chewed for a moment. Then his face, too, contorted and he dropped his fork with a clatter. She could almost see steam coming out of his ears.

A second later they were laughing – huge gasps of mirth that had them clutching their napkins to their burning mouths, tears of laughter and pain running down their bright red, sweating faces.

‘Didn’t you check it?’ she managed to ask, when she could finally get her breath.

Devan wiped his eyes, his face crumpling with laughter again. ‘I thought it tasted a bit insipid, so I

threw in three of those dried chillies from that old plastic bag in the herb drawer.’

‘Oh, my God, you’re kidding! Those are the ones I got from that roadside stall in Turkey last year, remember? They’re absolutely lethal.’

Once they’d calmed down and their mouths were smarting but no longer on fire, Devan suggested, ‘Beans on toast?’ which set them off again.

Despite the chilli assault and her sore ankle, they’d ended up making love that night. She remembered it because, without their daughter in the next room, she had relaxed and allowed herself to cry out, uninhibited, as he eventually, after a delicious hour or so, brought her to orgasm. He was a good lover. *Was*.

She felt a tingling wave of longing pass through her body now, at the memory. But Devan was asking her something about bay leaves and she forced herself back to the present.

Bash was a beautiful child, and not just because his doting grandmother said so. Ash, his Indian father, had given him huge dark eyes, luscious lashes straight as a die, and a head of shiny dark hair. His mother had given him her wide, full mouth and cheeky grin, his grandfather the dimple in his chin. He was sturdy and even-tempered, liking to potter around getting on with things on his own. But if you turned your back, his telescopic arms would grab anything you assumed was out of reach, and it would be gone, hoarded in some secret place, perhaps never to see the light of day again.

This had been the fate of Caitlin's passport on a recent trip to France, resulting in a tedious and very expensive visit to the British Embassy, and Ash's mobile, lost for two days inside a Playmobile recycling truck they'd given Bash for his second birthday.

They had just finished a roast chicken lunch – with Connie's famously crunchy roast potatoes – on Easter Sunday and were lounging around the sitting room. Bash was playing with a pile of ivory mahjong tiles from Connie's parents' time in Singapore after the war, as the adults discussed the timing of Caitlin and Ash's journey back to Shoreditch.

'I'll give him supper and get him into his jammies before we go,' Caitlin said, 'so we can just transfer him when we get home.' She gave a wry laugh. 'It sometimes works.' She was sitting next to her father, and now she nudged him in the ribs. 'Stroll before we go, Dad?'

Connie saw Devan hesitate. He'd looked tired today and a bit twitchy, she thought, at being dragged from his solitary routines by the unaccustomed activity in the house. But the weekend had been a success. She was pleased that he'd made an effort for them all.

'You go,' he said to Caitlin. 'My back . . .'

'Poor Dad.' She stroked his arm. 'What are you doing about that?'

'Oh, you know, stretches and stuff . . . I've got a sheet of exercises as long as your arm from the physio.'

Caitlin cast Connie a glance, with a questioning arched eyebrow. 'And are you doing them?'