

Chapter One

Wiltshire, England, August 2016

Summertime had England in its grip. The heatwave baking the Continent had finally hit British shores and the nation was revelling in its signature jubilant mood that was always unzipped any time the mercury nudged the thirties—deck-chairs dotted the parks, freckles multiplied, children played in fountains and residential streets reverberated to the slap of flip-flops on bare feet.

Not that Flora Sykes could see or hear any of this. Her parents' back garden—eight acres in the Wiltshire countryside—was bordered by high beech hedges and carpeted in camomile lawns, and she had been blissfully facedown and unconscious on the lounger by the pool since arriving, a cool three hours after she'd stepped off the plane. Her big brother Freddie was still nowhere to be seen, sleeping like a student; her father was on the golf course; and her mother, swatting away Flora's half-hearted, exhausted offers to help, was efficiently plunging langoustines into boiling water, apparently unmoved by the creatures' Nemo-like attempts to escape by wriggling the plastic bags they were held in across the counters.

Flora had intended to read. One of her New Year's

resolutions involving working less and playing more had been to read everything on last year's Man Booker longlist, but by March that had been amended to reading the shortlist and now she would just be grateful to get through this first book that she'd bought in January and was still only a third of the way through. The problem was adrenaline. Her life was ruled by it—long, intense, work-around-the-clock bursts, followed by crashes into oblivion—and it left precious little time or energy for pastimes like reading.

This week had been a case in point. She had woken up in Palm Beach on Monday, Chicago on Wednesday, and had squeezed in a meeting and drinks party in Manhattan yesterday, before darting to JFK in her cocktail dress for the red-eye to Heathrow.

"Cup of tea, darling?" Her mother's voice, distant, sounded in her ear. She heard the chink of china on limestone. "And you need to put some more lotion on. Your shoulders are beginning to go pink."

A warm hand touched her skin, testing across her shoulders for proof. Flora raised her head, a cloud of butter-blond hair falling over her face. "Huh?" she groaned.

"Oh, darling, I worry about you. All this jet lag plays havoc with your system."

Flora flipped her hair back and tried to push up into a sitting position. Her mother was swinging her legs onto the lounge next to her, a copy of *The Lady* on her lap and a matching cup of tea in her hands. Her straw hat threw shade over a face that was still beautiful, even in her late fifties.

Flora fiddled with the straps of her Liberty-print cotton bikini—not great for swimming in but she had no intention of getting wet; well, assuming Freddie didn't chuck her in—and reached for the tea. The steam pinked her already

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sleep-flushed face as she drowsily watched the electric-blue dragonflies skimming the water's surface, swallows swooping in the clear skies above.

"You work too hard. It's not good for you."

"I know but I can't step back at the moment. I need to keep bringing in new clients—it's what Angus hired me for. I can relax a bit come Christmas."

"*Christmas?* Darling, you'll be long dead by then. It's only August. Frankly, I'm worried you won't see out the day."

"Well, of course you are, you're always worried. You'd worry about not having anything to worry about," Flora smiled. "When's Daddy getting back?"

Her mother glanced across, eyebrows hitched and a skeptical expression in her blue eyes. "I said lunch was twelve-thirty—so one."

"And when *is* lunch?"

"Two."

Flora chuckled. Her father's tardiness was legendary. He had been late to his own wedding (burst tire on the Aston), the hospital when Freddie was born (traffic in Mayfair), the hospital when she was born (the dog got lost in Hyde Park and the ambulance couldn't wait) and his brother's funeral (the high street closed for the farmers' market in Marlborough). The only things he had never, ever been late for—not once in forty years—were his auctions. He had been chief auctioneer at Christie's throughout the late eighties until fairly recently when he'd retired; the auctions were known as lively, rambunctious affairs more akin to shooting parties and he had been feted for his witty commentaries which whipped up both mood and appetite and meant that, more often than not, he brought the hammer down on record prices.

But lunch, they all knew, could wait. No doubt he would still be hacking divots into the sixteenth green at twelve-thirty, in spite of his very best intentions to obey his adored wife.

"Freddie's sleeping late," Flora observed, catching sight of the time as she sipped her tea. It was twelve-fifteen already, although her body was telling her it was dawn.

". . . Yes. He is."

Flora tipped her head back against the teak and looked across at her mother. "What?"

"Nothing."

"Mummy, I know that tone. What is it?"

Her mother glanced over but Flora could tell she didn't really see her. "He's very thin."

"He's always thin."

"Well, he's lost a lot of weight then. I don't think he's eating properly."

"I can almost guarantee it," Flora said with a groan, extending a leg to examine her pedicure. Three weeks in and it was holding up well. "This is the man who uses the possibility of scurvy as justification for buying multipacks of Frazzles, remember."

But her mother didn't laugh as she looked over the stretch of springy lawns. "I think something's wrong."

Flora chortled. "You *always* think something's wrong." If her father was perpetually late, her mother was perpetually worried. Then she caught sight of her mother's expression. "Mummy, the only thing that's wrong is he's missing Aggie, I bet. He's finally realized what a whopping great mistake he made finishing with her, that's all." She dropped her foot back down and, closing her eyes, enjoyed the feeling of the

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sun beating down on her skin. "Aggie's the best thing that ever happened to him."

"Apparently she's already going out with someone new."

Flora opened one eye. "Who told you that?"

"I do have my own contacts you know, darling. Coffee mornings weren't invented by your generation." A pained expression flitted over her mother's face. "Silly boy."

Flora shifted position onto her side, tucking her knees in tight. "Listen, she might make him sit up and beg for a bit, but there's no question she'll take him back."

Her mother's lips pressed together as they always did when she was concerned. Flora recognized it from the day of her Maths Common Entrance exam, the day her father took his helicopter-licence test, the day Freddie announced he was running the Marathon des Sables . . . "I hope you're right."

They fell quiet, only the sound of pages being turned interrupting the symphony of bees working in the hydrangea bushes, blackbirds singing from the oak tree and Bolly, their labrador's, tail thumping sporadically on the tiles whenever Flora dropped her hand down to stroke his coat as he lay in the shade beneath her lounger.

Her mother closed the magazine and turned to face her, trying to seem brighter. "So, tell me *your* news—and I don't mean work. Are you seeing anyone at the moment?"

Flora cast a sideways glance at her mother without moving her head. She suppressed a sigh. "No. No time."

Her mother too suppressed a sigh. "Darling, you have to make time. How can you ever expect to meet someone if you spend your life in vaults and warehouses and galleries and on planes?"

"I meet plenty of people, Mummy. Just none who are . . ." She searched for the right word.

"Special?"

"I was going to say 'different,' but yes, same thing I guess."

"Different from what?"

Flora shrugged, even though she knew perfectly well. She met hundreds of men in her line of work—dealers, gallery owners, collectors, art historians, specialist repdryers, not to mention clients though of course she'd never consider crossing the line and dating one of them—but they invariably boiled down to two types. Men like her boss, Angus: bespoke-suited, ex-public school educated, elitist and cliquey. Or her father: erudite, eccentric, larger than life but hopeless with anything practical, absent and vague on the mundanities of daily life. She wanted someone with a bit of "edge."

"It's just you're such a beautiful girl. I can't understand why you haven't been snapped up already."

"I'm not a pot of yogurt!" Flora laughed. "I don't have a best-by date."

"Now that's naive, darling. Of course you do. All women do."

Flora allowed the sigh to escape her this time. She wished her mother would let this subject drop. "Look, Mum—I'm perfectly happy with my life the way it is. It'll happen when it happens. You can't go looking for it."

They fell into a silent truce, both of them watching a couple of blackbirds hopping on the lawn and pecking for worms. Flora knew she didn't need to hold Bolly back as she would once have done—he was too arthritic to care these days, preferring to snooze in the shade.

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"So is the slaughter in the kitchen concluded?" Flora asked, changing the subject.

"Perfectly boiled and pink and warm," her mother said with satisfaction. She was as elegant a cook as she was a dresser. "And I've done your brother's favorite cheesecake for dessert."

"Oh good, that'll get him out of bed then. I'm beginning to think we might have to plant a small explosive device outside his bedroom door."

Her mother chuckled even as she winced, just as a crunch of wheels on the gravel made them twist and turn to see Flora's father flying up the drive, the cream top down on his XK8, his perfectly white hair cresting in the wind as the sound of Fleetwood Mac poured into the slipstream behind him.

"I don't believe it!" Flora exclaimed in astonishment. "He's actually on time."

"Yes, but still driving like he's late." Her mother tutted as she swung her legs off the sunbed and slid her pedicured feet into her white leather slides. "Honestly, he'll have the heads off my delphiniums! Who does he think he is? Stirling Moss?" She sighed, taking Flora's empty teacup from her hands and walking across the lawn to her husband, happy to have something else to worry about.

Within the half-hour, the morning's quiet slumber had been pulled from the house like a dust sheet off a chair and Radio 4 was blaring out as her father emerged ruddy-cheeked and ravenous from the shower, the floor still scattered with pin-hole templates of mud from his golf shoes.

"Hi, Daddy." Flora smiled as her father caught sight of

her sitting sideways on the counter, her feet in the sink—a favorite resting position when at home, ever since the time she'd fallen in nettles when she was eight and her mother had cooled her burning, itching feet in iced water. She braced herself for the exuberant kiss that he'd plant on the center of her forehead, a hand clasped over each of her ears so that the world was temporarily muffled, as though underwater. "Good round?"

Her words brought pain, it appeared, as his wide smile faded and he slapped a hand across his own forehead. "Terrible! Bloody awful!" he moaned. "I'd have played better hitting the damn ball with a vacuum! I don't know what's wrong with me."

"I'll tell you what's wrong with you," her mother said, snipping a fresh sprig of rosemary from the window box, her eyes on a squirrel digging for acorns rather too close to the lobelias for her liking. She rapped on the window smartly, sending it skittering back up the nearest oak. "That extra glass of Maury last night, that's what."

There followed an aghast silence.

"But darling, we were having figs!" her father protested as soon as he'd recovered, agog that it could even be considered that they might be eaten without the Maury's accompanying top notes of pomegranate molasses.

"You know what I'm saying," her mother replied, turning back to them both but pinning her husband with an expression of reproach. He tried to catch her for a kiss as she pulled the olive bread from the Aga, her slim arms swamped in the oven gloves. "The Pouilly-Fumé was perfectly sufficient." She handed him the tray of rosemary-sprinkled bread in lieu of the kiss. "Put that on the table for me, please."

Flora giggled as her father—sporting a particularly color-

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ful ensemble of cherry-pink shorts and a grass-green polo shirt—shuffled away, disconsolate at his wife's insistence on worrying about the state of his liver. Between his speeding, his wine consumption and the state of the kitchen floor, he was well and truly in the doghouse. "Poor Daddy."

Her mother was heaping the warm, shelled langoustines onto the club salad, and Flora, spotting her chance, stole a slice of avocado. Her mother automatically went to reprimand her with a slap on the wrist, then thought better of it and handed Flora another slice herself. "You need feeding up. Now call your brother, will you, please?" she said, lifting the laden serving plate. "Then bring through those napkins and the flowers."

"Yes, sir!" Flora saluted, clicking her heels in the sink and grinning as her mother walked away with a sigh and a shake of her head.

"Honestly."

Flora jumped down from the counter and went and stood at the bottom of the stairs in the hall. "Hey! Ratfink!" she hollered as loudly as she could. "Lunch in the garden now or I'm sending in the army!"

"If I'd wanted to let the neighbors know we were eating, I'd have invited them over," her mother said wryly as Flora trotted out into the garden a moment later and set down the oyster-pink linen napkins and a milk jug filled with freshly cut white sweet peas.

"Bet he's up now though," Flora grinned, sidling into the chair beside her father and tearing off a chunk of the still-warm bread.

Her father reluctantly poured the lime soda which his wife was trying to sell to him as an equally refreshing alternative to a champagne spritzer and she took a sip and

closed her eyes, feeling the condensation running down the chilled glass onto her hand, the drowsy throb of the midday sun like a pulse on her skin. She didn't need to open them again to know her brother was finally crossing the grass. Yes, she'd heard the creak on the bottom stair, heard the French door knock against the wall, but she'd always been able to detect when he was nearby—hence his nickname for her, Bat Ears, which had morphed over the years into Batty. There were just under two years between them but they had been inseparable from the moment her mother had brought her home from the hospital, with Freddie climbing into her cot each night and sharing his favorite toy. He'd looked out for her in the school playground on her first day and helped her on her paper-round on Sundays (at her father's insistence they earn their own money) when the supplements meant the papers were too heavy for her to carry; he'd promised not to tell their mum when the butterfly tattoo she got on her hip became infected; he'd threatened to beat up any of his friends who tried to hit on her and had vetted those boys she did date, more fiercely than their father had.

"In your own time, Ratty," she grinned, lazily opening her eyes and pinning him with a grin. "We'll just starve to death out here while you— Holy shit!"

"Flossie! Language!" her mother scolded.

But Flora couldn't take her eyes off her brother—her lanky, rangy, sandy, mop-haired brother still covered in the boyish freckles they'd once tried to count by joining them up with permanent marker. But the lopsided smile that had got him off numerous detentions had clearly slid off him somewhere along the M4, along with eight kilos.

He pointed a finger straight at her as she literally jumped

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to attention. "Don't start! You look *minging*," he said. "Seriously, sis, lay off the pies."

She wanted to laugh. It was his usual joke, normally received with great hilarity, but she noticed that no one was laughing today. "What the hell's happened to you?" she asked, her eyes trying to persuade him to seriousness.

"Flora, lang—" her mother said again, but from the corner of her eye, Flora saw her father's hand shoot forward and quieten her.

He shrugged. "Nothing. Chill."

"But you're so thin!" she cried, almost laughing at the irony that he was trying to pretend everything was fine.

"Pot. Kettle. Black," he replied, flopping artfully into the spare chair and taking a glug of lime soda. He pulled a face and scowled at the glass, then cast a skeptical look at his father who could only shrug in reply.

"Mum, tell him," Flora ordered.

"I have, darling, and I told you too," she replied, heaping an extra-large helping of salad onto his plate. "Why do you think I ordered an extra kilo of langoustines?"

Freddie seemed to pale at the sight of it, his fork inert in his hand.

"You look properly shocking," Flora said, putting her elbows on the table and staring him right in the eye, refusing to let it drop. She knew her brother better than anyone. "For real. What's going on?"

He opened his mouth to respond, but unlike the food that he couldn't seem to put in it, the words by contrast couldn't seem to get out. He just shrugged.

A long silence opened up into which concern rushed. They were all definitely worried now. Freddie might not be able to eat but he could always, *always* talk. Flora watched

him, her mind racing. Had he heard that Aggie was dating again? Had it knocked him more than they had anticipated?

But there was no time even to ask. The sudden scraping of his chair on the flagstones made them all jump.

"I can't do this," he mumbled.

"Freddie?" their father inquired, concern stripping his voice of its usual humor, as Freddie strode back toward the house, his arms swinging too high, too wildly.

The rest of the family stared at one another—shocked, alarmed, shaken.

"You two are close. Has he said *anything* to you?" her mother asked in a low voice, her elbows on the table. "Anything at all that could explain this?"

Flora shook her head, still looking into the space he had just traveled through, as though he'd torn through the fabric of the air and left it hanging in rags behind him.

"I'm going after him," her father said, throwing down his napkin on the table, but Flora put her hand on his forearm and stopped him.

"No, let me," she insisted.

She stood and ran into the shaded house, the old floorboards creaking beneath her weight, branches of the jasmine trailing in through the open windows, honeysuckle blossoms nodding behind the glass, her fingers sliding over the bumpy walls as she took the stairs two at a time. She put her head in at his bedroom door but she already knew she wouldn't find him in there, and instead continued up the staircase to the attic room at the top. It was decorated in a turquoise Toile de Jouy paper, heavy gingham curtains hanging at the small windows and a broken clock tossed on the bed, forgotten. It had once been the *au pair's* room but the two of them had been undeterred by that, forever sneak-

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ing past whichever sleeping German or Swedish girl was there at the time, en route to their secret hiding place.

She stopped by the wall and opened the small hatch built halfway up it, which they had been strictly forbidden from ever opening when they were young. She crawled through, emerging moments later onto the flat section of roof, a hidden valley obscured from sight of the garden by the slopes of all the gable ends. Freddie didn't look surprised to see her as she scooted over to him, keeping low out of habit.

They used to sunbathe up here, and sneakily learned to smoke too, although Freddie had drawn the line at them drinking up here—alcohol and heights weren't a good idea.

"Tell me what's wrong," she said quietly, sitting against him. Usually they leaned back, pressing themselves against the roof tiles either to feel the sun on their faces or to watch the moon, but today he was hunched forward like a curled-up beetle, his elbows on his knees, his head dropped low.

"Can't." He shook his head.

She clasped his arm as his words confirmed her worst fear that she wasn't imagining this, it wasn't her mother's overblown anxiety that something was wrong. It really, truly was. "Whatever it is, I'm on your side. You know I am."

He shook his head, staring at her sidelong. "You won't be. Not this time."

"Freddie, there is literally nothing that you could say that would ever make me doubt you. You're my big brother. I adore you."

He dropped his head down, squeezing his hands together so tightly, his knuckles blanched white. She winced on his behalf.

"Is it why you wanted us all to be here this weekend?" She had had to move heaven and earth to bring her diary into alignment with his unusual request that they all gather here.

"I thought I could do it. I thought I could tell you all. I thought it was the right thing to do . . ."

"You can," she whispered. "It is."

"No. I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because I was watching you all down there and you're the same as you've always been. You so perfect and sarcastic and sweet, Dad so bluff, Mum making everything beautiful and worrying about nothing." He paused. "Only now she really has got something to worry about. I've ruined it."

"Ruined what?"

"Us—our family. And I can't bear to see the looks in your eyes when I tell you."

It was her turn to fall quiet, her eyes scouring his face as he pulled away again, his emotions pleating inwards as though hiding from her gaze. "What have you done, Freddie? You have to tell me." Her grip tightened on his arm. "You know we're not getting down from here until you do."

He took a juddering breath. "It's not true. You have to believe me."

"And I will, I promise. I already do."

"You don't know what it is yet."

"No. But I know you. I support *you*. I love *you*."

He nodded and dropped his head down, letting the tears come first. And then, finally, the words.