

Lucy
Diamond



PAN BOOKS

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Chapter One

The first time Olivia and Alec Tarrant saw Shell Cottage, back in July 1975, they had been married precisely eight hours and twenty-two minutes, and their honeymoon getaway car had broken down in the wilds of Devon. It had been a long, hot day, beginning with the hectic rush of preparations first thing in the morning: the hairdresser arriving to tong and spray Olivia's hair into blonde ringlets, the careful stepping into her long satin dress ('Mind your feet, Olivia!') with her mum and sisters yanking the bodice ribbons so tight she could hardly breathe. Then had come the hushed, nerve-racking journey in the Bentley, borrowed from a friend of Mr Johnson next door, the sweet summer scent of white roses in the church, and all those familiar smiling faces turning towards her as she walked in with her dad. Vows and kisses, photographs in the churchyard, and then lunch, speeches and dancing in the Regent Hotel. *Mrs Tarrant*, she kept thinking dazedly, as Alec whirled her across the dance floor, his strong hands light on her back. No longer Olivia

Marchant, barely more than a girl with her long hair and upturned nose. Now she was a wife. A woman. Mrs Tarrant.

By rights they should have been speeding on their way to Cornwall and their honeymoon cottage at this moment, the wind in their hair, the promise of their wedding night lying excitingly (and somewhat terrifyingly) ahead. Instead they were stranded in the middle of nowhere, after the car had made a strange choking sound and juddered to an abrupt halt. As she stood by the dusty roadside in her brocade wedding shoes, the long train of her gleaming white dress draped heavily across one arm in an attempt to protect it from dirt, Olivia felt a lump in her throat and thought for a horrible moment she might actually cry. On her wedding day!

Alec was rolling up his shirtsleeves in order to tinker with the engine's innards but came to hook an arm around his new wife's waist when he noticed her anxious expression. 'Hey, don't worry,' he said, giving her a comforting squeeze. He smelled of wine and aftershave and sweat: a husband's smell, she thought distractedly. 'We'll get there. Think of this as an adventure, not a problem.'

Olivia sniffed and tried to smile. An adventure, not a problem: that was Alec all over. Confidence ran through the very marrow of him, leaving no room for doubt or anxiety. Olivia, by contrast, tended to have a list of worries and what-ifs as long as her bridal train.

A bird cheeped in the lush green hedgerow; a small,

Summer at Shell Cottage

cheerful sound against the emptiness of their surroundings. 'We'll take the scenic route,' Alec had decided when they set off from the reception earlier but it was almost seven o'clock in the evening now and they still had miles to go. At this rate, they'd end up bedding down in a field for their first night as man and wife, Olivia thought in dismay. (Please, no. She had packed a cream lacy negligee for the occasion, and could only imagine the grass stains.)

Oh, Olivia! her mum had always sighed. *What will we do with you?* If her mum and sisters could see her now, standing at the roadside by the broken-down car, they would exchange knowing looks in that irritating way of theirs. *Oh, Olivia! Why do these things always happen to you? We should have known!*

She was just wondering if it would be very forward of her to take off the too-tight garter she'd borrowed from her cousin when there came the sound of a car approaching. Without hesitating, she stepped into the road and waved frantically. 'Stop!'

'Oh dear, oh dear. What's happened here, then?' A tall, florid-faced man swung himself out of a dark blue Ford Cortina, just like the one from *The Sweeney*, and Olivia almost swooned in relief. His eyes twinkled with amusement as he looked at her in her wedding finery, ringlets collapsing in the heat. 'Can I give you two lovebirds a lift anywhere?'

Thank goodness for unexpected blue Cortinas and the kindness of strangers – in this case, the kindness of Jed

McGarry. He wasn't able to fix the car but he offered them transport and a night at his brother's place if they needed it. 'He's got a B&B not far from here,' he told them. 'And we can send one of the lads over with the toolbox first thing tomorrow. Between us, we'll have you back on the road, all right?'

Alec glanced down at the engine again and then at his watch, clearly weighing up the best option. Olivia didn't hesitate, though. She was not spending her wedding night sleeping in a field, or their broken-down car, and that was that. 'Thank you,' she said quickly. 'That would be lovely.'

Jed McGarry drove for about twenty minutes and then they rounded a bend and were startled by the sight of the headland, and the sea beyond, a muted blue expanse stretching far out to the horizon. The sea! Olivia's spirits lifted immediately and she glanced over at Alec, who was smiling too. He reached across the back seat and took her hand in his, his large square-ended fingers folding around her small white ones. She felt a throb of excitement at his touch, and at the whole unanticipated situation of being jolted around on the slippery vinyl back seat of a stranger's car, heading who knew where with her gorgeous new husband.

Maybe this was what life had in store for her as Alec Tarrant's wife: one surprising adventure after another. The thought was not displeasing. In the eight hours that she'd

Summer at Shell Cottage

been Mrs Tarrant, nobody had dared say *Oh, Olivia!* at her in that wearily despairing sort of way. This was definitely progress.

Two minutes later, they were pulling up in front of a generous-sized cottage, painted a soft barley colour, with a thatched roof and a poppy-scarlet front door, above which a scallop shell had been carved into the centre of the stone lintel. Behind the house you could see a flower-filled garden, which looked very much as if it might lead straight onto sand dunes and then a pale, curving beach in the distance.

‘Here we go. Shell Cottage,’ said Jed. ‘Now let’s just hope Sam’s got room for a couple of newly-weds, eh?’

There were seagulls dipping and wheeling above their heads, the mingled scents of cut hay, sweet peas and a briny sea tang in the air, and a soft breeze that tickled the back of Olivia’s hot neck as she made her way out of the car. ‘This is lovely,’ she whispered to Alec, feeling shy all of a sudden as a man emerged around the side of the house with a wheelbarrow, and raised his eyebrows at the sight of the bride and groom.

Alec took her hand and squeezed. ‘What did I tell you? An adventure, not a problem. Stick with me, Mrs Tarrant. We’re going to have a lot of fun together.’

Despite Olivia’s trepidation, it turned out to be the most perfectly romantic wedding night a bride could wish for. *This*

is my happy ever after, right here, Olivia thought as she woke the next morning to the glorious sight of Alec sleeping beside her in the wide oak-framed bed, his hair ruffled, his strong jaw and cheekbones rendering him breath-catchingly handsome even in slumber. She nestled against him, feeling an uncontainable rush of joy that she would be waking up beside him for the rest of her life, and he stirred, throwing a heavy arm across her and pulling her closer so that she could hear the beating of his heart. ‘Good morning, Mrs Tarrant,’ he murmured without opening his eyes, and she smiled.

Later that morning, following a hearty breakfast on the small stone sun terrace, Olivia managed to peel her admiring gaze away from her new husband for a few minutes in order to appreciate the beautiful old house in which they were staying. She loved how much character it had, with the beamed ceilings, mullioned windows and sea views, and the way that the ancient claw-foot bath could comfortably fit two. It was the kind of house that was hard to say goodbye to, a house made for happy, romantic times.

Afterwards, they went on to enjoy the rest of their honeymoon in Cornwall but Shell Cottage had cast a spell over them both. The following summer, Olivia and Alec returned there for a week-long holiday, and the summer afterwards too, when their baby daughter Freya was just three months old, and then . . . well, every single summer after that, basically, until the year that Olivia rang the McGarrys to book

Summer at Shell Cottage

their usual stay – two adjoining rooms now that they had Freya and Robert – only to be told that unfortunately, the McGarrys were retiring and selling up.

At the time, Alec's second thriller had just hit the bestseller list, and he'd recently received a generous payment from his publishers, having signed a new contract to write three more books. Life was good: the family had moved from a small terraced house in Barnet to a slightly larger one in Tufnell Park where the children had a bedroom each, and Olivia was learning to drive her very own Austin Metro on the wide tree-lined streets. Package holidays abroad were becoming popular and when Olivia broke the news about Shell Cottage to her husband, she half expected him to suggest a trip to the Costa del Sol instead, like some of their neighbours were planning. But Alec was a romantic through and through; he loved Shell Cottage and what it stood for. 'We'll buy it,' he said.

Olivia thought this was one of his whims at first – a silly joke, a crazy impulse. People like them didn't have two homes! Her parents had lived in the same semi-detached house in Buckinghamshire their entire lives and had been perfectly happy. A second home seemed wildly extravagant, way beyond their means.

Alec, though, was deadly serious. What was more, when he made his mind up about something, there was no stopping him. They drove down to Devon the very next day,

taking the children out of school, so that he could strike a deal. Just like that, it was done.

Of course, for some years afterwards, they were stretched financially, letting out Shell Cottage to friends and family in order to make ends meet, but it was worth all the hardship and extra work. Olivia and Alec were never happier than when they were driving out of London, the car loaded with suitcases, headed towards Silver Sands Bay for a summer holiday, Christmas, New Year or simply a long weekend.

As their fortunes had grown over the decades, so too had the house. When one of Alec's books was turned into a film, they spent the money on an extension, adding a couple of extra bedrooms upstairs and a larger, more modern kitchen. They decorated throughout in cool off-whites, heaving up the old carpets and waxing the floorboards, hanging the walls with seascapes by local artists. There were huge soft beds for the rooms upstairs, a luxurious bathroom with a drenching monsoon shower and a deep, linger-for-hours bathtub.

It was a special place for them all. Freya and her husband Victor had spent their wedding night in the house fourteen years ago, and now there were the grandchildren, Dexter, Libby and little Ted, who came for a fortnight's holiday each summer and frolicked like sleek, shrieking seal pups in the sea. Robert had brought Harriet and her daughter with him three summers ago and announced at the annual end-of-

Summer at Shell Cottage

holiday family barbecue that they were going to get married. And for Alec, who had gone on to write twenty-four other successful novels over the years, the house was his favourite place to come and work in solitude for a few weeks every winter, and then again in early summer, once he'd completed a first draft for the final crucial read-through. A routine had developed where he'd take himself off to Devon in July with his printed-out manuscript, straw hat and a bottle of scotch, to be joined a few weeks later by the rest of the family.

Not this year, though, thought Olivia now, as she trudged slowly downstairs in their silent London home, trying to avoid looking at the framed holiday photographs that hung on the wall. Tears smarted in her eyes as her gaze was inevitably drawn to her favourite picture of all, taken the day after their wedding, of her and Alec, perched on the front wall outside Shell Cottage, arms around each other. You could practically see the happiness crackling about them like a force field, fierce and bright, strong enough to protect them from anything.

Almost anything, anyway. A sob rose in her throat and she walked quickly away, but it was no use, the tears were already falling. Summers would never be the same again.

Chapter Two

Freya Castledine pressed the buzzer on her desk and waited for her next patient, idly scratching an insect bite on her arm. All the summer nasties had presented themselves at the surgery today: three cases of hay fever, a woman with a livid red burn on her leg following a holiday in Turkey (it was always the left calf, always following a moped rental, leg pressed accidentally to the hot exhaust; why didn't these idiots *think?*), a child with a painful-looking infection following a wasp sting, and a man with the most rancid athlete's foot she'd ever seen (and she'd seen a few by now).

Freya supposed she should be grateful that winter was over, along with all of *its* special ailments – pneumonia and bronchitis, hacking coughs and gallons of snot – but summer had lost its allure for her this year. It was overrated as a season, full stop, she thought, an image appearing in her mind of the bikinis still languishing hopefully in her drawer, unworn since she became a mother twelve years ago and promptly piled on three stone. Summer meant prickly heat

Summer at Shell Cottage

and horseflies, the agony of breaking in new sandals, the indignity of baring milk-white legs in public, and the sheer palaver of juggling childcare with work through August. Worst, though, was the prospect of a summer holiday without her father this year. She still couldn't believe he wouldn't be there waiting for them at Shell Cottage, that battered old hat on his head, shouts of welcome, a beaming smile.

Her heart ached at the thought. Without fail, the journey down to Devon was always arduous and slow, the children bored and fractious, but there had been this kind of magic about Dad which meant that they'd all be smiling within seconds of their arrival, a new-holiday giddiness awakening inside each of them. For Freya, it didn't take much: a long, deep breath of the soft sea air, one of her dad's legendary Sundowner cocktails, her bare feet touching the warm sand and hearing the sound of the waves . . . The cumulative effect always made her feel the same way: that the world was good. That she'd temporarily sidestepped off life's treadmill into her own private heaven, where time moved like syrup, where days were unhurried and full of fun.

Oh, Dad. It was going to be so subdued at Shell Cottage this year without him there, making them all roar with laughter. However would they manage?

She'd held it together each time she'd been back to her parents' elegant, book-filled Hampstead home, taking charge when Mum floundered, distracting herself with the million

and one things that needed doing. But she felt like an over-filled vessel these days, perilously close to bursting and spilling everywhere. As well as losing Dad, she'd had to cope with Victor going into hospital, trying to prop up Mum, keeping her wits about her at work and *still* remembering to send Libby in with cakes for the school summer fair, find Teddy's glasses that he'd lost for the hundredth time and wash Dexter's cricket kit . . . It was no wonder she'd taken to sinking into the sofa with a glass of wine of an evening. Most evenings, to be fair. And who could blame her? The moment she took her first grateful mouthful and savoured its taste was like melting into a warm embrace. It was the only time of day she felt vaguely human.

And yes, okay, so the glass inevitably turned into two glasses, and sometimes a whole bottle. And, admittedly, she no longer looked directly at the GOT A PROBLEM? alcohol awareness poster in the surgery reception these days. And yes, all right, so she *had* nipped out on her lunch break to pick up an emergency gin bottle for later because the thought of an evening stone-cold sober made her feel decidedly twitchy.

So what, though? Big deal! It wasn't as if anybody had noticed anything untoward about her behaviour. She put out the clinking recycling box in darkness, covering the telltale empties with the bag of newspaper and milk cartons so the neighbours wouldn't notice. Similarly, she hid the hollow ache of grief inside and kept up appearances to the rest of

Summer at Shell Cottage

the world. For the time being, at least. She couldn't help worrying she was clinging on to sanity by the very tips of her fingers, though. One night, when Victor and the children were in bed, she had actually driven out to the middle of nowhere, pulled over in a layby and just howled like an animal. Like a madwoman.

Broken. That was how she felt. A little broken doll.

In the past, if someone had come into the surgery and said to her, *I'm broken, I'm devastated, I'm drowning in sadness and only ever feel better after a bottle of Merlot*, she'd have put on her professionally concerned face and trotted out the usual suggestions: plenty of exercise and fresh air, talk to friends, eat properly, don't make the mistake of relying on props like alcohol or caffeine to see you through.

What a load of bollocks. She'd never be so patronizing again. Now she would lean over, look them in the eye and say, *I understand. My God, I understand. I've been there myself, way down at the depths like you. The thing is, I have no answers for you, only my own question. When will it end?*

Her door opened just then and she plastered on an expectant smile as an elderly man entered, leaning on a stick and breathing heavily. Despite the sunshine outside, he wore a blazer over his shirt and was scarlet-faced and perspiring as a result. Freya jumped up to help him to a chair. 'Mr Turner,' she said, once he had lowered himself into the seat and

mopped his shiny brow with a crumpled white handkerchief. 'How can I help?'

By five o'clock, Freya was flagging. She still had one last patient to see but her mind was flitting ahead to collecting the children from the childminder, arriving home and starting on dinner: pork stir-fry tonight, even though she could already predict that six-year-old Teddy would painstakingly pick out all the sugar-snap peas and leave them in a shiny green heap at the side of his plate, and that Libby, nine years old and toying with vegetarianism, would talk mournfully about the cuteness of pigs. Dexter, aged twelve, would eat a huge plateful at least, but then he was in the midst of a gigantic growth spurt and shovelled in food like coal into a furnace. (One of these days Freya fully expected to come in to see him gnawing on a chair leg, having emptied the entire fridge and pantry.) No, the challenge with Dexter would be whether or not she could extract more than a grunt from him when it came to finding out about his day at school. It could go either way.

Meanwhile, her husband Victor, a detective sergeant, was four days into a two-week public order course in Gravesend, simultaneously learning how to be even more of a heroic figure of authority and forgetting to call home and wish his wife and children goodnight. There was over a week left until

Summer at Shell Cottage

he came back, and she had the dismal feeling they would seem like strangers to one another by then.

Anyway. Whatever.

She glanced at her computer screen, saw that her next patient was Ava Taylor, and groaned. Ever since Ava had been born six months ago, her mother Melanie had wheeled her self-importantly into the surgery approximately twice a week, fretting that her daughter had a sniffle, a cough, that she had been glassy-eyed during breakfast, that her breathing sounded 'a bit quiet'.

'You understand,' she'd said conspiratorially more than once, glancing sideways at Freya's framed desk photo: the children balancing atop a huge wonky sandcastle on Silver Sands beach, Teddy brandishing a sword perilously close to Dexter's groin. 'Us mums, we do worry, don't we?'

Melanie was right to worry but not necessarily about her daughter. A mere two days earlier, Richard Taylor, her husband, had shuffled into Freya's consulting room looking shifty and uncomfortable before unzipping his trousers and showing her his painful swollen testicles, then describing the burning pain he felt when peeing and the cloudy, blood-tinged discharge he'd experienced from his small, frightened-looking penis.

Gonorrhoea, Freya briskly told him, before administering an antibiotic injection into his pale, hairy buttock and writing a prescription. A nice festering case of the clap, which he

almost certainly hadn't picked up from his wife. It was strange and not entirely pleasant to have insights into marriages all over town. Thank goodness nobody could peer into hers right now.

She drummed her fingers on the desk, waiting for Melanie, and her thoughts turned to the bottle of Hendrick's gin nestling in her bag, along with a rather squashed packet of Cadbury's Mini Rolls (for the school summer fair cake stall – they could like it or jolly well lump it). *Good old mother's ruin – bring it on*, she thought. *Ice cubes, juicy lemon slice, enough tonic splashed in to make it respectable . . .* She glanced down at the bag by her feet. If Melanie didn't hurry up, at this rate she'd be uncapping the bottle and having a swig right now.

Too late. There was a knock at the door and Melanie wheeled in the buggy, the usual expression of certain doom on her face.

'Hello there, Melanie,' Freya said politely. 'What seems to be the problem today?'

Melanie wittered on about baby Ava feeling a bit hot, and just sort of, you know, grouchy and not quite herself, but Freya was struggling to concentrate, imagining instead the distinctive rattle of ice cubes being dropped into a tall glass, the hiss of the tonic bottle opening. You were meant to have cucumber batons with Hendrick's, weren't you? Did they have any cucumber? The salad drawer was woefully empty, she thought, remembering the lonely yellowing spring onion

Summer at Shell Cottage

and the bag of dried-looking carrots. Did they even have enough for a stir-fry tonight, come to think of it? Bugger it, they might just have to have a takeaway after all.

Freya jerked back to the moment, aware that Melanie had stopped speaking and was waiting for her opinion. *Snap out of it, Freya. Be professional.*

She ran through some basic checks on her patient: listening to Ava's chest, checking her temperature, and gently sliding a finger into the baby's warm, wet mouth to prise it open and look inside. Ava, perched plumply on her mother's knee, stared at Freya with interest the entire time, sucking curiously on Freya's finger when it appeared in her mouth, her round pink cheeks soft and pillowy to the touch.

'Well,' she said afterwards, returning to her seat, 'I don't think there's anything to worry about. She has a mild fever and her throat looks a bit red, but it's probably just a summer cold.' Ava batted the air with both hands as if playing an invisible piano, then stared down at her fingers, seemingly mystified by their behaviour. 'Give her plenty to drink and a spoonful of Calpol if she seems in discomfort.'

Melanie didn't appear satisfied with this bland piece of advice. No doubt she'd been hoping for a dramatic dash to A&E, sirens wailing. 'But she's having trouble sleeping,' she persisted, pursing her thin pink lips. 'She didn't want *any* of her pear and apple puree at lunchtime and that's her absolute favourite. She really doesn't seem herself.'

‘She seems fine to me,’ Freya said firmly, approaching the fast-unravelling end of her tether. *Go away, Melanie. I want to drive home and see my children now, to fry chopped onions and pork, with a lovely big gin at my side. I want to sit in my garden with the grass tickling my bare toes and not think about anything for a while.* ‘Try not to worry too much. She’s a lovely healthy baby, with a bit of a snuffle, that’s all. Give it a few days, she’ll be right as rain.’ *And while you’re at it, have a word with that pox-riddled husband of yours and tell him to keep his pants on more often.*

Melanie looked affronted to have her concerns rebuffed as being ‘a bit of a snuffle’. Mouth pinched in apparent disagreement, she rose stiffly to her feet and returned Ava to her buggy. ‘Thank you, doctor,’ she murmured in a martyrish sort of way.

Just at that moment, Freya’s phone started trilling and vibrating. Damn! She hadn’t realized it was even switched on. She lunged for her bag but kicked it over in her haste and – oh Christ – the neck of the gin bottle slid right out onto the grey carpet. She could almost hear the wail of a klaxon – *Alcoholic alert! Alcoholic alert!* – as she leapt from her chair. Face flaming, she made a desperate scramble for the bag, the phone still chirping away.

‘Sorry about that,’ she said with a nervous laugh, once she’d switched it off. Melanie’s face was impassive as she said goodbye and left, and Freya sank back into her chair

Summer at Shell Cottage

afterwards, feeling rattled. Had Melanie seen the gin? Had she noticed Freya's panic? Shit. 'Not your finest hour there, Frey,' she muttered with a sigh. She really bloody needed a drink now.

Chapter Three

Ever since Alec's death, Olivia had been thinking a great deal about her last day with him. Dwelling on it, you could say. Should she have guessed what was to come? Could she have saved him somehow? It had all seemed so ordinary to begin with, that was the problem. Just another beautiful summer's morning, the two of them eating breakfast on the patio of the Edwardian Hampstead house where they'd lived for the last twenty-five years. He was leafing through *The Times*; she was thinking vaguely about how she would begin planting up the Fortescues' garden later that afternoon. Then the phone rang inside the house. 'I'll get it,' Alec grumbled, taking a last munch of his toast and marmalade.

Olivia had carried on sipping her tea and gazing out at the dahlias, which were just springing into vivid splashes of colour: crimson, orange, red. She could hear the distant sound of someone practising scales on a piano and the loud *chack-chack* of a blackbird warning that there was a cat prowling nearby. Then came Alec's voice, gruff and cross through

Summer at Shell Cottage

the open door. ‘How did you get this number?’ he said. He was always grumpy when he slept badly, and the stifling June heat had played havoc with his sleep recently. ‘You mustn’t ring this number again!’

An overenthusiastic fan, Olivia thought mildly. They tracked him down sometimes. Her knuckles tightened on the teacup as she caught sight of the ravaged leaves of her beautiful carmine lupins. Slugs again. She’d really have to sort out the –

Then there came a crash. A strangled sort of shout. She ran inside to find Alec prone on the hall carpet, the dropped telephone beside him. His face was puce, his eyes bulging and shocked; one hand clutched at his chest. A faint line of dribble leaked from the corner of his mouth, his lips parting as he tried to speak. But no words came, only a great, groaning pant of distress.

After that everything happened very fast, as if time had accelerated around her. Despite the best efforts of the paramedics and then the consultants, Alec slipped into unconsciousness and never came round again. She’d sat next to him as he lay unmoving in the crisp white hospital bed, begging and praying for him to come back to her but instead his soul quietly departed with one last hoarse breath, and he was gone. Sixty-four years old and his life was over.

Her world felt desolate without him, unbearably empty. Alec had always been the gregarious one of the marriage, the

sort of man who could stride into a crowded room and charm everyone into becoming his new best friend within minutes. He was witty and charismatic, generous and spontaneous; the most fun and interesting person in any gathering. Now that he had died, Olivia felt like a small tug-boat cut adrift on a stormy sea, uncertain where she was heading or if she could even stay afloat. She had counted on at least another ten or twenty years together; they had planned to retire down to Devon before too much longer to 'grow old disgracefully', as he'd put it. But no. One rogue blood clot marauding through her husband's body had put paid to that.

Sometimes she wondered angrily who the pestering fan had been on the phone that day – *How did you get this number? You mustn't ring this number again!* – and whether Alec's subsequent ire had been the last fatal strain on his health. Had the caller felt a twist of guilt, a prick of conscience, when they read of his death in the newspaper? Had it even occurred to them that they might unwittingly have contributed to his demise?

Since that terrible airless June morning three weeks ago, Olivia had functioned on autopilot, the big, quiet house silting up with unwanted flowers, and sympathy cards she couldn't bring herself to read. Maria, their Filipino cleaner, tiptoed around now and then, head bowed as she dusted and polished and occasionally changed the putrefying water in

Summer at Shell Cottage

the vases, but Olivia barely noticed her presence. It seemed a minor miracle to survive each long, torturous day without disintegrating, turning into a madwoman, clawing at the ground, screaming at the sky. *Alec is gone, Alec is gone.* She'd never hear his husky laugh again or feel his arms around her; she'd never be warmed by the golden, unswerving spotlight of his devotion. How was it possible to go on?

Over the last fifteen years, Olivia had built up a small boutique garden design service, with two members of staff and their own van. She had always found solace in planting and weeding, but this summer she didn't even want to step outside her back door to water her own garden, let alone venture further to tend the flower beds, lawns and shrubbery of her wealthy clients. What the hell. Let them wither and droop, let them dry to a brown crisp. Without Alec, it all seemed pointless anyway. Everything did.

The children helped out where possible. Although she was a busy GP with three little ones of her own, Freya drove down from her home in Hertfordshire to assist with the practicalities of the funeral, as well as briskly tackling many of the horrible, cold formalities: registering the death, winding up her father's bank accounts, and wading through the reams of correspondence and documents piled up under his desk. Capable and pin-sharp even in the throes of mourning, Freya had always been one for Getting Things Done. It had been a

wrench when she returned home, leaving a typed to-do list and renewed silence in her wake.

Robert, too, was supportive and helpful, coming over to deal with the extraordinary number of emails which had piled up in Alec's inbox – a task Olivia herself hadn't been able to stomach. All those polite replies to type, all the condolences to acknowledge, not to mention the myriad work-related conversations that needed untangling.

'How's it going?' she asked, walking into Alec's study one Friday afternoon to see her son frowning at the ageing computer screen. It was still strange to find another person there in her husband's domain, cluttered as it was with book paraphernalia, several crime writer awards and ump-teen souvenirs from his travels.

'Not bad,' he replied, stretching his arms above his head. Robert had the same green eyes and dark hair as his father whereas Freya was like her: fair with pale skin that burned easily in the sun. Tall and rangy, Robert was the athlete of the family, walking at seven months old, and not stopping ever since. Even now, he was wearing a running top with shorts and trainers, as if he'd broken off midway through a marathon to pop round. 'Eleanor's asked, in the nicest possible way, if we think Dad's last book is going to be publishable,' he went on. 'She said they could supply us with a ghostwriter if we felt it was necessary, although that would probably mean moving publication into next year.'

Summer at Shell Cottage

His last book. Olivia's heart seemed to clench. That wretched book had helped kill him, she was sure of it: the stress of trying to meet the tight deadline, the dread of another big American tour and festival appearances looming that autumn. Alec was a professional, always delivering a new novel to his editor in July, with the hardback edition published several months later in time for Christmas. Regular as clockwork the schedule went, only this particular book had got to him for some reason. Her husband didn't often suffer from self-doubt but in the weeks before his death, he had agonized to Olivia privately a number of times that he just wasn't sure about this one. Some days he would go off to the heath for a walk and not return for hours, still with the same distracted light in his eyes. She didn't even know if he had been close to finishing it when he died.

'Right,' she said. 'Leave it with me. Is there anything else?'

'Yes. Marcus – solicitor Marcus – has come back with a few queries. Dad left quite a lot of money to someone called Leo Browne. Do you know him?'

Leo Browne. She turned the name over in her mind, but it didn't ring any bells. Maybe it was an editor he'd worked with in America, or his film agent; she'd never been able to keep track of all Alec's contacts. Her lip trembled as she remembered teasing him about the ridiculous number of Christmas cards he used to receive from friends, fans and colleagues; how he couldn't even recall who half the senders

were. They would appear like drifts of snow through the letterbox each morning, an avalanche of festive bonhomie. This Christmas the haul would be decimated, though. She'd sign their cards alone, the white space that bit emptier without his confident black-inked scrawl alongside hers.

She curled her hands into fists, digging her fingernails into her palms. *Come on, Olivia. Keep it together.* She had to stop allowing herself to be felled with sorrow by every tiny memory, every single conversation.

'I don't recognize the name, sorry,' she said, after a deep breath.

'No worries. Oh, and there's an email from Katie, checking we're still set for the summer as usual.' He gazed expectantly at her. 'When were you planning to go?'

Katie was their sort-of housekeeper at Shell Cottage, a cheerful thirty-something woman who lived in Silver Sands village and kept an eye on the place when they weren't staying there. During the summer, she was like their good fairy, popping round to clean and make up the beds while they were out. Had anyone even told Katie about Alec? Olivia had lost track of who knew the terrible news and who didn't.

She leaned against the bookshelves, stuffed in a haphazard fashion with all the foreign editions of Alec's books. The idea of being at Silver Sands without her husband was unbearable. Who would organize the lilo races and the crabbing? Who would man the barbecue and lead the legendary hikes

Summer at Shell Cottage

out on Dartmoor? Who would appear on the terrace with a cool drink for her just when she was feeling thirsty, or rub sunscreen into her fast-pinking shoulders? 'I don't know about the holiday this year,' she mumbled, looking away.

'What? Oh, Mum, no. You're not staying here and moping around all summer. You have to go. Everyone else still wants to.'

'It's just . . . without your dad . . .' She shrugged helplessly. If she went to Shell Cottage alone, she'd only feel tormented by memories of all those summers gone by, their precious wedding night, and most recently, last New Year's Eve, when they'd set off fireworks in the garden, just the two of them, and kissed as if they were teenagers. How he'd loved the sheer extravagance of fireworks, the bright pinwheels of colour exploding in the dark velvety sky.

But Robert's fingers were already flying over the keyboard again. 'Dear Katie, Thank you for your email. We are looking forward to our return to the house,' he read aloud sternly. 'If you could have everything ready as usual for my arrival on the . . .' He broke off and glanced up at the calendar. 'What shall I say, the fourteenth of July? That gives you another week or so to tie up a few more things here.'

Olivia hesitated. She couldn't imagine going into *London* on her own right now, let alone driving all the way to Devon. Robert met her look steadfastly with those green eyes, so like

his father's, and her resistance faltered. She'd never been able to refuse Alec anything when he looked at her that way.

'Mum?' Robert prompted. 'You could take Dad's manuscript with you, couldn't you? Read it through if you felt up to it. One last story to enjoy.'

His gaze was unswerving and Olivia found herself nodding in defeat. 'Okay,' she said. *Whatever*, as her grandchildren would say. She could always ring Katie and cancel, she told herself.

'Great,' Robert said, typing again. He clicked on 'Send' with a flourish. 'I think it's the right thing, Mum. The sooner we all try and get back to normal, the better. And a holiday is probably exactly what you need.'