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Helen Naylor
Excerpt
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Chapter 1 *The city heat*

‘When we get to Polreath on Saturday, I’m going to do nothing,’ said Anna. ‘I just want to sit and have cool drinks and read and watch the world go by.’

‘Me too,’ replied Stephen.

It was the hottest summer for twenty years. It had started at the end of May. Everyone thought the heat would only last for a few days and then the rain would return, but this summer was different.

‘And don’t expect any intelligent conversation from me,’ Anna continued. ‘It’ll take a day or two for me to become a member of the human race again!’

‘Mm,’ said Stephen, not really listening. ‘What about this cottage we’ve booked, do you think it’s going to be all right? To be honest, I’m a bit worried about it – we were so late making our decision and it was still available. Why didn’t anyone else want it? It makes me think there must be something wrong with it.’

‘Don’t worry. I’m sure it’ll be fine. And even if it’s not, we’ll still be away from here. Just think – three weeks by the sea, without any work. It sounds wonderful.’

In the city the heat was uncomfortable. People were not used to high temperatures day after day. Journeys to work became hot and sweaty, and increasingly bad-tempered in the crowded trains and buses. By the beginning of July, nobody could remember when it had last rained. Every-

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where you looked seemed to be brown – the grass in the parks was burnt and most of the flowers had died. The sun was burning hot and the air seemed to be getting thicker and thicker. At the weekends, the place was empty as many people left for the countryside.

But Stephen and Anna couldn't leave – not until the weekend anyway.

* * *

Stephen was thirty-two with dark, curly hair. He had noticed a few grey hairs that morning when he was drying it after his shower. But he didn't mind too much; in fact, he rather liked the idea of a few which might make him look serious. But his face showed signs of stress and worry.

Stephen left the flat just before seven. He was earlier than usual this morning because he wanted to avoid the rush hour, but it seemed as if everyone else had had the same idea – the roads were busy and there had been an accident half way along Sussex Gardens. He waited impatiently while the police sorted out the chaos but by the time he arrived at work, he was late and not in a very good mood.

He locked the Saab and went into the cool building. The offices of Jardine and Makepeace, advertising agents, were on the fourteenth floor of a modern block with wonderful views over Regent's Park. But this morning, when Stephen found himself climbing the stairs (the lift was out of order again!), he would happily have given up the views for an office on the ground floor.

'Please let everything go smoothly today,' he said to himself as he made his way up the stairs.

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Stephen was worried about work – the agency had lost an important client that week. He felt that Charlie Jardine, the agency boss, blamed him. A couple of days before, he'd passed by Charlie's office and had heard him saying on the phone, 'Yes, well, I'll have to talk to Stephen about that. He was the one working on their new advertisement.' Stephen hadn't heard any more but he thought that Charlie sounded a bit angry.

He wondered if it was a bad time to go on holiday – perhaps his job would disappear when he was away. But he didn't want to miss this break – and in any case, Anna would kill him if he suggested cancelling. So he said nothing to her about his worries. He often found it hard to talk about his problems, even with Anna. God knows why, she was usually willing to listen.

In his mind, he would think through different ways of opening the conversation with her, but everything he thought of sounded so obvious – 'I'm worried about work' or 'I'd like to talk to you about something'. In any case, he really preferred to work things out himself. But he knew he was not easy to live with when he didn't talk much.

'Morning Mark. Another lovely day,' panted Stephen, and sat down to get his breath back. His shirt was wet and sticking to his back.

'Morning Stephen,' said Mark. 'I'm not sure if it is a lovely day. Clare's away – she's got food poisoning or something – so between us we've got to do her work as well as our own.'

'Oh hell! Just what I needed to hear!' replied Stephen.

Anna's last day began even earlier. At 6.30 that morning she yawned as she walked across to St Phillips Hospital. It

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was another beautiful morning – for her the best time of the day when the air was still fresh and the day was still full of promise.

Her nurse's cap sat comfortably on her short blond hair. She looked fresh and efficient in her blue uniform. She loved her job as a nurse but it was hard. There always seemed to be so much to do – more than ever since the new manager had arrived.

'This weekend, when we're away,' she thought, 'I'm going to get up early and walk along the beach before anyone else is awake.' Then she laughed at the idea of getting up early when she didn't have to! Well, maybe she would – who knows, holidays can change people. Maybe that's what she needed – change. She was thirty and had been working at St Phillips since she'd finished her training – perhaps it was time to move on.

Later in the day she went to say goodbye to Michael Barton, a favourite patient who was recovering from a major operation.

'Have a wonderful holiday!' he said.

'Thanks, I will. And I hope I won't see you when I get back,' replied Anna. And as soon as she said it, she realised what a stupid thing it was to say.

'I mean, I hope you won't still be in hospital, you know, you'll be back at home,' she said quickly.

'It's all right, love. I know you weren't talking about me dying! I hope I don't see you either – although I'll miss you looking after me. Bye – all the best.'

She left the ward knowing that this time tomorrow she would be in a different world. She got off the hospital bus at the end of her street and walked slowly home, thinking

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about a cool beer in the back garden. They were lucky. Their flat was on the ground floor of a nineteenth-century house and the garden at the back was theirs. The garden wasn't big but it was a wonderful place to escape to in the summer. She wondered what sort of day Stephen had had. She knew something was worrying him but was too tired to do anything about it. Anyway, she knew from past experience that it was no use asking directly. He'd once told her that he could only talk about difficult things after they were past and no longer difficult. 'I'll find out what it is on holiday,' she thought. 'When we've got more time and energy.'

As Stephen was about to leave the office that evening, Charlie Jardine called him into his office and told him that there were going to be some changes in the next month, that probably one member of staff would have to go – 'be made redundant' was how Charlie said it, but Stephen thought 'sacked ... fired ... dismissed' was what he really wanted to say. Then Charlie said, 'But of course, I don't want to lose you.' Why didn't that make Stephen feel better? He left work with a heavy heart.

Chapter 2 *On the way*

‘Got everything?’ asked Anna.

‘I don’t care if we haven’t!’ said Stephen. ‘Let’s go! You drive.’

‘OK. We’ve got to stop at Rebecca’s to leave our keys with her,’ said Anna, shutting the front door quietly behind her. ‘She said she’d come in and make sure everything is OK while we’re away. Remember? Oh, and did you write down our holiday address for her – she said she wanted it in case of emergencies. Though I don’t think I want to know if there *are* any emergencies, do you? Now where did I put the car keys?’

‘You always think you’ve lost the keys, and you never have,’ said Stephen. ‘I think you just say it to annoy me. Get in and drive! I’ve got the address for Rebecca, I’ve got the map, I’ve got the address of the cottage and you’ve got enough bottles of suntan cream to protect an army. Now, come on! We’re wasting valuable holiday time!’

‘Right. I’ll drive first. Why don’t you go to sleep? I’ll wake you when it’s your turn to drive,’ said Anna.

London looked a bit like a ghost town at seven o’clock that Saturday morning. Either everybody had left it for their own holidays or they were still in bed. It was good to leave the city behind as Anna set off west along the M4 on the 500 kilometre drive to Polreath. Polreath was a small, quiet fishing village on the north-west coast of Cornwall

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with a few holiday cottages, two hotels, and the usual shops, bars and restaurants. It was famous for its seafood restaurants – lobsters, prawns, crabs – and relatively unspoilt – a great place to relax.

It would take most of the day to get there but Anna was happy to drive. It gave her time to think about last night when Stephen had come home from work. He had looked almost ill – he said it was only the heat and the traffic, and he just needed some peace and quiet. He had gone into the garden with a bottle of beer and walked around looking as if he was interested in the flowers (which she knew he wasn't). She had left him alone and after a while he came in for dinner, seeming a bit more cheerful. They had had a perfectly pleasant evening talking about arrangements for the next day and had gone to bed without mentioning work. But later, she had woken up and heard him in the kitchen, talking to someone on the telephone. When he had come back to bed, she had pretended to be asleep. In the morning, neither of them had mentioned it. 'Oh well, when we've both relaxed, perhaps he'll talk about it,' thought Anna.

The sun was behind her and she could feel its warmth on her shoulders. There wasn't much traffic about so she put her foot down, and as the kilometres passed, she felt her head begin to clear of all the worries, the questions. She put a cassette on quietly – a little Mozart for company, perfect – and started to enjoy the drive.

'Where are we?' asked Stephen sleepily.

'We've just passed Bristol, so I suppose we're doing well,' said Anna. 'Your turn to drive.'

'OK. Let's stop and have a cup of coffee first.'

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Anna turned into the next service area where they had to queue for a fairly awful cup of coffee. Half an hour later they were back on the road, this time with Stephen driving. He changed the music to an Ella Fitzgerald tape and Anna attempted to sing along with her.

‘I think I prefer Ella Fitzgerald to you, if you don’t mind,’ joked Stephen.

‘Sorry, this song always makes me want to sing,’ replied Anna. ‘Don’t worry, I’ll go to sleep in a minute.’

Stephen turned off the motorway. He reckoned it would take about another three hours to get to Polreath. Anna was asleep. ‘She wasn’t last night, though, when I came back to bed after that phone call, I know. She’s not very good at pretending.’ Stephen looked at her lovingly. ‘Perhaps it was a mistake to ring Mark, but I wanted to tell him what Charlie had said about making someone redundant. Now all I’ve done is make Mark feel bad, too. I must be going mad. Why did I tell him? He’ll find out soon enough if he’s going to lose his job.’

Anna moved beside him.

‘Not long now,’ said Stephen, trying to forget about work. ‘I’ll be really happy to get out of this hot car, won’t you?’

‘Mmm.’

‘First thing I’m going to do is have a swim,’ he said.

‘What about unpacking the car, and buying a few things like milk and bread for tomorrow’s breakfast?’ said Anna.

‘To hell with that. We’re on holiday and we’re going to do what we want to do, not what we should. No more planning, no more thinking ahead, no more worrying.’

‘I’ll remember you said that. This sounds as if it’s going to be an interesting three weeks.’

Chapter 3 *Polreath*

Their first view of Polreath was from the top of a hill.

‘Oh look, Stephen! The sea! And lots of little boats. It looks wonderful,’ said Anna.

There was a big sign at the side of the road telling motorists not to drive into the village, that they must leave their cars in the car park.

‘Right. Let’s leave everything here. I’m going for a swim,’ said Stephen.

‘Me too,’ replied Anna.

They walked hand in hand down the steep, narrow street to the beach below. The water wasn’t wonderfully warm – this was the Atlantic after all – but even so that first swim was almost magical. Stephen lay on his back, looking at the sky and enjoying the first taste of freedom. Anna had swum quite a long way out but was now coming up towards him.

He turned towards her and they managed a salty kiss.

‘Hello, love. Welcome to our new world,’ said Anna softly.

‘Hi, little one,’ he said.

‘You look ten years younger already. And that’s after only one swim!’

They kissed again.

‘Come on,’ said Stephen, ‘that’s enough for now.’

‘What, swimming or kissing?’ asked Anna.

‘Both,’ he smiled, and kissed her again.

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They swam slowly back to the beach. The sun still felt warm, so they sat on the sand for a few minutes with their towels wrapped round them. Outside a pub people were sitting with drinks and watching them in a leisurely way. Anna and Stephen – the only ones on the beach at that time suddenly realised that everyone’s eyes were on them, so they picked up their things and left.

‘We’d better go and introduce ourselves to Mr Goddard and get the key for the cottage,’ Stephen said. ‘He said to come to his house. What was it called, Anna?’

‘Seahorses,’ she replied. ‘We passed it on the way down the hill. Look, you go. I want to change my clothes.’

‘I don’t know, one look at you in your swimsuit and he might put the price down,’ he replied.

‘Very funny! I’ll wait on the corner over there,’ she said, giving him a little push.

Anna watched as Stephen knocked on the door of Seahorses. A youngish man appeared and she could hear Stephen introduce himself.

‘Mr Goddard? Hello, I’m Stephen Martins. Sorry about my appearance but we got so hot travelling down here that we had to have a quick swim,’ he said.

‘No problem. I’m pleased you’ve arrived. I’m Tristan Goddard. Welcome.’

He looked over Stephen’s shoulder and saw Anna standing at the corner. She gave a small wave and smiled.

‘That’s Anna,’ said Stephen. ‘She said she’d come and introduce herself when she’s changed.’

‘Fine. Well look, this is the key for Dolphin Cottage. Go down to the harbour, turn right and follow that little road