

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

Karen watched her husband. He sat at the end of the kitchen table, leaning back against the paisley cushion which padded the wheel-back chair – his chair – a glass tumbler of whisky cradled in both hands, eyes half shut, his face sweating and suffused with red.

Normally Harry would carve the chicken. Karen was quite capable of doing so, of course – in fact considered herself better at it than her husband, who hacked away at the bird, dumping heavy slabs of meat on to everyone's plate as if they were cavemen – but Harry was a stickler for tradition. Tonight's roast sat waiting on the worktop beside the range, but Karen knew it was pointless to ask him. He had been boozing all day, as usual, and was past negotiating anything but another drink.

'What are you staring at?'

His voice, suddenly sharp despite the whisky, interrupted her thoughts.

Karen sighed. 'Nothing.'

'Nothing?' Harry raised his tone an octave, meanly mimicking her. 'Nothing, nothing . . .' his voice trailed off.

She turned away. 'No point talking to you when you're like this.'

'Like what? What am I like?'

‘You know perfectly well. You’re drunk, Harry. You have been all day . . . all year, in fact.’

Her husband just shook his head, his eyes closed. ‘Here we go. Here we bloody go again. Nag, nag, nag. Get the lecture over with then, woman. Tell me I’m a drunk, tell me the booze’ll kill me, tell me you can’t stand the sight of me any more.’ His eyes snapped open: blue eyes, now faded with age, but nonetheless focused and full of annoyance.

Karen felt tears gathering behind her eyelids. She thought of all the countless times she had attempted to stop him drinking. Cajoling, entreating, threatening, appealing to his ego by telling him how much his extraordinary character was demeaned by drunkenness – which it was. And so on . . . and so on. All to no avail. She no longer had the will to try again.

‘You’re the only one who has a problem,’ he was saying as he heaved his bulk out of the chair. For a moment he stood swaying in his brown cords, striped shirt and loafers, before beginning an unsteady potter across the worn terracotta kitchen tiles to the bottle awaiting him by the sink. Largo, the Labrador, started awake in his basket at the screech of the chair legs, then almost immediately fell back asleep. He was used to his master’s ways.

‘Sophie was here for what? A week? Ten days? She would have noticed if I was as drunk as you make out. She would have said something.’

Karen watched him lay his glass down on the stainless-steel draining board with the slow deliberation of a person who realizes they aren’t quite in control of their faculties. He reached for the bottle, the top already off, and slopped a large measure into the glass. The ice tray, also to hand, still contained a few half-melted cubes, which he tipped out on to the draining board and then

scooped into his drink. Turning, wiping his wet fingers down his trousers and leaning against the side for support, he raised his glass to her.

‘True, no? Admit it, Sophie has no problem . . . at all . . . with my alcohol intake.’

Karen didn’t argue because Harry was right. Her stepdaughter had no problem with anything her father said or did, just so long as the cheques kept on coming.

Harry was eyeing the chicken. ‘Is that bloody bird going to sit there all night?’ His words were beginning to slur slightly now – Karen marvelled at the amount of alcohol her husband, nearly seventy-five, could consume and still be coherent. He pulled himself away from the worktop and weaved his way back to the table, grabbed his chair and slumped back down. ‘Bring it here. I’ll carve the damn thing before it gets stone cold.’

She did as he asked, her gut dull with resentment. But she knew there was absolutely no point in tackling him when he was this far gone. She knew all too well where that could lead.

They sat in silence, their plates of food in front of them. The kitchen seemed suddenly hot and airless to Karen as she observed Harry attacking his meat and potatoes with gusto, piling, cramming the food into his mouth as if he hadn’t eaten in a week, gravy smearing his chin. He always ate like this, as if his life depended on it, as if he were trying to fill a bottomless pit. But in years past she had enjoyed his appreciation of her cooking. Now she just saw it as greedy. Karen had no appetite. All she wanted to do was escape that airless room, step outside into the garden – even though it was early January, pitch dark and icy cold – and fill her lungs with fresh air. Most of all she wanted to stop witnessing the sad

degeneration of a man she had once worshipped. And to forget what he had done to her last night.

It was Sophie's final day with them, the end of her stepdaughter's long and fraught Christmas visit. Sophie had never cut Karen any slack. She was ten when her parents had split up – two years before Karen even knew Harry – but in those two years, Sophie had had her father all to herself, and had been spoilt to princess level, led to believe she was, and always would be, the only love of Harry Stewart's life.

So Karen understood that it would be an uphill battle, that she could expect a certain amount of animosity from the girl at first. But she had hoped – foolishly as it turned out – that they could mend their bridges over time. Eighteen years later, however, that was very far from the case. If anything, as her father approached seventy-five, Sophie's attitude to Karen appeared to harden, the girl's determination to belittle her in front of Harry, point out all of Karen's faults, perhaps having something to do with the unknown details of her father's will.

Last night the three of them had been due at a local dinner party. Harry was hugely popular in the village and the surrounding area, a larger-than-life character whom everyone adored, told stories about, welcomed at any event. They were always in high demand as a couple.

'Is that girl coming down this century?' Harry had grouched as they waited in the kitchen for Sophie – who didn't seem to understand time in the way most people did – to finish dressing. As usual, his mind permanently trained on the next source of his addiction, he reached for a glass from the cabinet and dragged the bottle off the tray in the corner.

'Don't, Harry, please,' Karen had said. 'You've already had a

couple and you can't arrive at the Standings drunk . . . think how embarrassing Sophie would find that.' She'd known she was manipulating him, using his daughter as backup, but she didn't care.

At first he had just shaken his head, tutted, and put the bottle down. Karen had sighed with relief. He would be drunk by the end of the night, but then so would half the dinner party. But as Sophie still failed to appear, he began pacing the room, clearly on edge.

'Sod it, one won't hurt. Who cares what the Standings think? Don't think I've ever seen Roger sober, anyway.' Which was a gross exaggeration, but she didn't challenge it.

'Please, just this once—' Karen started, and she could hear the unattractive pleading in her voice.

But before the rest of the sentence was out of her mouth he had turned on her, his eyes blazing. She didn't have time to back away before his large hand swung at her, his open palm catching her square on the cheek, her head snapping to the right with the sheer force of it.

'Shut up! Just shut up, woman. If you'd stop whining for one bloody second . . .'

He turned away, but not before Karen, standing stock-still with shock, had seen the panic in her husband's eyes. Harry was not a bad man. He was just a bad drunk.

She lifted her hand to her burning cheek, tears springing to her eyes. Without a word she began walking to the door, but Harry was fast behind her. His hand gripping her arm, he swung her round to face him.

'Karen, listen . . . sorry, sorry, I shouldn't have done that. I've . . . I've never, *ever* hit a woman before . . .'

He paused, clearly

bewildered by what he'd done. 'It's just when you nag like that . . . I saw red.'

She had looked blankly at him.

'Please,' he'd lowered his voice, 'please don't tell Sophie . . .'

And when she'd still said nothing, he'd gone on, more urgently, 'You won't, will you? Please, Karen, don't. She'd be absolutely horrified.'

Karen hadn't told Sophie. She did the same thing as she'd done in the face of all the bullying and belittling, all the cruel taunting, all the foul breath and stinking alcohol sweat, all the mindless, repetitive whisky-induced drivel that had gone on over the last few years. Nothing.

'I can't go to dinner with this,' she told Harry, holding her hand to her cheek as he stood in front of her, momentarily cowed, waiting for her forgiveness. Even this minor rebellion felt like a victory.

'You've got to come. What'll I say to the Standings?'

'Say what you like. I don't care, I'm not coming.' She couldn't look at him any more. Him in his pristine blue shirt and maroon tie, his tailored suit and polished brogues, his short, grey hair, still plentiful, brushed neatly back from his brow, his handsome face tanned from hours on the golf course. The picture of a smart, successful man, despite his advancing years. He was looming over her, standing close, blocking her way, not really threatening, just a solid barrier. But she pushed past him and hurried upstairs, shutting herself in their bedroom before Sophie had a chance to see the hot red welt spreading across her cheek.

When she'd checked in the mirror for damage, she saw a stranger. Her blonde crop – not dyed, she and her brother, Johnny, had been white-blond since they were children – was uncharacteristically

dishevelled, her hazel eyes huge and shocked in her heart-shaped face, the redness on her left cheek like some childish attempt at make-up.

Now, as she rinsed the plates, filled the dishwasher, wrapped the remains of the chicken in foil, wiped splashes of gravy from the table, swept up the bits from the floor that Largo had disdained, her thoughts returned to her predicament. *He's an old man, a sick old man. How can I leave him?* It was a chant almost, that ran around her head on an hourly basis, had done for at least a year now. She understood that no one grew up wanting to be an alcoholic. It was addiction, pure and simple. But did that mean she had to stay and put up with this abuse for the rest of her life? He was tough, he could live another ten years at this rate. Maybe, she thought, Sophie could do what she was always threatening to do. Move in and look after her father, make sure she copped his millions when he died. Maybe he would clean up his act for her.

But each time she reached this point, where she, Karen, was free, her stomach knotted with anxiety. Freedom felt more like being adrift in a vast, empty ocean. No house, no beloved Largo, no husband, no community. And she loved Harry, or at least loved the man that Harry used to be.

The very first day she met him, at the interview for a job as his PA, she had been struck by his charisma. Despite being in his later fifties, he was so full of life, so funny, so handsome, so sure of himself.

'You can type, I presume?' He'd asked, eyebrows arched, eyes full of laughter as he gave her an almost insultingly bold stare. He was standing in his shirtsleeves by the window of his modern, featureless office on the outskirts of Portsmouth, looking out on to a

well-laid lawn and a plinth holding the shiny metal company logo of Stewart Engineering, cars parked off to the right. Harry had built his company from scratch, specializing in fencing – such as pedestrian barriers, railings, gates, security and electric fencing, anti-climb panels – and it was a success.

‘Just about,’ Karen had said, more cheekily than she intended, but unable to ignore his teasing look.

‘Well, Mrs Rawlings seems to like you. Which is unusual, to say the least.’ He waved at her to sit down in the chair opposite his wide teak desk – piled high from end to end with papers interspersed with an odd assortment of keypads, fobs, cable loops and other unidentifiable widgets.

Karen had said nothing. Mrs Rawlings was an office manager of the old school: grey hair in a severe French pleat, black pencil skirt, plain white blouse, black court shoes, a single string of pearls at her neck, immaculate nails polished with a fearsome cranberry. Initially she had peered over her glasses at Karen as if she were something the cat dragged in. But for some reason she’d softened when Karen had been honest and told her she knew absolutely nothing about engineering and was probably most unsuitable for the job.

‘Don’t worry about that,’ she’d said briskly. ‘You might be just what Mr Stewart needs.’ A comment Karen could not fathom, but chose to ignore.

Her previous job as PA to the boss of a recruitment agency in Southampton was so dire, her boss so sleazy, that she would happily settle for almost anything, even if it meant a half-hour commute. And although she’d been hoping for a job in the travel industry, where her almost fluent French – learnt during a two-year stint as a chalet girl in Courchevel when she was nineteen – would be an asset, nothing had come up in the months she’d been looking.

‘It’s a boring bloody job,’ Harry declared with a curious satisfaction when they were both seated on either side of his desk. ‘You’ll have to deal with me, for a start, and I’m tricky at the best of times. Then there’s Mrs Rawlings to sweet-talk. And the men will ogle you every time you set foot out of the office.’ He’d smiled his most winning smile. ‘In fact, you should probably run a mile.’

And she’d replied, ‘I’ll risk it, if you will.’

So the flirtation began from day one. Karen herself, when she started working for Harry, was in a sort of relationship, with Russ. On off, on off, neither could properly commit to moving in together, but they were close, real friends. As her mother, in her more sober moments, kept telling her, ‘Many good marriages have flourished on less.’

But Harry was free, divorced from his wife, Theresa, for two years by then. Office gossip went that the marriage had fallen apart after he’d been spotted by a friend of Theresa’s in a hotel in Paris, holding hands with a tasty French sales rep, when he’d told his wife he was in Newcastle. And the friend had doxed him in. Theresa, a feisty Greek with a Mediterranean temper, had not only taken a very dim view of his behaviour – reasonably enough – but had seen it as a complete deal-breaker. The marriage, as far as she was concerned, was over from that moment. ‘She didn’t understand about my work,’ was Harry’s excuse when Karen asked what had gone wrong.

It was a few months before anything beyond flirtation happened. That Tuesday, snow threatened, a lot of snow according to the forecast, and Mrs Rawlings had closed the office at lunchtime to prevent the workers from having trouble getting home. But Harry had asked Karen to stay a little longer.

‘Load of nonsense, these forecasts. Putting the wind up us to

cover their arses. Not frightened of a little snow, are you?' he'd teased.

'Of course not,' she'd replied, marvelling at the way Harry Stewart thought even the elements were at his command.

And it did snow. By the time they looked up from their work, vast amounts had dumped out of the sky in a matter of hours. There was no way Harry's sleek silver Jaguar was going to make it past the end of the drive. They were trapped.

Luckily, the prudent Mrs Rawlings kept the office fridge stocked with her boss's favourites: sausage rolls, corned beef, Brie, orange juice, beef tomatoes, pickle. And Harry's desk drawer yielded an almost full bottle of finest malt. As evening set in, the world outside a flawless, silent white, the office became cosy, womb-like, in the single light from the desk lamp. Karen and Harry seemed to adopt a siege mentality as they picnicked on a cleared patch of desk, munching hungrily on the sausage rolls, with the whisky – not something Karen was used to – gradually loosening the boss-PA boundaries.

'What will we do?' she'd asked him.

'Do? Nothing we can do.'

'But supposing it keeps on snowing?'

Harry had laughed. 'Well, then, we'll be found in twenty years time, like Scott of the Antarctic, curled around each other for warmth, clutching our diaries, which'll contain something brave and heroic they'll turn into a book . . . which will make millions for our descendants.'

And while Karen was laughing at the ridiculous scenario, Harry was putting his glass down and coming round the desk and grabbing her out of her chair with such passion she was not given time even to think, let alone protest.

The night they spent on the office floor, wedged on cushions from the leather sofa and covered with the tartan car rug from Harry's Jag, was unique. With all the time in the world, no chance of intrusion, they were free of restraint. And Harry was expert, a sensualist, hedonistic by nature and keen to milk every ounce of pleasure from their entwined bodies. Russ's dogged drive to his own orgasm – usually less than ten minutes, tops – was hardly in the same ballpark.

'I hope they don't rescue us too soon,' Karen had whispered into his neck in the small hours of the night. 'The food should last us at least another couple of days.'

And Harry had just chuckled and pulled her closer against his body.

Even in those days, Harry had been a heavy drinker. But his drinking was part of his zest for life. A zest which seemed to drain clean away as soon as he sold his company – his beloved baby – on the eve of his seventy-second birthday. Such plans they had! Harry, a workaholic, was determined to catch up on all the things he'd missed, such as seats at the Masters golf tournament, taking a yacht round the Med, African game parks, Las Vegas . . . the list was endless. And now they had the money . . .

But her husband, from day one of retirement, seemed not to want to travel even thirty miles, let alone three thousand. Karen watched in dismay as he fell in on himself, lost all of his *joie de vivre*. Instead of travelling the world, he played golf and drank, drank and played golf. Then, increasingly, as his right hip became more and more painful with arthritis, he mostly just drank, albeit at the golf club. 'We'll go next year,' was his monotonous response to Karen's tentative plans.

She hadn't given up hope that things would improve, however.

Not even now. Her husband might still see the light, get help, stop drinking. Then he'd revert to his old self. And love her again.

On her way up to bed, after she'd let the dog out and spent a few minutes gazing up at the stars, she made her nightly detour to the den, where Harry had set up his vast flat-screen television, his red leather recliner, his fifties drinks cabinet. He was asleep, of course, the remote clutched in his left hand, a nearly empty glass nestling in his lap as he snored for Britain in front of one of the endless golf replays that blared out into the stuffy, wood-panelled sitting room.

'Come on, Harry . . . wake up . . . it's late.' She gently prised the glass from his hand and put it on the side table.

He harrumphed, half opened his bloodshot eyes without registering her presence, then closed them again.

'Harry . . . come on, get up. Time for bed.'

This process could go on for a while. And he was such a heavy man – tall and a dead weight – that Karen's small frame stood no chance of lifting him unless he helped her.

Once she'd dragged him upstairs, undressed him, left him flat on his back under the duvet, she went to one of the spare rooms to sleep. She hadn't felt comfortable doing so when Sophie was there – not wanting to give any ammunition to her stepdaughter that she might use to drive a bigger wedge between Karen and Harry. But now it was a blessed relief to sleep alone between the chilly sheets and not have to endure the stale whisky fumes or listen to the tractor snores all night.

The next morning was a perfect winter day, cold, but with a bright-blue, cloudless sky, the sun pouring in the kitchen window. Karen made herself toast and marmalade – her own home-made

preserve, which she'd boiled down and potted into twelve sterilized glass jars of assorted sizes only the previous week – and a mug of filter coffee. She ate quickly, impatient to be outside, to escape with the dog on to the Sussex downs behind the house. Because if Harry woke up he'd expect her to stay and make his breakfast, which always involved a tedious round of orange juice, eggs, bacon, tomato, toast, tea and the *Telegraph*.

The ground was frosty and crackling under her boots as she strode up the path on to the hill. Largo was delirious, charging over the rough ground, snorting and snuffling and wagging his tail as he stuck his nose down rabbit holes and inhaled all the scents brought out by the sunshine. Karen sucked in the fresh air, light-headed with the sense of release from the confines of the house. She loved being outdoors – even as a child, she was always badgering her mother to let her play out, never happier than when she was allowed to take Johnny, her brother, into the Devon hills with their collie dog and sandwiches in her backpack.

She saw someone up ahead. The new vicar. He looked lost, just standing on the brow of the hill as if he were trying to get his bearings. She groaned silently. Reverend Haskell had only arrived last November after the parish's previous incumbent, Bob Parkin, had been finally diagnosed with Alzheimer's.

Largo, racing up to him, obviously startled the man out of his reverie because he jumped and looked around.

'Oh . . . Mrs Stewart,' he said.

'Reverend,' she replied.

'Please . . . call me William, everyone else does.'

'Only if you call me Karen.'

They both smiled.

'Deal,' he said.

There was an awkward silence, made more uncomfortable on Karen's part because ever since William Haskell's arrival in the village, she had felt a subtle pressure from him to become part of the congregation. He had asked her three times now – no doubt prompted by her husband – if she would like to meet him to 'discuss things over coffee'. But Karen was not a churchgoer, did not believe in God – or at least not the organized-religion version. She had managed to resist all Harry's blandishments over the years to come to services with him, and she was not about to give in to this new attack on her faithlessness.

'Isn't it just the most stunning day?' he said, gazing out over the hills. He was in his mid-fifties, Karen reckoned, maybe a bit younger, slim but with broad shoulders and an upright posture that made him look taller than he was. His colouring reminded her of an Irish boyfriend she had once had with his dark hair – the thickness making the short cut unruly – fair skin and very light-blue Celtic eyes surrounded by dark lashes. She wouldn't have called him good looking exactly, but his face was strong, lived in, with a deep furrow between his eyebrows as if he were permanently worried. He was certainly a breath of fresh air in the village after decades of Bob's plodding, unimaginative ministry. Haskell was charismatic, energetic and intent on shaking the parish up, raising money for just causes, involving everyone in 'community' – his favourite buzzword.

'We need it after all that rain,' she said, dying to get on with her walk.

They both stood, hands in the pockets of their jackets, breath steaming in the cold, looking at the view rather than at each other. Where they were standing gave a toytown impression of the village below, so neat and pretty and tranquil, the square tower of the

Norman church majestic in the shaft of sunlight coming over the hill. Her house, the Old Rectory – large and elegant, early Victorian brick – sitting contentedly beside the church. The vicar’s, by contrast, a dull, boxy, seventies build further down the lane where he lived with his wife, Janey, and seventeen-year-old daughter, Rachel.

‘Is Harry OK?’ William asked. ‘I didn’t see him in church yesterday.’

Her husband was a church warden, a pillar of the parish council, frequent benefactor to the church bell-tower fund, and allowed the church fête to be held in their garden every summer. In the past he would rarely miss a service, sometimes going to evensong as well as to matins. But the drinking had made his attendance erratic.

‘He wasn’t feeling well,’ she said, entirely truthfully as Harry had barely been able to stand with his crippling hangover on Sunday morning.

‘Nothing serious, I hope?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘Give him my best, will you?’ The reverend seemed to stir himself. ‘Right, better get on. So many things to do . . .’ He paused, taking a long, slow breath. ‘This is such a lovely part of the world. What luck to be able to work here.’

Karen nodded, but although his words were delivered with his usual enthusiasm, they fell strangely flat in the still morning air, as if he were trying to convince himself that he was happy to be there by virtue of saying so.

‘Is it time for that coffee yet?’ was his parting shot as he waved, grinned and strode off towards the village.

Is he not quite as happy as he seems? she wondered, as she walked on up the path. She’d detected a pensive, almost disconsolate look in

his light eyes, quite out of sync with his determinedly cheery vicar persona. *Still, it can't be that easy being a religious man in today's secular world.*

'Where have you been?'

The kitchen was dim with smoke and rank with the smell of burning fat. On the stove was a frying pan containing a scorched rasher of bacon, now cold and congealed. The table was a litter of crumbs and burnt toast, the lid off the marmalade, a greasy knife resting on the open butter packet, the filter machine still on despite the glass carafe being empty, adding the aroma of singed coffee to the mix. Harry was sitting with the newspaper spread out in front of him, his reading glasses balanced on the end of his nose, his colour high, a light sheen of sweat on his forehead.

'A walk, it's such a beautiful day,' she replied. 'I met the vicar on the hill.'

Her husband gave a low growl. 'Preposterous man. All that hail-fellow-well-met rubbish. He's a Happy Clappy, no question. Mark my words, he'll have us singing "Kumbaya" next. Bob may have been dotty, but at least he knew tradition when he saw it.'

This seemed a bit unfair to Karen, but she knew better than to challenge her husband over religion.

'How are you feeling? You look a bit rough.' She rinsed out the coffee jug and filled the filter paper with fresh grounds.

Harry turned back to his paper. 'What's that supposed to mean?'

'It means you look ill, Harry. You're bright red in the face and sweating.'

'I just drank four cups of coffee and ate a massive fry-up, that's why I'm sweating.' He shot her a warning look, obviously hoping to silence her on the subject of his hangover.

‘The vicar wondered why you weren’t at church yesterday. I said you were ill.’

‘It’s none of his bloody business. He should spend more time preaching and less time poking his nose into my affairs. He was banging on about “syncretism” last week. What the hell’s that supposed to mean? The man’s an idiot.’

Karen had no idea what it meant. She did know, however, that Harry’s absence from church had nothing whatever to do with Reverend Haskell’s preaching, but she was not going to have that argument right now. ‘He seems like a good man, though, don’t you think? He’s already started a lunch club for the old people, Sheila said. At least he’s enthusiastic.’

Harry gave her a pitying look. ‘Ha! “Enthusiastic”. Just what we need in a man of the cloth. Although I’m not sure what qualifies you to judge, seeing as you never set foot in church.’

‘He’s not in church all the time, Harry. I’ve met him out and about, I hear people talk, I’m perfectly entitled to say whether he seems like a good person or not.’

‘I’d rather assumed it was part of a vicar’s job description to be good,’ Harry retorted. ‘Or have I missed something?’

She didn’t respond to his sarcasm, just began to clear away the mess in silence.