

# MARCIA WILLETT

## *The Prodigal Wife*

Can a family that has  
been broken ever  
be mended again?



## About the Book

The Keep – that beautiful, ancient family home where the Chadwick family have lived for generations – is still a haven from the heartbreaks and storms of life. Jolyon Chadwick, a famous television presenter, takes his new girlfriend Henrietta home to meet his extended family – and also to meet Maria, the mother who deserted him and his father many years ago, who has now reappeared and seems to want forgiveness.

Jolyon, however, is not in the mood for forgiveness, although his father Hal, now married to his childhood sweetheart, feels a lingering guilt about Maria and wants them all to be friends. And Henrietta, still vulnerable from the break-up of her own parents' marriage, is not sure whether she can move on . . .

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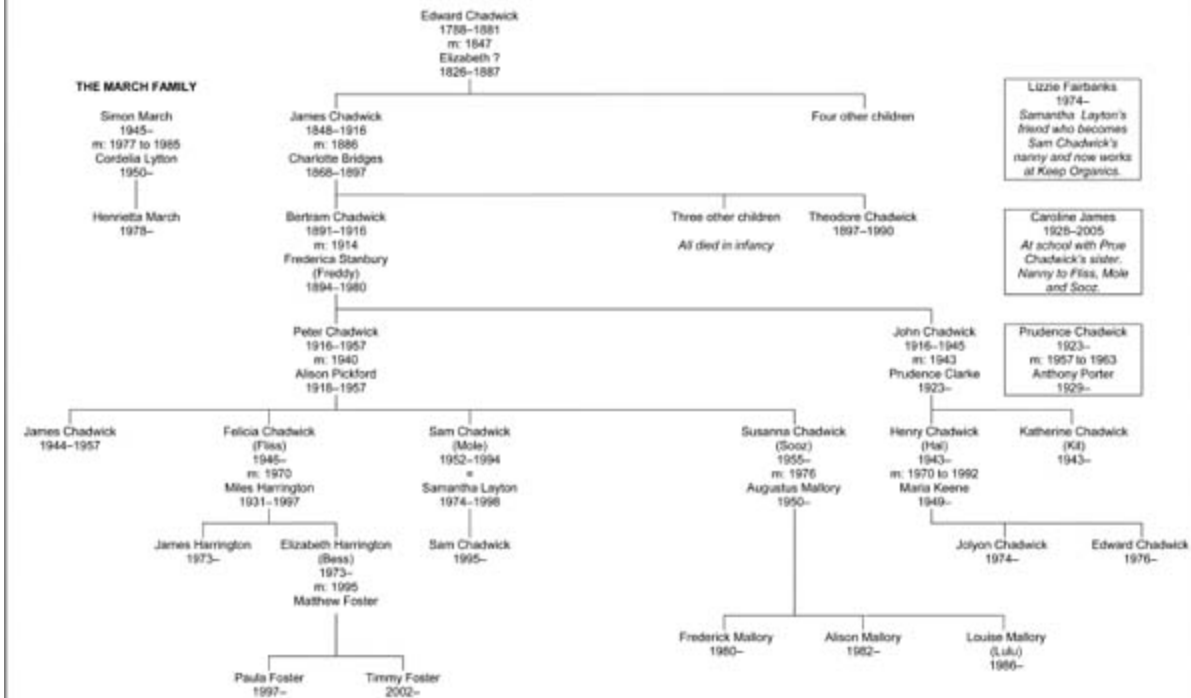
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THE PRODIGAL  
WIFE

MARCIA WILLETT

To my sisters' children and their children

## THE CHADWICK FAMILY TREE



### NOTES:

Maria Chadwick marries Adam Wishart (1948 - 2006) in 1995 following her divorce from Henry Chadwick.  
Henry Chadwick and Felicia Harrington marry in 1998.  
Full details may be found in The Chadwick Trilogy: Looking Forward, Holding On and Winning Through.

# PART ONE



## CHAPTER ONE

THE WIND WAS rising; it plucked restlessly at the storm-weathered stone walls and breathed in the chimney. It stroked the sea's glittering moonlit surface to little peaks and rustled drily amongst the stiff broken bracken on the cliff. The row of coastguard cottages turned blank eyes to the long rollers that creamed over the sand, sinking away to a delicate salty froth at the tide's reach. A cloud slid across the moon's round bright face. On the steep, slippery, gorse-plucking cliff path, a yellow light flickered and danced and disappeared.

Drifting between uneasy sleep and wakefulness, Cordelia startled wide awake, eyes straining in the darkness. As she slipped out of bed and crossed to the window the moon rose free of the cloud, laying silver and black patterns across the floor. Out at sea, the brilliance of its shining path, fractured with light like splintered glass, cast the water on each side of it into an oily blackness. Once she would have pulled on some clothes and climbed down the steep granite staircase to the tiny cove below the cottage; now, common sense prevailed: she had a long journey to make in the morning. Yet she lingered, bewitched as she always was by the unearthly magic; watching the black swirl of the tide round the shining rocks.

Was that a figure on the path below or clouds crossing on the moon? Alert, she stared downwards into the shifting, shadowy darkness where shapes thickened and dislimned as vaporous mist drifted and clung along the cliff edge. Behind her the bedroom door swung silently open and a

large pale shape loomed. Sensing a presence, glancing backwards, she muffled a tiny scream.

‘McGregor, you wretch. I wish you wouldn’t do that.’

The tall, gaunt deerhound padded gently to her side and she laid her hand on his rough head. They stared together into the night. To the west, beyond Stoke Point, the squat, bright-lit ferry from Plymouth edged into sight, chugging its way to Roscoff. No other light showed.

‘You would have barked, wouldn’t you? If anyone were out there, you would have barked. Well, you can stay here now. No more wandering round the house in the dark. On your bed. Go on.’

The great hound obeyed; collapsing quietly on to a blanket of tartan fleece, his eyes watchful, glinting. Cordelia climbed back into bed and pulled the quilt up high, smiling a secret smile; thinking about the morning. Even after thirty years as a journalist she was still excited by the prospect of journeys and new assignments, and this one promised to be fun: a drive into Gloucestershire to find an ancient soke and to interview its almost equally ancient owner – and a meeting on a narrowboat with her lover.

She slept at last but the deerhound raised his narrow head from time to time, listening. Once or twice he growled deep in his throat but Cordelia was sleeping soundly now and didn’t hear him.

She woke early and was away, travelling north, by a quarter to eight. It was raining hard. McGregor reclined gracefully on the back seat of her small hatchback. He stared with regal indifference at the drenched countryside and when they turned on to the A38 at Wrangaton, heading north towards Exeter, he sighed and put his head down on his paws. Clearly the brief run on the cliff he’d had earlier was to be his ration for a while. Cordelia chatted to him between bursts of song – she needed music whilst she was driving – and noticed in the mirror that something had been

caught under the rear-screen wiper. She switched it on and the fragment – a leaf? – was dragged to and fro across the window but wasn't dislodged.

Cordelia switched it off, hummed a bar or two of 'Every Time We Say Goodbye' with Ella Fitzgerald and thought about the soke and its elderly owner, who was clearly thrilled at the prospect of being written up for *Country Illustrated*. She'd spoken to him on the telephone and he sounded an absolute sweetie. She did a quick mental check-up: had she remembered to pack the spare batteries for her tape recorder? She pulled off at the Sedgemoor service station and got out so as to give McGregor a run. Whilst he paced elegantly along the hedge line, Cordelia removed the small square of sodden paper from behind the windscreen wiper. It almost came apart in her fingers but she could see patches of bright colour and she tried to smooth it flat on the bonnet of the car, squeezing out the moisture, puzzled as to how it could have become wedged. She guessed that it might be an advertisement, tucked there by somebody in the supermarket car park, but she was surprised that she hadn't noticed it before. The rain had done its work and it was impossible, now, to guess at what it had been. She scrumpled the fragment and put it into her pocket. The rain had stopped and gleams of watery light slipped between the rags of cloud that were blown before the south-westerly wind. She opened the door for McGregor to scramble on to the back seat and then went to get a mocha and a *pain au chocolat*.

Angus phoned just after she'd turned off the M5 at Junction 13 and was heading towards Stroud. She pulled in at the side of the road and picked up her mobile.

'Where are you?' she asked. 'Have the boys gone?'

'Yes, they're safely *en route*. Don't worry. The coast is clear. I'm on my way to Tewkesbury, hoping to moor up overnight in the marina. You've got the map?'

‘Yes. I’ll phone when I’ve finished at the soke. I’ve no idea how long it might take. Did they love the narrowboat?’

‘It was a huge success. We’ve all agreed that we want to do it again. Speak later then? Good luck.’

She drove on through Stroud and into the lanes that led to Frampton Parva, stopping once or twice to check the directions. As she turned into the lane signposted to the village she saw the soke at once and pulled on to the verge under the hedge. It stood across the fields at the end of its own drive; golden stone, three storeys high, mullion windows, and, only a few yards further along the lane, a tiny, beautiful church. The combination of church and house was quite perfect and she wondered if the photographer had spotted it.

Cordelia let McGregor out, knowing that he might have to wait in the car for some while, and stood enjoying the scene and the warm sunshine. Now she could see two figures moving outside the soke: one gesticulating, the other slung about with equipment. So the photographer had arrived; she hoped it was Will Goddard. She liked working with Will. She put her hands into her pockets and her fingers came into contact with the ball of paper. She took it out and tried to flatten it into some kind of identifiable shape. It was drier now and she could just make out a picture. It looked like a poorly photocopied photograph; two people in an imposing doorway, at the top of some steps – a hotel, perhaps? – turning towards each other. She half recognized the embroidered denim jacket as her own, but why should it be? Cordelia turned it over to see if there might be some clue on the back of the paper. There had been something written there but the ink was smudged and illegible. She folded the paper more carefully this time and dropped it back into her pocket.

McGregor came loping towards her and she coaxed him into the car with the promise of a biscuit and settled him again. She checked her bag: tape recorder, notebook,

pencil; ran her eye over a list of questions to refresh her memory and drove down to the gateway of Charteris Soke.

Three hours later, on the narrowboat, while Angus made tea, she described the soke: the courtroom with its beautiful judge's seat set within an ancient, barred window, the carved stone fireplace with its coat of arms, and the secret door to the tower, which had once been a fortified treasury; and its charming owner whose family had lived there for centuries.

Presently she stretched and looked about her appreciatively.

'This is fun,' she said. 'And we've got all day tomorrow to ourselves. What bliss.'

'I thought we'd go upriver to Pershore,' he said. 'Let's hope McGregor likes being a water-gypsy. Does Henrietta know where you are? How is she acclimatizing to house-sitting on the Quantocks after her busy life nannying in London?'

Cordelia made a face. 'With difficulty. My poor daughter is in shock but coping.'

'I know you told me about it on the phone but I've lost the plot a bit. What exactly happened?'

'Oh, it's just so sad. Susan and Iain - that's the couple Henrietta works for - have split up. Apparently Iain's been having an affair for ages and poor Susan hadn't the least suspicion until he said he was leaving. It's been a frightful shock for everyone. Well, Susan's parents were planning to go to New Zealand to see their other daughter and they decided that the best thing was simply to take Susan and the children with them to give everyone a breathing space. They all went off last week.'

'And where does the cottage on the Quantocks come in?'

'That's where Susan's parents live. Maggie and Roger. There was no room for Henrietta at the daughter's house in New Zealand, you see, so she's gone down to look after the

dogs and the old ponies while they're all away. I've sent her a text and told her I'll be home on Sunday night. And no, I haven't told her I'm here with you - but you knew that. She'll expect me to be in a B & B. That's what I usually do.'

'You'll have to tell her one day, especially now that I've moved down to Dartmouth,' Angus said - and grimaced at her exasperated expression. 'OK, OK. I promise not to mention it again. Not this weekend, anyway. I thought we'd have supper at the White Bear. Then we'll get away early in the morning and I'll cook breakfast somewhere upriver.'

'Sounds wonderful,' Cordelia said. 'Look, d'you mind if I just make a few notes while today's all still so fresh in my mind? Then I can put the soke out of my head and relax, and we'll take McGregor for a walk along the towpath.'

## CHAPTER TWO

HENRIETTA RECOGNIZED THE voice at once, though this morning the message was a different one.

*'Hi, Roger. It's me again. It's ten o'clock on Tuesday morning. I might pop in later today on my way down from Bristol. Round about four o'clock. Sorry I keep missing you.'*

Instinctively she glanced at her watch: just after eleven.

'It's your fault he keeps missing us, whoever he is,' she told the dogs, who had subsided into furry golden heaps on the cold slates. 'He always phones when we're out for a walk.'

Their feathery tails wagged with polite indifference and Juno, mother and grandmother of the other two retrievers, heaved herself to her feet so as to drink lavishly from the large bowl of water beside the dresser. The kitchen door stood open to the warm September sunshine and a delightful confusion of rich colour: pinky mauve Japanese anemones, crimson and purple Michaelmas daisies, scarlet montbretia all grouped together and dusted by the powdery sunlight. Henrietta made coffee and carried it to the little wooden chair outside the door. She felt that something significant was about to happen: there was a kind of magic in the soft golden glow that overlaid this small court; an expectant, hushed waiting in the deep rural silence. Juno came out to sit beside her, leaning against the chair, and Henrietta slid her arm around the furry neck and laid her cheek on the top of Juno's head.

'You miss them all, don't you?' she murmured sympathetically. 'Well, so do I, but we might as well get

used to it.'

They sat quietly together, Henrietta sipping her coffee and wondering about the voice on the answering machine, whilst Juno's heavy head rested against her knee. The first message had been waiting for her just a few hours after Roger and Maggie had left for London on the first leg of their journey nearly a week ago. To distract the dogs from their departure she'd driven them off through the narrow lanes towards Crowcombe, up to the Great Wood, and taken them for a walk on Robin Upright's Hill where she could look out across Bridgwater Bay. When she'd returned to the cottage, the green light on the answerphone had been flashing. She'd hurried to it, fearful that there had been some kind of problem; that the train had been delayed and they'd failed to meet up with Susan and the children.

*'Hi, Roger, it's Joe. Thanks for looking out the books for me. I'll be coming your way soon. Love to Maggie.'*

There had been no instructions about Joe's books, although a carrier bag stood on the chest in the hall. She'd glanced inside and seen that it did indeed contain books: books about boats and harbours. Well, that wasn't surprising given that Roger was a retired naval officer with a very wide knowledge of old sailing boats.

But who was this Joe? Henrietta had the oddest feeling that she knew him; that she recognized his voice – she'd even imagined that she'd met him and that they'd talked. Now, sitting in the sun with Juno stretched out at her feet, she could visualize him: tall, with fair hair, hands sketching shapes in the air as he talked. But where and when? She pulled her long thick plait over one shoulder and twiddled the end, drawing it through her fingers. It occurred to her that he might be a member of one of the naval families with whom she was connected by the network of married quarters, naval hirings and boarding schools. Clearly he was on familiar terms with Roger and Maggie. A new thought, that he also might be of their generation, gave rise



to a sudden and quite disproportionate sense of disappointment. Of course she could dial 1471, get his number – unless it was withheld – telephone this Joe and tell him Roger was away but she'd found a bag of books that might be for him. Perhaps she simply wanted to enjoy the mystery for a little longer: to allow her imagination to weave amusing scenarios which distracted from her present problems.

His voice sounded young, she told herself firmly. And that image of him talking, explaining something to her, was the image of a young man. Yet, if they'd met, how could she have forgotten his name? She finished her coffee with mixed emotions: excitement, apprehension, curiosity.

'Get a grip,' she told herself. 'He's probably a boring old fart with a passion for tea clippers.'

Nevertheless, she decided that she'd drive into Bicknoller after lunch and buy something special for tea – a delicious sponge perhaps. Luckily Roger had a very large stock of alcohol, though she'd get a lemon in case Joe liked a gin and tonic. She wondered what she could rustle up for supper ...

'Honestly!' she cried aloud in vexation. 'What are you *doing*?'

Juno struggled up, alarmed by the sudden cry, and Henrietta stroked her head remorsefully.

'Sorry,' she said. 'Sorry, Juno. I'm losing it. That's what comes of having nothing to do. I'm missing the children, and Susan dashing in and out, and all the usual dramas.'

Another thought occurred to her. Gently pushing Juno's bulk to one side, Henrietta got up and went into the house. She hesitated for a moment before replaying the message, and then she found her mobile and dialled her mother's number.

Two telephone calls before she'd even got to her desk, which was covered with computer printouts, articles

snipped from newspapers and journals, reference books. Wandering between the kitchen and the study, mug of coffee in hand, she was just getting the first sentence of her piece into her head: 'Charteris Soke in Frampton Parva is the only house of its kind known to exist this far south.' Pause there. Was she absolutely certain that this was true? Well, that could be thoroughly checked later. Now. Should it be '*delightful* Charteris Soke'? Or '*charming* Charteris Soke'? Either adjective seemed overused; dull. Anyway, follow that with a bit about what a soke actually is. Cordelia riffled about for a relevant piece of paper, checked the dictionary definition of soke or *soc*: the right to hold a local court; or the territory under the jurisdiction of a particular court. She studied the photographs of the little ancient manor house – the shape of the piece was gradually forming – and then her mobile phone shrieked again in the bowels of the kitchen and she put down the coffee mug and ran out into the passage, finally snatching the phone up from beneath the pile of newspapers on the kitchen table.

'Hi,' she cried breathlessly. 'Hello? Are you still there? Oh, Henrietta. Oh, thank goodness. I thought I was too late and you'd hung up. Did you get my text to say that I was back? How's it going? Are you settling in?'

'I'm fine, Mum. Yes, I got your text. Everything's fine. Look, I just thought I'd check with you. I've had this message on the answerphone from someone called Joe who wants to drop in later and who obviously knows Roger and Maggie very well, so I'm wondering if there might be a naval connection. I feel I recognize the voice. Do we know someone called Joe? My generation, not yours. Does it ring any bells?'

'Jo.' Cordelia cast about amongst her large circle of naval friends and acquaintances. 'Jo. That's short for Joanna, I suppose, or Josephine ...'

'No, no. Sorry. This is a man not a girl.'

'Ah.' Cordelia revised her ideas. 'Joe. Right. Joseph. No, I can't think of a Joe offhand.'

'Me neither. Only the voice sounds familiar. Never mind. Are you OK?'

'Fine. Wrestling with that piece for *Country Illustrated*. Sure you don't want some company? It must be so odd to be suddenly set down in the middle of rural Somerset with nothing but Maggie's menagerie for company after the house in London with Susan and ... with Susan and the children. I could come over if you're feeling lonely. Or we could meet in Taunton for a spot of retail therapy.'

'Honestly, I'm fine. Really. And anyway, you're obviously in the middle of your article. I'll let you know who Joe is later on. 'Bye.'

Cordelia went back to her study, her mind all over the place, completely distracted. Had there been a veiled criticism there? *You're obviously in the middle of your article*. Love for her daughter filled her, along with anxiety and compassion and guilt, especially guilt: all the emotions guaranteed to quench any creative flow. She fiddled about, tidying papers, closing books and putting them back on shelves, sipping at the lukewarm coffee whilst a question she'd heard recently on a radio programme nibbled at her thoughts.

*Are we the first generation to need to be friends with our children?*

Well, are we? She thought about her own parents: caring but detached. None of this emotional soul-baring for them; no in-depth discussions of their offsprings' feelings or needs. She could well remember her father's reaction to her own separation and subsequent divorce, his expression of shock fading into distaste when she told him that Simon was leaving her.

'Another woman, I suppose. No, I don't want the sordid details. I can only say that I'm glad your mother is dead.'

No, no. Things relating to the emotions were best kept hidden; not talked of; stiff upper lip.

*Are we the first generation to need to be friends with our children?*

Well, she did need to be friends with Henrietta. She wanted to encourage and support and be there for her. But, oh, the grief and anxiety not to be shown, never to be shown, just gnawing away inside.

Henrietta's little pinched white face: 'Is Daddy leaving us because I got bored of cleaning out Boris properly?'

Boris was the hamster, a handsome, benign, if intellectually limited, creature.

'Bored *with*, darling, or *by*. No, of course he isn't. It's just that sometimes friendships stop working properly.'

'But Daddy's still friends with me?'

'Of course he is. And always will be.' Until he'd written to his daughter when she was fifteen; a creamy white envelope containing a message as destructive as a bomb whose fallout was still causing damage nearly twelve years later.

Cordelia sat down and stared at the computer screen, unhelpfully blank just like her mind. How inept she'd been at the time. How ineffectual and helpless. She'd felt exactly the same when she'd arrived in Tregunter Road a month ago to find the place in turmoil.

Suddenly the screen seems to dissolve before her eyes and instead she sees Henrietta's face, her eyes wary, the old familiar shadow slicing down between them like a sword, cutting off any exchange of warmth and love.

She's up in London for a lunch at the Arts Club with her agent. She stays with friends in Fulham but drops in, as arranged, to see Henrietta on the way to Dover Street. As soon as the door opens she knows that something is wrong. The usual atmosphere of busy conviviality is missing. No sound comes from the two big basement rooms from which

Susan directs her small but successful mail-order business, and the kitchen is deserted: no Iain snatching a moment from his computer with the morning paper and a cup of coffee; no children running in from the garden to greet her.

Cordelia puts her bag on the table, looks around, puzzled.

‘Is it a bad moment?’ she asks.

Henrietta’s eyes are enormous with shock. ‘Iain’s gone,’ she says. ‘He’s just packed up and gone.’

They stare at each other. ‘Gone?’ Her own voice is husky, fearful. ‘D’you mean he’s left Susan?’

Henrietta nods. Suddenly her expression changes, grows distant. ‘Yes, gone. This morning. Apparently he’s been having an affair for ages. Susan’s gutted.’

They continue to stare at each other; other memories surfacing, resentment stirring. Susan’s voice is heard, calling from upstairs, and a child is crying.

‘You’d better go,’ says Henrietta quickly. ‘Sorry, but she won’t want to see anyone just yet and I’m trying to keep the children out of her hair,’ and Cordelia acquiesces at once, letting herself out of the house, hurrying away to Dover Street.

‘Charteris Soke in Frampton Parva is the only house ...’ It was beginning to sound like an estate agent’s enthusiastic pitch rather than a feature on a tiny piece of history. When the telephone rang again Cordelia snatched it up almost fearfully, until she saw his initials.

‘Dilly?’

The sound of his voice, the silly, familiar nickname, filled her with joy and relief. As her shoulders relaxed and she took a deep, deep breath she realized how very tense she’d been.

‘Darling. Wasn’t it fun? When shall I see you?’

‘I could be with you about tea-time. Would that be good?’

She could hear the smile in his voice. 'You have no idea how good,' she answered. 'Bye, darling.'

Cordelia stood up and went back to the kitchen, then out on to the wide stone balcony carved from the cliff, which dropped precipitously into the sea below. Hers was the last in the row of coastguard cottages and the most private. The other two were holiday homes, let out for most of the summer and empty for the greater part of the winter. Her windows had an uninterrupted view of the sea, and of the coast that stretched away to Stoke Point to the west and Bolt Tail to the east. Inside the boundary walls she'd planted escallonia, fuchsia, tamarisk, to protect herself from the interested, and even envious, gaze of walkers on the coastal path higher up the cliff that passed a few yards from the front door. She leaned her elbows on the wide wall where feverfew clung in tiny crevices, and clumps of pink and white valerian were precariously rooted. Below her the sea rocked gently as though it were tethered to the cliffs, anchored and going nowhere; a squabble of seagulls screamed insults at one another from sharp-angled ledges. Light streamed down from a wide haze-blue firmament and was reflected back so that there was no distinction between sky and water. Away to the west a single fishing boat ploughed a lonely, shining furrow.

Soon he would be on his way: there would be time for talk, for sharing, and for love.

'It's so silly,' she said to him much later. 'I threw a wobbly. Panicking about Henrietta and how she'll manage while they're all away. Two months! It's such a long time, Angus.'

She passed him a mug of tea, suddenly remembering the remark a mutual friend had once made about Angus Radcliff. 'He's so dishy, he could have been the model for Action Man,' she'd said. 'I rather fancy him, don't you?' Cordelia had pretended indifference but she'd understood what she meant: the disconcerting light-grey stare and

strong jaw; the dark, close-cropped hair and compact, well-muscled body.

‘So which outfit do you imagine him in?’ she’d asked the friend. ‘Resistance Fighter? Helicopter Pilot? Arctic Explorer?’

‘Oh, I imagine him in nothing at all,’ the friend had answered promptly. ‘That’s the whole point’ – and they’d shrieked with laughter.

Now, sitting down opposite him, she hid her smile. ‘And I’ve been thinking,’ she said. ‘You know when we were on the narrowboat I was telling you about Susan’s marriage breaking up and her parents whisking her and the children off to New Zealand? Well, it occurred to me when I was driving home that surely you must know Roger and Maggie Lestrangle? Wasn’t Roger at Dartmouth the same year as you and Simon?’

‘Roger Lestrangle. Yes, of course I know him. You didn’t mention his surname. But we weren’t the same year. Roger was two years ahead of me and Simon at BRNC, but much later on Roger and I were at the M.o.D. together with Hal Chadwick. Roger and Hal were great oppos. Or should I say Admiral Sir Henry Chadwick?’ He pulled a mock-reverential face.

‘Dear old Hal,’ Cordelia said affectionately. ‘He’s such a sweetie. And Fliss is so perfect as Lady Chadwick. That clean-cut, patrician face. Couldn’t happen to a nicer couple. Remember when they let me do that piece for *Country Life* on that wonderful old house of theirs? The Keep. Hal was thrilled but Fliss insisted that their more personal details were kept right out of it, which was fair enough, I suppose. Apart from the history of the place we decided to concentrate on the organic vegetable-growing business that Jolyon started, Keep Organics. It was great fun.’

‘Odd, though, isn’t it?’ he said thoughtfully. ‘They weren’t always a couple, Hal and Fliss. We tend to forget it because they seem so right together. They’ve only been

married for about seven or eight years. Fliss and Hal are cousins, you know, and The Keep is just as much Fliss's as Hal's.'

'They explained that when I went to see them,' Cordelia admitted. 'That's why Fliss didn't want too much private stuff put in. It's been such a family house with so much drama that I could have written a whole book about them. It's an amazing place. Actually, the soke reminded me of it but on a much smaller scale. What happened to Hal's first wife? Did you know her?'

Angus frowned. 'I don't think so. Once we'd all specialized we lost touch a bit. Roger and Hal were skimmers; Simon and I went into submarines. I think we were up at the M.o.D. when Hal's wife left him. She took one of their boys but Jolyon stayed with Hal so we saw much more of him. I must say it's so odd when I see Jo on the television these days. He's the image of Hal when he was that age.'

'Jo!' Cordelia clapped her hand to her mouth. 'Jolyon Chadwick. I *am* a fool.'

'Why?'

'That's why Henrietta telephoned. She said someone called Jo had left a message for Roger and she thought she recognized his voice. I never thought of Jolyon. I was thinking Joseph, or Joe with an e. I am a twit. He was going to drop in, not knowing that Maggie and Roger have gone off to New Zealand.'

'Well, that's all right,' Angus said comfortably. 'Henrietta won't come to any harm with Jo.'

'Of course not. But I might just phone. Give her a warning shot across the bows. After all, he's quite a celebrity now, isn't he? She might be cross to be caught in her old jeans and no make-up.'

She found her mobile and pressed the buttons.

'Darling, it's me. Listen. I'm wondering if it's Jo Chadwick who left the message ... Oh. Oh, he's there now.'



Right ... OK. Later on, yes, that'll be fine.'

Cordelia switched off and made a face at him. 'He's already there,' she said.

Angus grinned. 'And?'

Cordelia considered. 'She sounded flustered. But in a nice way. Said she'd speak later on.'

He raised his eyebrows, pursed his lips. 'Not too much later on, I hope,' he said. 'We might be busy.'

## CHAPTER THREE

SHE'D RECOGNIZED HIM at once. He'd paused on the garden path, a slightly perplexed expression clouding his face, as if he'd suspected some change he couldn't quite pin down. Then Juno and Pan had strolled out of the door to meet him, his expression had cleared and he'd held out his hands to them, bending to stroke them. The puppy had gambolled behind them, prancing and bounding, and he'd laughed aloud and said, 'Hello, old fellow,' and crouched to pull the puppy's ears. He'd glanced up then, and seen her waiting by the door, and his look of surprise had been almost ludicrous. He'd waded towards her through the sea of dogs and said, 'Hello. Is Roger around?' and she'd said, 'No, I'm afraid not, but come in. I think I've got some books for you.'

Now, they stood rather shyly together in the cool, dim hall, looking at the books, and she said, 'So you didn't know that Maggie and Roger had gone to New Zealand?'

'No.' He put the book back into the bag. 'I'd heard that it was on the cards, but I had no idea they'd gone. And so you're looking after the dogs? And the old ponies.'

She hesitated. It would be easy to allow him to believe that she was an Animal Aunt; no explanations would be needed and he would disappear with his books and that would be that. But she didn't want him to disappear; she had an odd but very definite desire for him to stay.

'Well, I am,' she said, 'but it's not quite that simple. I'm not the Animal Aunt. I'm nanny to Susan's children. They've gone with Maggie and Roger, you see.'

He looked at her more closely. 'I see,' he said. 'Well, I think I do. Look, I'm Jolyon Chadwick. My father is one of

Roger's oldest friends. Naval oppos and all that. I know Susan quite well, though I haven't seen her for years.'

She smiled. 'I know who you are,' she said. 'Mainly because of the television, of course, but I expect we've met up somewhere before. My family's Navy, too. Well, it was. I'm Henrietta March. Susan and I were at the Royal Naval School together. That's how I finished up as her nanny. I was between jobs at the same time that her business was really taking off and she had two babies, and it just seemed right somehow. When all this blew up I offered to come down here. Maggie's usual sitter was booked up.'

"All this"?' he repeated.

She hadn't expected her unconsidered phrase to be picked up quite so quickly. The silence lengthened whilst she wondered how much to tell him; after all, he would very soon hear the truth through the naval grapevine.

'Would you like some tea?' She postponed the moment. 'I've got rather a good cake from the village stores in Bicknoller.'

'Thanks.' He followed her into the kitchen and went down on his knees to play with the puppy that rolled on to his back in ecstasy and nibbled Jolyon's fingers with pin-sharp teeth. 'This fellow's new since I was last here. What's his name?'

'Maggie calls him Tacker. It's the Cornish coming out in her, Roger says. He has a rather grand kennel name but Maggie just began calling him Tacker and it's rather stuck.'

'Well, he is a little tacker,' said Jolyon. 'He's gorgeous. My old fellow, Rufus, died last year but he was just like this once. So.' He stood up and took his tea from her. 'What's it all about then?'

She'd decided not to prevaricate but still she hesitated. 'It's rather embarrassing, isn't it? After all, it's very personal and we don't really know each other.'

'We probably do. Naval families always have some connection. I expect our fathers know each other. I'm just

curious as to why Roger and Maggie have dashed off so suddenly without telling their closest friends, that's all. But don't worry if you feel it's indiscreet to tell me. I won't badger you.'

Henrietta sighed as she cut two slices of cake. 'It would be good to talk about it. To be honest, I'm still in shock. Iain has walked out on Susan. He's found someone else and they've split up. Maggie decided that it was a good moment for a sabbatical and has whirled Susan and the children off to New Zealand with her and Roger. Susan's partner is managing the business and looking after the London house and I agreed to come down here so that they could get away quickly.'

'I see. Poor old Susan.' His voice was bleak.

She glanced at him. His expression was grim and somehow this was comforting. 'I'm nearly as gutted as Susan,' she admitted. 'We were all so happy, you see. At least I thought we were. There was no hint of anything. No rows, no shouting, no disagreements. The business going on in the basement and lots of people around. We were like a big family. And this has just blasted us all.'

'Roger and Maggie must be devastated.'

'They are. It affects so many people, doesn't it?' She was silent for a moment. 'My parents are divorced.' She shrugged. 'So what? Big deal, and all that. But it was painful, and now it seems as if it's happened all over again. My second family is all in pieces and it's like I'm in mourning. Oh, I can't explain it.'

'You don't have to. I know all about it, except that I'm luckier than you are. My second family is still in one piece. Rather tough on you, being left alone, isn't it?'

'I don't think they saw it like that. I mean, they weren't really thinking about me in that light. Maggie's one concern was to get Susan and the children away, and I agreed with her. To be honest it was almost a relief. I didn't

want to be in Tregunter Road with Iain coming in and out, getting his things.'

'But this is a bit extreme. You need your friends at a time like this.'

'Maggie said I could invite people down. She was great. It's just I don't really want to talk about it yet. At least,' she grimaced, 'not with mutual friends. All that speculation and gossip stuff; picking over the juicy details. I'm not in the mood.'

He nodded. 'I can understand that.'

Her mobile rang. She picked it up from the dresser, glanced at the screen, hesitated, muttered, 'It's my mum,' and pressed the button. She slightly turned away from him, shoulder hunched, and he sat down at the table and began to murmur to the dogs.

'Hi, Mum ... Yes, actually he's here now ... Yes. I'll call you later.' She switched it off, looking embarrassed.

'I phoned her earlier,' she told him. 'I'd been trying to decide who you might be after all those messages. I asked her if she knew anyone called Jo and she'd just suddenly wondered if it might be you.'

'Oh.' He looked faintly gratified. 'What's your mum's name?'

'Cordelia Lytton. She reverted to her maiden name after the divorce. She's a journalist; a features writer. She mainly does the big glossies, but she's also written a series of rather off-beat factional books about the black sheep of ancient, well-known families. They've been very successful so her name might sound familiar.'

'Of course, I know her. She did that article about The Keep for *Country Life*. And she's been to some of Dad's parties. She's great fun.'

'Oh, yes. She's great fun,' Henrietta agreed.

He glanced at her, alerted by her non-committal tone. 'I'm surprised we haven't met then.'

Henrietta shrugged. 'I'm in London most of the time. In your message you said you were coming down from Bristol. Is that where you live?'

He shook his head. 'I'm still at The Keep. That's our house in the South Hams that Cordelia wrote the article about. It's a funny old place but there's plenty of room and I still like to be involved in the business I started, growing organic vegetables.'

'Before you became a famous television star,' she teased him.

'Hardly a star and certainly not famous. Crazy, isn't it? From gardener to television presenter in three easy stages.'

Henrietta grinned at him. 'You were a nine-day wonder that first summer. My goodness, the grapevine was *very* busy and Mum kept reminding me about the article she'd done about your family. And after that, Roger telephoned Susan every time you were going to be on the box so that we could get our friends in and boast that we knew you, and then we'd all sit round basking in your reflected glory.'

'Oh, stop it. Honestly, it was such a fluke, but I must admit I'm loving every minute of it.'

'It was amazing, though, wasn't it? What were you doing? Showing a rare rose at the Chelsea Flower Show or something? And next minute you're Monty Don and Ben Fogle rolled into one.'

'It was my great-grandmother's rose. She'd brought a cutting to The Keep when she got married and it thrived but we never knew what it was. It wasn't my idea to take it to the flower show. One of my cousins talked me into it and organized it all, and then the television crew decided to do a little bit about it because of its rarity value and we got on to the history of the family and suddenly it got out of hand.' He shook his head, still baffled by his success. 'The surprising thing was that when we did the live interview I