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The Summer Guest

Written by Emma Hannigan

Published by Headline Review

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Emma Hannigan

The Summer Guest

headline review

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This edition first published in 2014 by HEADLINE REVIEW
An imprint of HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP

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Cataloguing in Publication Data is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 4722 0999 3

Typeset in Bembo by Bookends Publishing Services
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Headline's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP
An Hachette UK Company
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

www.headline.co.uk
www.hachette.co.uk

Chapter 1

LEXIE GLANCED AT HER WATCH, MAKING SURE SHE had enough time for another cup of coffee. The remnants of breakfast festooned the table. She smiled to herself. Her husband, Sam, was such a creature of habit. As regular as clockwork, he stacked his coffee mug on top of his toast plate, with the knife neatly tucked alongside, but it never occurred to him to transport the pile across the kitchen to the dishwasher.

This was Lexie's favourite moment of the day. She flicked off the radio, posted a capsule into the Nespresso machine, placed her already used cup under the spout and pressed the brew button. She and Sam liked to hear the news headlines followed by the round-up of that day's newspapers, and after that, Lexie relished a few minutes of silence. She felt it set her up for the day ahead.

As she crossed the kitchen to the bay window seat, her leather-soled ballerina pumps made a satisfying sound as they connected with the waxed wooden floorboards. She perched on the long, spongy cushion and gazed out into the oval railed-in park opposite. The late May sunshine flooded the neatly kept communal space. Although each of the houses in Cashel Square had fine-sized gardens, the residents all made use of the wooden benches in the park. They took turns to tend the flowerbeds and keep the place clean. It was too small to appeal to gangs of youths and the absence of swings or play equipment meant it rarely attracted non-resident families.

Lexie sipped her coffee and closed her eyes to savour it. It was just the right temperature, black and strong with no sugar and a delectable covering of crema.

'I hope you don't liken your coffee to your taste in men,' Sam had joked when they first met, flexing a long arm and pulling his fingers through his auburn hair.

Luckily for both of them, Lexie's taste in men and coffee differed hugely. Soon after meeting they both realised they'd found their soul-mate. They had a no-fuss registry-office wedding, with her friend Maia as chief bridesmaid, flower girl and best man all rolled into one, followed by a lunch with immediate family as the only additional guests.

Property prices were beginning to rise, so they decided to take the plunge and look for a house to buy. One Sunday afternoon, out for a walk along the promenade in the seaside Dublin suburb of Caracove, they'd happened upon Cashel Square. It comprised eight detached two-storey-over-basement dwellings set in a horseshoe, with the park in the centre, and they'd guessed it was well out of their league. The door to number three had been open and a sandwich board told them there was open viewing. They were the sole viewers and the estate agent seemed thrilled with their arrival.

'It's a wonderful property but requires a small amount of imagination,' he said.

Lexie and Sam had looked at one another and grinned. They knew that meant the place was in dire need of renovation.

'It certainly needs a lot of loving,' Lexie said, as they wandered from room to room.

'It has massive potential,' the estate agent said, injecting as much positivity into his voice as he could.

'Yes, massive potential for us to pour an endless bag of cash into it,' Sam scoffed.

'Can we have a quiet word in private?' Lexie asked, as they finished their tour.

'Be my guests,' the estate agent said, yawning.

Lexie took Sam's hand and led him back into the kitchen. 'Sam, I can see us living here,' she whispered. 'I've totally fallen in love with it.'

'It could be amazing, but it's not what we're looking for, is it?'

Sam said, as he rubbed a hand across the peeling plaster on the main wall.

'I love it,' she repeated. A giggle escaped her as she noticed the colour draining from her husband-of-three-weeks' face.

'I don't like that dancing in your eyes, Lexie,' he said, with a slow smile.

'Let's make an offer,' she begged. 'One well below the asking price and verging on insulting and see where we go.'

'We're only starting out, hon,' he reasoned. 'This is a massive undertaking. It'd be years before it's back to its former glory. And even longer before we'd manage to pay back everything it'll siphon from our bank accounts. Old places like this are bottomless pits when it comes to money.'

'Perfect!' she said. 'We have all the time in the world. We're at the beginning of our journey. Let's do it together. You, me and number three Cashel Square!'

Lexie knew Sam found it hard to say no to her. Especially when she talked incessantly about the house. Several weeks passed after the initial viewing. Instead of giving up on the idea, Lexie was verging on obsessive.

'You're annoying me and I don't even live with you,' Maia said. 'Poor Sam now knows he married a lunatic. I reckon you should rein it in a bit. He'll go running for the hills if you don't stop with the crazy house talk.' Maia was a divorce lawyer and, although she had a very happy marriage with steadfast, calm Josh, she had a habit of seeing the worst in every union.

'I've seen it a million times – couples torn apart when one or other of them becomes fanatical about something. I told you about the pair who'd been married twenty-four years when it all went belly-up,' she warned.

'You said he was a sex addict and she was a raving alco. That's hardly comparable to wanting to build a home with the man I love,' Lexie said. She had a feeling deep down that Sam was just as keen as she, but he was attempting to be the voice of reason. She chipped away for the next few days until he uttered the words she'd been dying to hear.

'All right! We'll put in a measly offer. Will that stop your nagging?' he asked good-naturedly.

To their astonishment, the offer was accepted.

'It's an executors' sale and the family have instructed us to move quickly,' the estate agent explained.

Family and friends were marvellous, donating furniture and turning up in droves to the many painting parties the couple held. 'We'll provide the materials and pay you in beer and pizza,' Lexie promised.

By the end of that first summer of 1998, Lexie and Sam had a kitchen-living room, bathroom and bedroom in liveable order. The replastering wouldn't have won any DIY awards, but it was good enough to keep the damp out and the heat in.

'It looks like an enormous monster arrived in and vomited Ready Brek all over the place,' Maia teased. 'And as for tramping about on mangy old floorboards, nah. I'm happy in my apartment.' She shuddered.

'That, my dear,' Lexie said, linking her arm, 'is where you and I differ. I would go clinically insane in that dog-box you call home. Give me vaguely lumpy plasterwork done by caring but not the most professional of friends and vast open spaces any day.'

Penelope, Lexie's mother, was probably more in Maia's camp when it came to the house. She didn't *do* mess or dust or, God forbid, mismatched furnishings. 'You can do the rest as you go along, I suppose,' she said uncertainly, as she perched on the edge of a rather saggy sofa, clutching her handbag.

'Mum, you don't have to hold your bag like a life-raft. You're not going to drown on old goose-down cushions. Sam and I are delighted to have this place and we're not in a hurry to have it looking like something from that glossy interiors magazine, *The White Book*.'

'So I've noticed,' she said. 'Still,' she brightened, 'as the children start to come along, so too will the decorating.'

'Don't hold your breath, Mum,' Lexie said. 'Children aren't even a topic for discussion between Sam and me right now.'

'Well, that's a bit of a silly thing to say, don't you think? All married

couples turn their attention to having a family at some point. Anyway, we don't need to worry about it this second,' Penelope assured them. 'Needless to say your father and I are longing to be grandparents, but your brother just scratched that itch for us with the birth of gorgeous baby Amélie! I'm just *saying*, that's all.'

For the most part, Lexie and Sam kept to themselves. The neighbours in the remaining seven houses were friendly but never intrusive. They'd exchange pleasantries in passing and bid one another good day at the park. Ernie and Mary in number two fed Tiddles, the cat, if Lexie and Sam were on holiday.

Now, fifteen years later, there were still many nooks and crannies of number three Cashel Square waiting to be lovingly restored to their former glory. Lexie and Sam had made some headway, of course. They'd replaced the saggy old sofas with gorgeous cream leather ones. All the original fireplaces, ceiling cornices and floorboards had been carefully brought back to their prime. Sam had found a craftsman who'd moved into the basement for six months so he could rethread the sash windows and repair the hinges and panels of the shutters.

But the new kitchen they'd put in last year had cleared their rainy-day account. Many other rooms were still filled with junk or waiting to have the right furniture added.

Their long-term plans had changed since 1998 too. After an accident, Lexie had been forced to change tack with her career, but things were finally beginning to look up for them, despite the global recession.

Sam was now a shareholder in the computer-programming firm where he worked. But Lexie's promising job in graphic design had come tumbling down, literally. She'd been up an extendable ladder doing some careful ceiling-cornice painting when it had collapsed. She'd known by the cracking sound that her arm was broken. She'd landed on it awkwardly and it was twisted in a direction she knew wasn't natural. Crawling to the phone, she'd called Sam, then Maia.

True to form, Sam was calm and said he'd phone the ambulance. 'Stay where you are and I'll be with you in a jiffy. I love you.'

Maia was OTT as usual. 'You what? Jesus H. Christ, Lex. Is your arm hanging off or what?'

'No,' she sobbed, 'but it's really bad. Sam's on the way and so's the ambulance.'

'Well, don't go to St Mary's Hospital – they use knives and forks to sew people up. I had a client who went there to have a baby. Emergency section, baby was coming too soon, blah, blah. She had pains in her side for two months after the operation so she ended up in another hospital where they removed a fecking needle the other clowns had left there!'

'Okay.' Lexie had winced. 'I'm going now. I'm in so much pain I think I'm going to die.' She'd dropped the phone and promptly passed out. By the time she woke she was in recovery. Sam and Maia were on either side of her bed gazing anxiously at her. 'Hey,' she said weakly. 'What's happened with my arm?'

'You've had some pins put into your wrist,' Sam said gently. 'The surgical team said it was a bad break, honey.'

Maia was chewing the inside of her lip, looking agitated. Sam was smiling kindly.

'What?' she asked, turning to Maia.

'You're gonzoed,' she said. 'You're lucky they didn't saw your hand off and leave you with an unsightly stump.'

'Maia!' Sam said, growing irritated. 'Don't be so dramatic. Lexie had a horrible fall. She's going to be fine, though.'

Lexie adored Sam, but Maia was one of the only people in the world who'd tell her the truth. They'd been friends since school and, no matter what happened, they had each other's backs.

As it turned out, Lexie's injuries were closer to Maia's assumption than Sam's. 'Why did I have to break my left wrist?' Lexie wailed two days later. 'The doctors were so jubilant about the fact it wasn't the right.'

'They weren't to know you're left-handed,' Sam said, wiping away a tear. 'We'll get you the best darn physiotherapist in Dublin, and before long you'll be back in work and, most importantly, back painting your beloved portraits.'

Lexie really wanted to believe Sam. Her job was sacred to her and she was bringing so much extra business on board that her bosses had already offered her a rise. She knew it was only a matter of time before they suggested she become a partner. But all that paled into insignificance when it came to the way her painting made her feel. If a day was stressful or a week took its toll, she'd burrow away in the back room and paint.

Any time Sam suggested making the room more organised or even putting in some proper work surfaces, she balked. 'I love it this way. I know where things are and it allows me to be creative. I have to be regimented in work. This is *my* zone.'

Seven months later, despite her best efforts and many hours of painful physio, Lexie had to admit defeat.

'If things change, let us know,' Herman, her boss, said. 'The door is open whenever you get the control back in your hand.'

Lexie hugged him, accepted the farewell voucher for a massage treatment, and knew in her heart of hearts that she'd never be back at the graphic design company.

The cloud that shrouded her life could possibly have ruined everything, had Reggie, her father, not come to the rescue. She was wallowing in the house, day after day, slipping slowly into a depression when he single-handedly changed her destiny.

'I'm downsizing the company. I can't keep going with all the printing shops. Besides, lots of our customers are using cheaper on-line companies nowadays.'

'I'm sorry to hear that, Dad,' Lexie said. 'I know what it feels like when you're no longer in a position to fulfil your potential.'

Reggie patted her hand, telling her she was going to do that and more. He handed her a set of keys and told her the premises, which were strategically situated on the sea road a mere mile from Cashel Square, were hers, rent free, until she established a decent income.

'But what on earth can I do with your old printing shop?' she asked.

'How about setting up a gallery?' Reggie said.

Lexie sat back and allowed the idea wash over her. Astonishingly,

she didn't feel averse to the idea. In fact, the more she thought about it, the better it sounded. 'If I'm starting my career from scratch I may as well do so within walking distance of here,' she reasoned. 'The doctors say I'll be able to drive again in a few months, but for the moment it would more than suit me to be able to walk to work.'

'Of course,' Reggie said. 'It's the perfect area for a gallery, what with the promenade, the park and the pedestrian shopping area.' He had occupied the building for more than twenty years and knew the footfall was there. 'I'll help you decorate and I'm sure your friends will too. I ran the idea past Sam and he thinks it sounds wonderful.'

'So you've pretty much set me up. All I need to do is arrive, eh?' Lexie said, grinning. Throwing her good arm around her father's neck, she let him hold her like he did when she was little. She thanked God she had such amazing men in her life.

'You're such a jammy cow,' Maia said, when they met for coffee that afternoon. 'I wish my father was like yours.' She sighed. 'But I guess I'd need to have a relationship with him and actually know him in the first place!' They giggled. Maia was blunt to a fault. Especially when it came to awkward or emotive subjects. When they'd first met, some of the girls in their class at school didn't get her sense of humour but it was the thing Lexie loved most about her. They'd been drawn to one another since the age of ten and Lexie couldn't imagine her life without Maia.

After her father had walked out on them, Maia's mother had worked a lot, leaving Maia and her brother John to their own devices. As a result, Maia had decided the only way was out. Out of the house and into a job that would pay.

'I want to earn shedloads of cash and go on foreign holidays wearing designer gear while quaffing champagne.' Nothing got in Maia's way once she set her mind to something. Although Lexie had a lump in her throat and pride in her heart the day Maia graduated from law school, she wasn't surprised. 'You did good, kiddo,' she said, hugging her.

'I'm only getting started,' Maia said, with a shrug of her shoulder and a subtle nod to the right. Lexie glanced sideways and made eye contact with a gorgeous guy.

'Let me introduce you to Josh,' Maia said. She pulled Lexie close and whispered, ever so quietly, 'Great in bed, brains to burn, and I'm going to marry him some day.'



In the early days Lexie was at the gallery morning, noon and night.

'Sometimes I wonder whether you love the art more than me,' Sam said, with an exaggerated pout. 'I know you're struggling to work with one hand a lot of the time, but I can't help feeling left out.'

'Don't be ridiculous.' She giggled. 'There are one or two pieces I like less than you.'

All jokes aside, Lexie knew she needed to push hard to make her business a success. She was determined to look after her clients and form good relationships. If the gallery were to survive and thrive, she needed to breathe life into it. She buried all her bitterness and disappointment by focusing on the job in hand. At the time she'd thought anything other than being an active artist was a come down, such was her love for painting. Owning a gallery was the next best thing and she knew it was an opportunity and the perfect way to avoid plunging into a pool of dark depression.

'The paintings and sculptures are the blood and I need to be the heartbeat,' she explained to Sam.

Luckily for both of them, Sam got it. More than that, he got Lexie. Now, nine years later, the gallery was thriving and had survived the testing recession.

Draining her coffee cup, Lexie placed it in the dishwasher with the rest of the breakfast things and turned the machine on. She adored her new kitchen and still got a kick out of closing the integrated dishwasher door. It had been a long time coming, but the gorgeous refurbishment even met with Penelope's approval. 'It's wonderful, darling,' she said. 'I'd say you're able to relax in here far more now, and it's better for poor Sam to have a proper place for his dinner.

That old falling-apart kitchen you had before must've made him feel quite depressed after a hard day at the office.'

'Sam never complained,' Lexie said, trying not to get irritated with her mother. 'In fact, I pushed for the new units more than he did.'

Taking the stairs two at a time, she grabbed a cardigan to pop in her bag in case there was a cool breeze coming in from the sea. She brushed her teeth, then checked her face in the mirror for flakes of mascara or stray spatters of eye-shadow on her cheek. Pulling her long dark hair into a clip, she decided she'd do. She hoped the short walk between the house and the gallery would kick-start her tan. She thought of poor Sam, who went the colour of a beetroot almost instantly in the sun. Even if they were sitting in the garden for a drink he had to lather himself in high-factor cream. Yesterday evening she'd brought them a glass of chilled white wine each, and tossed the tube of sun screen to him. 'From blue to burn in sixty seconds! That's my man!' she said.

They teased one another endlessly, that was their way, but underneath it, they were inseparable. The only time she knew Sam got slightly peeved was when she and Maia went too far with the sisterhood gibes. 'When God created man *she* was only joking,' Maia had slurred last Sunday, at their barbecue.

'Lex,' Sam whispered, 'don't get into the whole men-are-worms vibe. It's embarrassing for Josh and me.'



As she ran down the stairs, plucking her handbag from the hall table, the photographic portrait, taken around the time of their engagement, stared back at her. She was incredibly fortunate that their relationship had stood the test of time, she thought. So many of their friends were now either single or in second partnerships. Maia was making a very nice living on other people's failed marriages.

The second she banged the front door shut, her mobile rang. Stuffing the cardigan into her bag, she retrieved her phone just in time. 'Hi, Mum,' she said.

'Hello, love. Isn't it a lovely bright day?' Penelope said.

'Hm, gorgeous,' Lexie said, shouldering the phone to her ear as she turned the Chubb lock in the door. 'I'm just on the way to the gallery. Any news?'

'I could ask you the same,' Penelope responded.

'Not a dicky-bird,' Lexie said. 'I'll be in work until lunchtime. Kate is covering the afternoon shift and I might head out for a run on the pier later. What are you up to today?'

'I was going to see if you'd meet me for lunch,' Penelope said. 'Dad and I have been chatting. Your fortieth birthday is around the corner. Have you any plans at all?'

'It's not until September, Mum. It's May now, for crying out loud!'

'It'll be June tomorrow,' Penelope corrected. 'Poor Amélie starts her fifth-year exams in the morning. Billy and Dee are tearing their hair out with her. She hasn't opened a book, you know.'

'I'm sure she'll be fine. My niece is a clever girl. She's probably done more work than they think.'

'Well, unless they've added a study hall to the shopping centre, I sincerely doubt it. She's turned into a bit of a madam lately. Dee is at her wits' end. She'll be leaving school next year. The time to cop on is running out.'

'Lighten up, Mum, for Pete's sake! Amélie's seventeen. She's supposed to rebel against everything. I'd be more worried if she didn't,' Lexie said.

'Now, that's just ridiculous, Lexie. Amélie is in danger of becoming a problem. Billy is too soft with her and leaves all the disciplining to Dee. It's not right.'

'Mum, it's none of our business what Amélie, Dee or Billy does in the comfort of their own home. I doubt Amélie is the first teenager to find study a bore and she certainly won't be the last.'

'You treat her like one of your friends, Lexie. I'm not sure that's appropriate, considering her current behaviour. Maybe if you took a more removed approach to her it might help Dee and Billy,' Penelope suggested.

'I can't help it if Amélie thinks I'm cool,' Lexie quipped. 'Besides, she needs to feel there's at least one person batting on her team. I remember what it's like when you think the whole world is against you. I wouldn't go back to being a teenager for any money.'

'Well, that's neither here nor there,' Penelope said. 'So, can you meet me for lunch later? Why don't we go to the noodle bar on the promenade? Say, one thirty? Will that give you enough time? We can have a better chat face to face.'

Knowing her mother would probably turn up at the gallery if she didn't meet her, Lexie agreed. At least this way they'd be in a neutral venue and she could leave if necessary.