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The One You Really Want

Jill Mansell

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Chapter 1

'Go on, you can say it,' Nancy offered, because it was so obviously what Carmen was longing to blurt out down the phone. Five-year-olds had more self-control than Carmen.

Five hundred miles away in London, Carmen replied innocently, 'I wouldn't dream of saying I told you so. We all know what happens to best friends who do that. You're the one who married Jonathan, so it stands to reason you thought he was the bee's knees. If I'd told you then what part of a bee I thought he was, you'd have hated me. That's why I pretended to like him.'

Nancy smiled to herself, thinking that she really should be crying. 'And that's why you don't have a Bafta. You may have tried to pretend, but it didn't fool anyone.'

'Ah, but I didn't tell you I thought he was an idiot,' said Carmen, 'and that's the important thing. You didn't feel as if you had to stick up for him the whole time, you didn't always have to defend him, d'you see, because if I had told you, you wouldn't have taken a blind bit of notice anyway. And we'd have ended up falling out.'

'Would we?' Nancy couldn't imagine falling out with Carmen. They'd been inseparable since they were eight.

'It wouldn't have been easy. Anyway, that's why I didn't. Which is why we're still friends,' Carmen said cheerfully.

'You can still say I told you so if you want to.' Nancy was feeling generous.

'Thanks, but I'll wait until I've put the phone down. I'm

polite like that.' More seriously, Carmen said, 'Are you sure you're all right?'

Was she? Who could tell? Nancy suspected that she was actually in a mild state of shock. It was Christmas morning, after all. Christmas was such a happy day, in her experience, that it was quite hard to take in what had happened. When you'd put so much effort into buying and wrapping presents, sending cards, choosing a tree and decorating the house – well, it assumed a momentum of its own. Actually holding up your hands and saying Stop! was easier said than done.

When you'd spent this long gearing up to Christmas, it was hard to imagine not . . . well, going ahead and having it.

'I'm great,' said Nancy, because the last thing she wanted was Carmen worrying about her. 'Mum's going to be here soon to give me a hand with lunch.'

'And you're really not going to tell her?'

Nancy closed her eyes. 'Completely ruin her Christmas, you mean?' Compared with the devastation this would cause, keeping the news to herself would be a doddle. 'You know how Mum feels about Jonathan. She'd be distraught.'

'OK, you're the boss.' Mischievously Carmen said, 'Off you go, back to peeling the parsnips like a good little wifey. Ever tried them poached in honey and arsenic?'

'If I had, I wouldn't be here to tell you, would I?'

'See? You always were the clever one. I'd better let you go. Keep in touch,' said Carmen. 'Give me a ring this evening.'

'OK. Thanks.' Belatedly, Nancy said, 'Are you all right?'

'Me? I'm wonderful.'

Nancy felt guilty, because if anyone deserved to have a big fuss made of them over the Christmas period, it was Carmen. When your husband had died three years ago – and, unlike herself and Jonathan, Carmen had been totally devoted to Spike – you were entitled to be depressed. 'Well, look after yourself. I'll call you tonight when I get a chance.'

‘Can’t wait. And don’t forget,’ Carmen said chirpily, ‘the honey disguises the taste of the arsenic.’

Had it only happened this morning? Was it really less than three hours ago that her world had tilted and begun to crumble?

OK, maybe not her whole world, but certainly her marriage.

Nancy, her breath misting up the bedroom window of their four-bedroomed detached house, gazed out over the frosty garden, sparkling iridescent in the sunlight like one of those glitter-strewn Christmas cards her Auntie Mags was so fond of sending. The sky was cloudless and an unseasonal shade of duck-egg blue. In the distance, beyond Kilnachranan, the mountains rose up snow-peaked and dramatic. The garden itself, all three-quarters of an acre of it, was wreathed in a glittery whiteness and heartbreakingly beautiful.

And down there on the stiff white grass stood the cause of her current torment. Her Christmas present from Jonathan.

It was all thanks to this . . . *thing,* that her life was about to change in a pretty major way.

The card had arrived ten days ago, among half a dozen others, as Nancy had been upstairs cleaning the bath. Even the sound of Christmas cards *phflummping* through the letterbox onto the mat was a thrilling one. They definitely made a more exciting noise, she had thought happily, than boring old bills and circulars. Because you never knew who might have sent you a card, completely out of the blue and against all the odds. Prince William perhaps, or Bono from U2, or Michael Douglas and Catherine Zeta Jones . . .

Well, she couldn’t help thinking it and getting that lovely squirly feeling in her stomach, the one she always used to get when she woke up on Christmas morning and saw the bulging pillowcase of presents from Santa at the foot of her bed.

And incredibly, this time, there *was* an intriguing-looking envelope amongst the rest, a heavy expensive cream one addressed in handwriting she didn't recognise. Incapable of saving it until last, Nancy cast aside the others – from Auntie Jane and Uncle Denis in Brighton, the boring Matthews family across the road, Jonathan's smug cousin Edgar in Dundee – and ripped open the mystery envelope. The picture on the front of the card was a snow scene of an Edinburgh street. The rank of shops depicted in the painting rang a vague bell. Cavendish Row, that was it. Opening the card, Nancy read the printed inscription inside.

Christmas and New Year greetings to a valued customer, from all at Rossiter and Co., Fine Jewellers.

To personalise it, there was a formless squiggle of a signature at the bottom, the kind a monkey might have made. Tuh, so much for being sent a card by someone exciting. This was from someone who was barely human.

What's more, Nancy thought crossly, Jonathan's surprise had now been ruined. He'd clearly paid a visit to Rossiter's on Cavendish Row and bought her something from there for Christmas. Bought her something expensive, more to the point, because they were unlikely to send classy greetings cards, with Valued Customer on them, to every Tom, Dick and Harry who needed a new watch battery and popped into the shop. Except it hadn't occurred to the not-so-clever people at Rossiter's that cards sent to the home of a married male customer stood a good chance of being opened, completely innocently, by his wife.

And since the whole point of Christmas presents was that they should be a fabulous surprise, her own Christmas morning was now spoiled.

Well, that was what she'd thought ten days ago. Gripping the window ledge, Nancy gazed down at her present. Having discreetly disposed of the greetings card in the dustbin, she'd spent ages practising her surprised-and-delighted face, because that was how she'd planned to react when she opened

the satin-lined box containing whatever item of jewellery Jonathan had ended up choosing for her.

Instead he had steered her across the bedroom, instructed her to close her eyes, then pulled open the curtains with a triumphant flourish.

'Ta-daaa! You can open your eyes now,' Jonathan had proclaimed, and Nancy had obediently opened her eyes, mystified as to why he would have wanted to put the jewellery box containing her Christmas present out on the windowsill.

Except, of course, he hadn't.

'It's a lawnmower.' It had taken her a good few seconds to get the words out.

'The sit-on kind,' Jonathan informed her with pride.

'It's . . . it's . . .'

'You just wait, you won't know how you ever managed without one.' Jonathan was beaming now, incredibly pleased with himself. 'No more pushing and shoving that old petrol mower, this takes all the effort out of doing the grass. Trust me,' he slid his arms round Nancy's waist and kissed the back of her neck, 'you're going to love it.'

It took a little while for all the implications to sink in. When they finally did, Nancy felt like the slow girl at school, the very last one to get the punchline of a joke. If Jonathan hadn't bought some mystery item of jewellery from Rossiter's for her, then he must have bought it for someone else.

Hadn't he?

OK, OK, it was a mess, but not an entirely unexpected mess. If she was honest, there had been hints before now that Jonathan might be up to something, but never any that had been concrete enough to act upon. Nancy knew that girls who were overly possessive, jealous if their men so much as glanced in the direction of another girl, did themselves no favours at all. One of her old student flatmates, Doug, had got himself saddled with one of these. Having convinced herself that he was playing away, Ella had interrogated him

endlessly, demanding to be kept informed of his every movement, even rummaging through his dirty laundry bag in order to go through Doug's tatty jeans pockets for phone numbers, and to sniff the collars of his shirts for traces of Other Women's Perfume. Nancy had caught her doing this once, at two o'clock in the morning. In a way, she'd felt sorry for Ella but at the same time she'd known the girl was making a terrible mistake. Everyone had laughed about her behind her back, and Doug had been embarrassed because, let's face it, lookswise, he was no Johnny Depp. Girls weren't exactly falling over themselves to go out with him. If it had taken him six months to pluck up the courage to ask Ella out on a date, how likely was it that he'd be simultaneously seeing several other girls on the side?

Eventually the teasing had become too much to tolerate and Ella's inability to stop being jealous had taken its toll. Doug had finished with her and Ella had been inconsolable, begging Nancy to persuade him to see sense and take her back. All this had had a profound effect on Nancy, who had longed to say I told you so, I told you you'd drive him away in the end. Instead, she'd vowed never to be the jealous type, never to indulge in interrogation sessions – and never *ever* to accuse any man of hers of doing something he hadn't done.

Unless, of course, she knew he definitely had.

Nancy frowned. The thing was, did she know for sure? Could there still be an innocent explanation for what had happened, one that simply hadn't occurred to her? And if there was no innocent explanation, who in heaven's name could Jonathan be seeing?

Someone she knew? Someone from his office? Not his secretary, surely to God. The whole point of a mistress was getting one prettier and younger and bustier than your wife. Tania looked like a potato in a pashmina.

It couldn't be her, Nancy decided. To be honest, she'd be insulted if it was.

A car toot-tooted outside, bringing her back to earth. Rose, her mother, was rattling up the drive in her green Mini. Car, not skirt.

OK, forget the unfaithful husband and the all-but-over marriage. It was Christmas Day. On with the show.

'Darling!' Rose threw her arms round her beloved only daughter. 'You look beautiful! Merry Christmas!'

'You too, Mum.' Nancy hugged Rose in return, thinking how frail she felt. Her mother was only in her late sixties, but there was always the worry that this year might be her last. This was why she couldn't tell Rose about Jonathan's philandering – OK, alleged philandering. It would break her heart and ruin her Christmas. If it kills me, Nancy thought, I will protect Mum from that.

'Where's that lovely son-in-law of mine?' Rose was peering hopefully past Nancy into the house. 'I've got bags of presents here – they weigh an absolute ton.'

'Jonathan's gone down to the pub to meet Hamish and Pete. Pre-lunch drinks.' Nancy, who'd been delighted to be shot of Jonathan for an hour, said, 'You know how it is, all the men get together and compare Christmas sweaters, the one with the most horrible pattern wins a – um, not that Jonathan ever stands a chance of winning', she added hastily, 'but some people have families with terrible taste. Anyway, he'll be back by two o'clock. Let me carry the bags inside. Oh Mum, you are naughty, you've brought far too many presents.'

'Rubbish, I enjoy buying them.' Following Nancy inside, Rose heaved a sigh of pleasure. 'Such a gorgeous house. You're so lucky, darling. Can you believe how lucky you are?'

Nancy thought back to the times at the beginning of their marriage when she had thought she'd been lucky. Or before she'd begun to inwardly suspect that Jonathan might not turn out to be Mr Faithful-till-the-End-of-Time after all.

But this was her mother asking the question. This time

last year Rose had bought Jonathan a mug with World's Best Son-in-Law! printed on it. Hastily changing the subject, Nancy said, 'The turkey's in the oven. I've done the potatoes and the bread sauce, but the rest of the vegetables are still—'

'How did I guess they would be?' Rose had been busily arranging the Christmas presents under the tree. Straightening, she beamed. 'Don't worry, darling, I'm here now. We can have a glass of sherry and a lovely chat while we're doing it all. You can tell me everything that's been going on.'

Nancy had to turn away so as not to let Rose see the tears in her eyes. Did other 28-year-olds tell their mothers everything that had been going on in their lives? Maybe they did. But Rose always saw the best in people; there was a kind of innocence about her. Nancy, feeling it was her duty to protect her mother from disappointment, had never been able to bring herself to tell Rose the truth.

'Now, parsnips. Carrots. Oh my word, asparagus – that must have cost a fortune, you are naughty.' Rose, surveying the contents of the vegetable basket, was torn between delight and terror at the thought of how much the bundles of fresh asparagus must have cost. 'Right, I'll make a start on the carrots.'

Swallowing the lump in her throat, Nancy watched her mother deftly peel and chop the carrots. Rose McAndrew, sixty-eight years old, four feet eleven inches tall and weighing less than seven stone with all her clothes on. Widowed thirteen years ago, she had never so much as looked at another man. She lived alone in a tiny, pin-neat, rented flat in Edinburgh, still worked part-time as a cleaner in an old people's home and was a prodigious knitter. Every spare second was spent producing, at lightning speed, soft knitted toys which she then donated to a charity shop supporting a children's hospice. Privately Nancy found it heartbreaking that her mother could spend eight hours knitting, sewing

together and stuffing an intricately detailed clown complete with knitted tube of toothpaste, toothbrush and pyjamas, only for it to be sold in the shop for four pounds fifty. *Four pounds fifty*. She'd visited the shop and seen the price tags with her own eyes. So much work for so little return, yet Rose had exclaimed in delight at the amount of money she was raising for the poor sick children. It simply wouldn't occur to her to be offended, because that wasn't the kind of person she was.

There was no one better.

Turning, Rose said happily, 'And what did Jonathan get you for Christmas?'

Nancy swallowed. 'A lawnmower. The kind you sit on. It's out in the garden.'

'A sit-on lawnmower? Oh my word, how marvellous! I say, darling, you'll be able to ride around on it like the Queen. What fun!'

Forcing a smile, because she was unsure how often the Queen actually rode around on a lawnmower, Nancy said, 'I know.'

'That's Jonathan for you, isn't it? So original. He always knows exactly the right thing to buy.'

Other people might have mothers in whom they could confide every tiny detail of their lives, but Rose wasn't that kind of mother. She needed to be cosseted and protected from details that would only upset her.

Nancy knew she couldn't tell her the truth.