Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

The Summer Season

Written by Julia Williams

Published by Avon

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

JULIA WILLIAMS

The Summer Season

AVON

This novel is entirely a work of fiction.
The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are
the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to
actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is
entirely coincidental.

AVON

A division of HarperCollins*Publishers*
77–85 Fulham Palace Road,
London W6 8JB

www.harpercollins.co.uk

A Paperback Original 2011

1

Copyright © Julia Williams 2011

Julia Williams asserts the moral right to
be identified as the author of this work

A catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library

ISBN-13: 978-1-84756-088-9

Set in Minion by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted,
in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior
permission of the publishers.



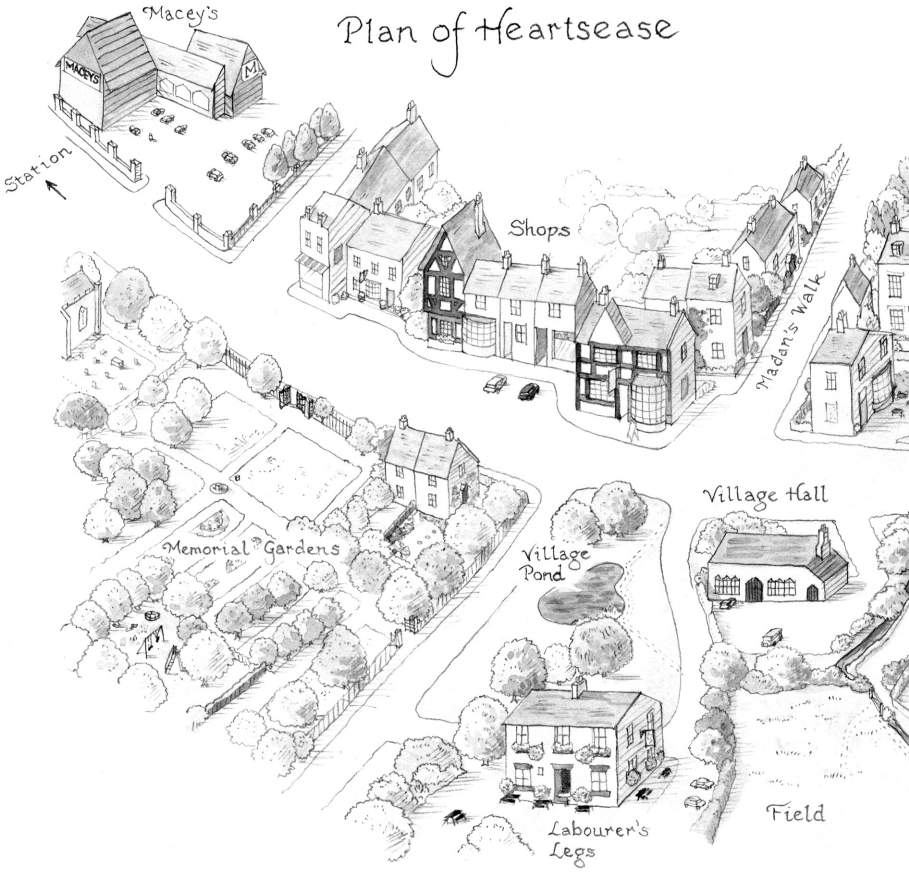
Mixed Sources
Product group from well-managed forests and other controlled sources
www.fsc.org Cert no. SW-COC-001806
© 1996 Forest Stewardship Council

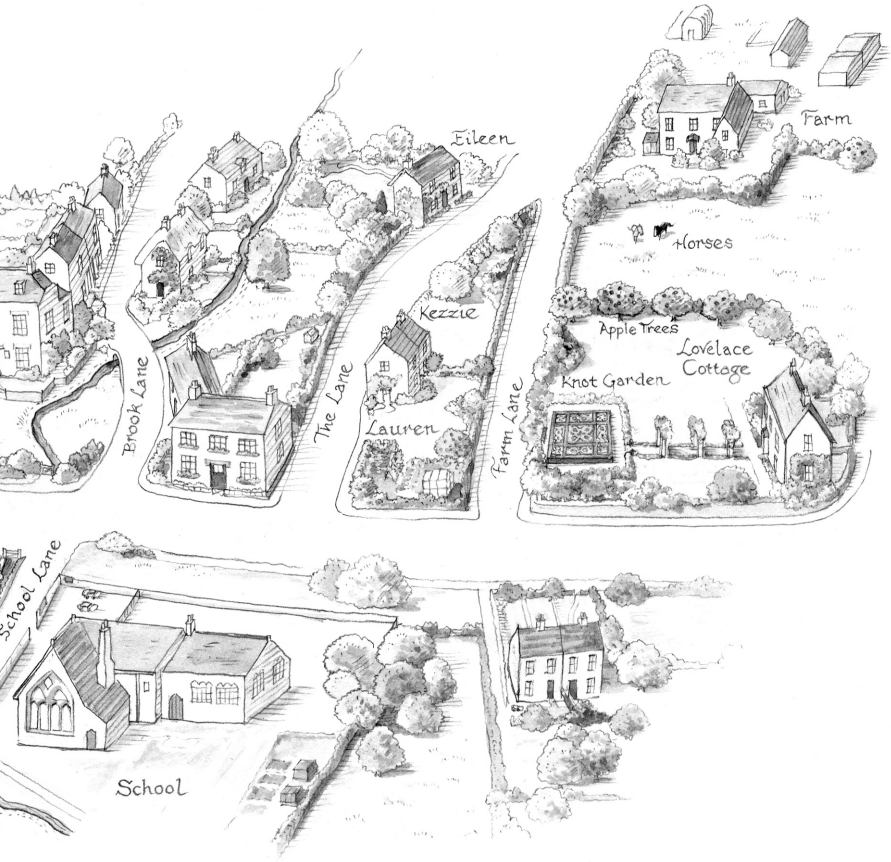
FSC is a non-profit international organisation established
to promote the responsible management of the world's forests.
Products carrying the FSC label are independently certified
to assure consumers that they come from forests that are managed
to meet the social, economic and ecological needs
of present and future generations.

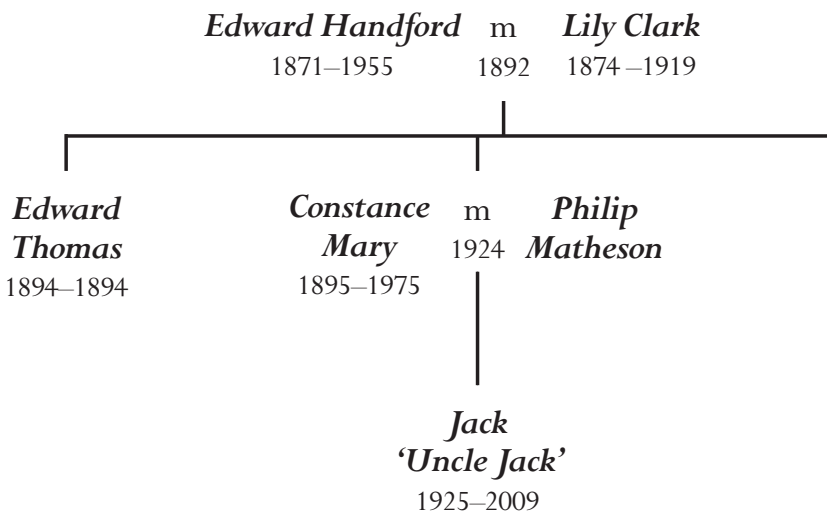
Find out more about HarperCollins and the environment at
www.harpercollins.co.uk/green

To the memory of

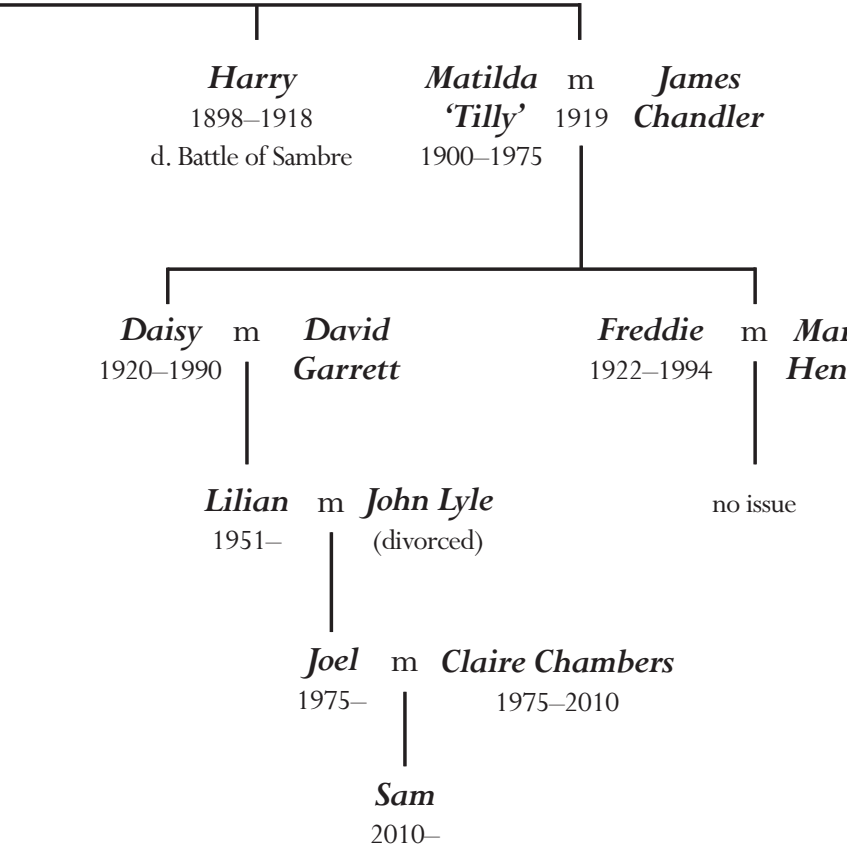
Alfred Thomas Clark 1890–1918
Ernest Ophir Clark 1896–1916
And Jemima Clark 1863–1944 who must have been so brave


Plan of Heartsease
Macey's
MACEY'S
M
Station
Shops
Nadan's Walk
Memorial Gardens
Village Pond
Village Hall
Labourer's Legs
Field


Eileen
Farm
Horses
Kezzie
Apple Trees
Lovelace Cottage
Knot Garden
Brook Lane
The Lane
Lauren
Farm Lane
School Lane
School



Edward and Lily Handford Family Tree


Harry
1898–1918
d. Battle of Sambre
Matilda
'Tilly'
1900–1975
m
1919
James
Chandler
Daisy
1920–1990
m
David
Garrett
Freddie
1922–1994
m
Mar
Hen
Lilian
1951–
m
John Lyle
(divorced)
no issue
Joel
1975–
m
Claire Chambers
1975–2010
Sam
2010–

Edward

Edward dreams of Lily. She comes to him in the garden, holding a bunch of pansies. It is summer and she wears a sun hat, which falls down her back.

'Here, for you,' she proffers, 'to ease your heart.' She laughs, and her long, dark curls fly loose down her back in the summer breeze. It is always summer, with the Lily of his dreams.

He reaches out to touch her, to feel her, to know that she is once more real and dear to him, as she ever was. As he does so, she scatters petals to the wind, and her touch on his hand is as light and insubstantial as the breeze. As soon as he grasps her, she is gone away from him, to a place he knows he cannot reach.

Edward dreams of Lily, and awakes to a cold hearth, a lonely old age and tears forming on his face. One day soon, he knows he will join her. Why can't it be today?

Edward and Lily
1890–1892

In the spring a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love . . .

Alfred, Lord Tennyson, 'Locksley Hall'

'Edward, you never said you were coming!' His mother rose to greet him as Edward came into the garden; she was sitting entertaining as was her wont. He hadn't let her know and he had walked up from the station so as to surprise her. Now he was caught, left-footed, wanting to have her to himself, unwilling to share her with these strangers spilling out of the rose arbour on the veranda, which overlooked the garden, nonchalantly sipping tea, in the wilting summer heat.

'I wanted to surprise you,' he said. Her delight at seeing him was infectious, and he couldn't keep up his feelings of discontent for long. He was here, back where he belonged at Lovelace Cottage, a larger residence than its name suggested, nestling in roughly an acre of land on the Sussex, Downs where they bordered Surrey. The air always seemed better here, purer, away from the fetid smells of London where he was studying.

'Come, sit,' she said, linking her arm in his, 'you must eat, I insist.'

'Sorry to break up your party, ladies.' Edward bowed slightly, tipping his hat. He vaguely recognized some of his mother's companions, worthy women of the parish all, but there were one or two new to him; he had after all been away for several months.

'You haven't met Mrs Clark, have you?' his mother made the introduction. 'She's our new vicar's wife. And we're very pleased to have her. The church flowers have never looked more beautiful.'

'Oh, that's Lily's doing, not mine,' said Mrs Clark. 'My daughter has a way with flowers. Always had, ever since she was a little girl. She works magic in the garden at the rectory I tell you.'

'Then she has something in common with Edward,' said his mother. 'You know he studies Botany, don't you?'

Botany – a subject his late and unlamented father had been very sneering about. John Handford had wanted his son to follow him into the family business – as an importer of exotic goods from the colonies – it was a business that had made his father rich enough to buy this beautiful house and gardens. But like his casual acceptance of Edward's mother, his father hadn't appreciated what he'd had. The house and gardens were merely signs of his success, possessions to be gloated over, just as Edward's mother was. He'd never appreciated the beauty and the peace here, preferring the hurly-burly of city life that had always sustained him.

When he'd died five years previously, Edward's father had left the house to Edward and the business jointly to Edward and his mother. Edward had sold his share of the business to his cousin Francis, who was more suited to it than he. His mother had retained her share, which provided an income on which she could live comfortably, while she ran the house in Edward's absence. They were both much the happier for it.

'Talking of Lily, where is she?' said Mrs Clark. 'It really is about time we were going.'

'I could sense she was getting bored with our conversation,' said Edward's mother, 'so I sent her down to the wood.'

The loosely styled 'wood' was an area of the garden that Edward had long wanted to change, but had so far lacked time and funds to do so. In the spring it was full of bluebells, but the trees were old and creaking, and overshadowed the house too much in Edward's opinion. He longed to cut them back and open up the space in the middle to make a more formal garden. It was his hope that after he had completed his studies, he would design gardens for the gentry, and he planned to start here.

'I'll go and fetch her,' offered Edward, happy to escape the clacking of the women for a moment. The veranda steps led down to a green lawn, which fell away from the house for nearly two hundred feet. In the bottom left-hand corner the offending trees stood in a dip, and Edward made his way down to it. He couldn't see any sign of anyone at first, so he strode through the trees to the clearing, where he caught sight of a tiny, dark-haired girl, framed in the sunshine. She was wearing a white muslin dress, and peering intently at the flowers in her lap. Long, brown curls tumbled down her back, and her sun hat was slung halfway down it. Her dress was covered in grass stains, and her hands looked rather grubby.

Edward's first impression was of a small, and no doubt tiresome, child, and he immediately regretted his offer to fetch her. Then she looked up at him and his preconceptions fell right away. Her green eyes opened wide and her perfect heart-shaped mouth formed an 'oh' of surprise at seeing him, and her slender hands flew to her mouth, as she blushed prettily with embarrassment. This was no child, but a girl on the verge of becoming a woman. Her radiant

beauty was like nothing he had ever seen before, made more charming by her unconscious ignorance of it.

'Hallo,' she said, shaking the daisies from her lap, as she rose in some disarray. He could see that even standing she was small, but her petite frame couldn't hide her womanly figure. He swallowed hard again. 'Are you Edward?'

'Yes,' said Edward, still reeling from how wrong his first impression had been. 'How did you know who I was?'

'Oh, your mother talks about you all the time,' said Lily. 'It's Edward this and Edward that. How did you know my name?'

'Your mother sent me to fetch you,' Edward offered.

'Oh,' Lily pulled a face. 'I was enjoying it here. No doubt I shall be summoned back home to face Papa and be told off again for my hoydenish ways.'

She looked down ruefully at her stained skirt. A stray curl fell across her face and she absentmindedly pulled it back, reminding him again of the child he had thought her to be.

'Are you often told off for being hoydenish?' Edward said, laughing. There was something so lively and disingenuous about her, it was impossible not to be enchanted.

'All the time,' said Lily, with an impish look on her face. 'I don't know how it happens but I was so interested in seeing the plants, I hadn't realized I had made such a mess of my clothes. Did you know you had heartsease growing in this wood? It seems such a shame to hide it. If it were my garden, I'd cut down some of these gloomy oaks and make a proper garden here, to show them off.'

'Oh, would you now?' Edward was caught between captivation and irritation. She really was the most enchanting creature he'd ever seen, but he rather resented her telling him what to do in his garden.

'Oh dear,' Lily looked stricken. 'I shouldn't have said that should I? Please forgive me; it's none of my business what

you do in your garden. It's just that gardens are rather a passion of mine.'

'Are they?' said Edward with a smile. 'They're rather a passion of mine, too.'

'Have I drawn it properly?' Lily looked at him anxiously, as Edward came over to see how her work was progressing. In the six months since he'd left university, Edward had become used to having Lily for his assistant on his expeditions into the Sussex countryside to document the flora and fauna. Her mother, Lily confessed, had given up trying to keep her at home and teach her how to be ladylike. And though it was an unconventional career choice, learning about flowers was still an important part of Lily's education, so Mrs Clark had been easily persuaded to let Lily come on these trips with him, so long as Sarah the housemaid accompanied them as a chaperone. As it happened, Sarah was rather fat and lazy, so more often than not she'd accompany them as far as the first field, and sit down to await their return. It meant that Lily and Edward were spending more and more time together, and Edward for one was not sorry.

'It's perfect,' declared Edward, impressed by the delicacy of the poppy that Lily had painted. She had a natural affinity with plants, and a talent for drawing them technically. It was Edward's plan to put together the material he had collected to make a small book about the plants of Sussex, in the hope that not only could he earn some money in his own right, but also build up a reputation as a serious botanist. His desire was to go abroad, to visit far-flung corners of the globe and make his reputation by bringing back exotic plants the like of which the world had never seen.

'Hark at you,' teased Lily when he told her. 'Who do you think you are? A mighty explorer like Doctor Livingstone?'

'No,' said Edward, very serious – Lily's laughter made him

realize just how intensely serious he could be sometimes, 'I just want to see the wonders that are out there. Imagine trekking through the Amazon, or scouring the deserts of the Sudan. There's such a huge world out there, I want to go out and explore it. I want to find something new and different. I'd bring it back for you.'

'Oh, would you, now,' said Lily, her laughter putting him in mind of silver bells. It was impossible for him not to feel cheerful when he was with Lily. It was as though she made the sun shine. 'Suppose I don't want your smelly plant. It might be poisonous for all I know. Besides, why do you want to search for the exotic, when we have perfectly good flowers of our own here?'

'I could take you with me,' he said. 'You could come as my assistant.'

'Shocking shocking, man,' she declared with a coquettish smile. 'I suppose Sarah would have to accompany us as my chaperone then. I don't think she'd make it past the first step into the jungle.'

Her pretty green eyes danced across her face, and her boisterous curls spilled out of the plait they were supposed to be in and tumbled down her back. Edward took her upturned chin in his hands and kissed her gently on the lips.

'You don't have to come as my assistant,' he said. 'You could come as my wife.'

A wife. *To have a wife*. That would be quite a thing. Edward turned the word over in his head. In a few short months Lily would be his, and nothing could ever take them away from one another. In the meantime, much to the amusement of his mother, he had finally started work on creating the garden he had always envisioned, but now with renewed purpose; it was to be a wedding present for Lily.

'Look at this!' he would cry every day, as he pored over

plans and read books about the gardens of the past. He was transfixed by the idea of creating a knot garden in the Elizabethan style – a knot garden that would be a symbol of his love for Lily.

'Look at what, Edward?' his mother would retort with humour. She was pleased for him, he knew. She was very fond of Lily, and only desired her son's happiness.

'See here,' Edward would say, pointing out the patterns in the *Compleat Gardenes Practice*, a reference guide from the sixteenth century, which he was using to give him ideas to utilize and improve upon. 'The way they created geometric patterns and wove the plants together. I could do something similar. It will be a knot garden the like of which no one has seen. And Lily will love it forever.'

'I'm sure she will,' said his mother, smiling. 'With such a genius behind it, how could she not?'

Edward ignored his mother's gentle teasing, and concentrated on his plans. He designed the garden with careful precision. He would wall off the bottom part of the garden, where the old oak trees grew, and place the knot garden centrally, enclosed by gravel paths. From the edges of the paths to the wall would be flowerbeds full of perennials. For the knot garden itself he planned to use box with an interweaving of ivy and rosemary in heart shapes, the centrepiece to include the letters E and L. As was the current vogue he planned to fill up the gaps with bedding plants: heartsease, which was abundant in the area, forget me nots, gloxinia, but in each of the four corners, he left space to plant flowers for the children who would make their happiness complete. And so Edward toiled on his garden, planted in love with hope for the future; a garden he could be proud of forever.

'Where are you taking me?' Lily was clearly bursting with curiosity as he led her, blindfolded, down the garden.

'Shh, it's a surprise,' said Edward. He had worked hard to keep secret from Lily what he had been planning over these last few months, pretending that the trees at the bottom of the garden had become unsafe, as a way of keeping her away from the garden. He hoped that she would love his garden as much as he did, having poured his heart and soul into the project. He felt it was quite possibly his best work to date, and maybe the best he would ever do.

'I hate surprises,' said Lily, 'come on, please let me peep.'

'No,' said Edward firmly, 'the sooner you cooperate the sooner you can see it.'

He took her by the hand.

'Watch out, there's a step here,' he said, as he led her down into the garden. He pushed open the wrought iron gate he'd had specially commissioned. 'Now you can see,' he pulled back her blindfold, which was the scarf that tied her summer hat on her head.

'Oh, Edward!' Lily clapped her hands over her mouth in delight as she gazed on the fruits of his labour, a garden set out in love and hope. A knot garden of hearts weaving rosemary, ivy, forget me nots, and gloxinia, with borders of the heartsease which gave their village its name.

'Do you like it?'

'Like it? I love it!' She danced excitedly down the paths. 'Did you do this for me?'

'Of course I did,' he said. 'It's a love knot garden, dedicated to my one true love.'

'Edward, I don't know what to say.' Lily came back to him and threw her arms around his neck.

'Just say you love me,' said Edward, with feeling.

'Always,' said Lily, 'always.'

He held Lily fast, and kissed her on the top of her head. Then he led her to the far end of the garden, where they

sat on the wrought iron bench he had had specially made, with their initials on. Never had he felt more happy and content. This would always be their special place. A garden to represent their married life, a life that he knew, with Lily by his side, would be well worth the living.

Part One

Summer's Lease

Chapter One

'Come on, girls, time to get up! Important day today.' Lauren came softly into her twin daughters' bedroom, to watch two tousled heads sleepily awake and register their surroundings. Two brand new uniforms hung over the end of the identical pine beds, and her daughters slowly emerged from underneath their matching pink princess duvet covers. She drew the Cath Kidston inspired floral curtains, and looked out on the little garden that belonged to her rented cottage. It had a small patch of green for the lawn, and her pots of lobelia, geraniums, busy lizzies and alyssum were still flowering in a tumbledown fashion. It was homely and neat, pretty much the way she liked it. The warm, early morning sun belied the promise of the September day. It was going to be another hot one.

Lauren turned back to look at the girls and her heart contracted with a deep spasm of love. Four years old already and starting school for the first time. Where had all that time gone? It seemed only minutes since they'd been born three weeks prematurely, on a baking hot August day. Had they been born on their due date, she'd have had a whole extra year with them. As it was they were going to be among the youngest in their class.

'Come on, girls,' she said again, then went to sit on Izzie's bed and tickle her under the duvet. Izzie was usually the

slower of the sisters (and being asthmatic, the one who gave Lauren most cause for concern) and sure enough her giggles brought Immie immediately over to join in the fun. The three of them romped about on the bed for a bit, laughing, before Lauren said, mock sternly, 'Come on, time for school.'

By the time she'd helped them on with their clothes, and got them downstairs to the cosy kitchen, with its wooden pine table and cheerful mugs on mug racks, Joel had arrived with Sam – on time for once.

'Big day today, girls,' he said, as Izzie and Immie came to show off their school uniforms. They looked so sweet in matching grey pinafores (a size too big for them, to allow for plenty of growing room), crisp white shirts, and green cardigans. Their bright white socks were pulled high above their knees, their black Mary Jane shoes positively sparkled and their fair hair was tied up in identical ponytails, which by the end of the day Lauren was fairly sure would be coming undone.

They smiled shyly at Joel, as he popped Sam in the high chair, and watched them parade their brand new green book bags proudly in front of him.

'You wouldn't mind taking a photo of the three of us, would you?' said Lauren. 'Only, it would be nice to have a memento.'

'No problem,' said Joel, proceeding to snap away. 'Are you excited, girls?'

'Yes,' they chorused.

'I should say so,' said Lauren, 'I don't think they slept a wink all night.'

'Ouch,' grimaced Joel. He looked at his watch. 'Is that the time? I'd really better dash.'

'Oh, of course.' Lauren clocked his sober grey suit, and kicked herself for forgetting what day it was. 'Good luck, today.

Hope it's not too grim.' She touched him awkwardly on the arm, not quite sure whether the gesture would be appreciated. After Claire had died, their mutual grief had brought them very close. Too close she felt at times. Sometimes it had felt a little too intense, and now she tended to stand back more.

Joel gave her a tight, tense smile, his dark eyes brooding. His face was sombre and sad. 'It has to be done,' he said, before kissing Sam on the cheek. 'Have a great day, girls.'

Poor Joel. Thirty-five was far too young to be widowed. It was tough on him being alone with Sam, she knew that. That was why, in the main, Lauren cut him some slack when he took her for granted, which he invariably did. Lauren felt she owed it to Claire to look out for Joel; he needed support, and she was going to give it, even if he didn't always make it that easy. She felt a familiar spasm of grief for Claire too. A year on, and part of her still expected to see Claire pitch up at the cottage as she had done every day with Sam before her sudden and shocking death.

Lauren sent the twins up to brush their teeth, while she cleared up the breakfast things. She stacked the girls' matching Belle plates in the dishwasher, next to her favourite Cath Kidston mugs and bowl set (a present from Mum, Lauren could never have afforded them). She loved her kitchen, which had been extended to make room for a dining table. It was cosy, and full of clutter. The children's toys – a magnetic easel, a plastic car and a small table and chairs set – competed for space with her pine table, washing machine, dishwasher and fridge freezer. Though Lauren didn't have quite as much work surface as she'd have liked, and what she had was crammed full of cookery books, this was her favourite room in the house – the real heart of her home.

Lauren lifted Sam out of the high chair, and put him into the buggy she kept here for him. She felt stupidly nervous for the girls, even though they had been going to the nursery part of the village school for nearly a year. But still. Proper school. True, being the youngest in the year, they were only part time to begin with. But before she knew it, they'd be gone all day. No longer would she have them to herself in the afternoon. If she didn't have Sam still to look after, the days could be long and lonely. Just like her nights . . .

A sense of melancholy came over her as she walked down the front path, with its familiar white picket fence, and creaky iron gate. The twins were holding on to either side of the buggy, chatting away nineteen to the dozen about what was going to happen in their day. They didn't seem nervous in the slightest. It was only Lauren who felt a vague sense of loss, with the realization that after today nothing would be quite the same again. She pushed the buggy down her road, waving hello to her neighbour Eileen, who was out walking her dog, and turned right onto the main road that led down the hill to the centre of Heartsease, where the girls were starting at the village school.

The September sun was still warm, and the day was shaping up to be one of those last blasts of summer lazy days, which you had to cherish before autumn took hold. But there were small signs of the approaching autumn. The trees were beginning to turn, the first conkers were beginning to ripen, and a gentle breeze blew a few leaves softly to the ground. It was days like these she remembered most from the period after Troy left her, and this time of year had remained bitter-sweet to her ever since. Just as she was getting used to the shock of motherhood, she'd had the bigger shock that she was going to be doing it alone. And now more then ever, sending her beautiful

daughters off to school for the first time, she wished that it wasn't so.

Joel got in the car with a heavy heart, turned left out of Lauren's road, and drove back up the hill past his house and out of Heartsease across the Downs, towards the neighbouring town of Chiverton. He drove down a windy country road, arched with trees, their leaves beginning to shimmer with an autumn hue. He loved the countryside here and it was one of the many reasons, when his mum had inherited Lovelace Cottage and suggested he bought it from her, that he had. Even Claire, who'd at first been reluctant to leave London, and 'live in the sticks' as she'd put it, had agreed that when you came to the brow of the hill and looked out on the Sussex countryside, the views were stunning.

Claire. His heart contracted painfully. A year ago today. Could it only really be a year? A year and a day ago he had been so happy. So rich and fulfilled. With everything in life he needed. But he didn't know it then, didn't appreciate it at times, maybe didn't even want it. It was only after he lost Claire, and his world came crashing down around him, that he belatedly realized how truly lucky he had been.

Today was going to be a painful and difficult day. Joel had promised to go with Claire's parents to her grave, in the cemetery on the other side of Chiverton, and then for lunch. He wasn't sure he was going to be able to get through another heartbreaking day with them. It wasn't that Marion and Colin were unkind or unsupportive, far from it. Although they lived over an hour away, they would help out with Sam at the drop of a hat, and they had been an immense source of strength to him. They had shown him compassion even though they were grieving too. No, it wasn't Marion and Colin who would make this day hard.

It was Joel's guilt about what he'd done, and how he'd let Claire down.

Every day for the last year he had said sorry to her. Every day. And today, at the graveside, he would lay freesias, her favourite flowers (which he'd bought at great expense) and say sorry again. But it was never ever going to be enough.

Joel blinked back tears as he arrived at the graveyard. It was a bright, warm September day, unlike the day of Claire's funeral, which had been the bleakest, rainiest autumn day he could remember in his life. The church had been packed, and so many people had been so kind and thoughtful. But Joel had barely been able to acknowledge their kindness, responding like an automaton, feeling only a numbness that he now realized must have been deep jolt. The suddenness of Claire's death still shocked him, even now, a year later. How could someone as beautiful and alive and vibrant as Claire be there one day, and not the next? He'd be trying to make sense of that till the day he died.

Joel was pleased to see he had arrived earlier than Claire's parents. Selfishly, he wanted a bit of time on his own, for his own private grief. He walked up to her grave and felt again the sudden shock of seeing her name there:

Claire Harriet Lyle
1975–2010
Loving wife, mother and daughter
Taken from us too soon

He never got over the unreality of it. Nor, did he imagine, he would ever get used to it. Claire should be with him now, watching Sam learning to walk and talk, helping Joel restore the house and gardens as they had planned. She shouldn't be here, on this Sussex hillside, buried six feet under. He felt a sudden sharp bolt of anguish, the pain of

it almost taking his breath away. Claire was lost to him, and there was no saying sorry now.

Kezzie sat in the middle of half-packed boxes, in her tiny lounge crying. She felt like she'd been sitting in the middle of boxes crying forever, ever since she'd made the decision that she had to leave. Only weeks ago, at the height of summer, she'd been excitedly packing up to move out of her small flat in Finsbury Park and move in with Richard. The gardening course she'd completed finished, the redundancy from her much hated job in web design accepted. A whole new life lay before them. She would design the gardens, Richard, the architecture. Together they would take Chelsea and Hampton Court by storm. And now that would never happen. The last month of her life had been the most painful, confusing and ridiculous time she'd ever known.

Should she ring Richard again? Kezzie sat on her heels in the chaos of her lounge and thought about it. She was sorely tempted. It had been nearly a week since their last painfully awkward conversation. Somehow she clung to the hope that maybe he could find it in himself to forgive her for what she'd done. She flinched as she saw the cold contempt in his eyes at their last meeting, heard him say over and over: 'You've let me down, Kezzie. I can't trust you.' That scene kept playing like it was on a hideous time loop, over and over in her brain. However much she tried to shut it out, there it was every time she closed her eyes. A reminder of what she had done, and what she had lost.

But all that ringing and texting Richard in vain were making her feel slightly unhinged, and even Flick, the kindest and most supportive of best friends, had gently pointed out she was losing dignity in trying to win him back.

'You have to give him time, Kez,' she said. 'You're going to lose him for sure this way.'

Kezzie knew she was right, but the temptation late at night to email him after a glass of red, or ring him, just to hear his voice, had proved too much for her time and time again. The last occasion had been so mortifiyingly cringe-making – Richard had answered saying, 'Kezzie, I have my parents here, please don't make a scene' – that she'd hung up straight away. At that moment she decided she was losing the plot big time, and needed to escape, somewhere, anywhere, so she wouldn't chance running into Richard, and where she wouldn't be reminded of him, on every corner.

It was then that Aunt Jo had stepped in. Arriving on an unexpected flying visit to London, and seeing the state of her beloved niece, Jo had declared that Kezzie needed a bolt hole. 'And as luck would have it, hon, I can offer you my place.'

'What do you mean?' Kezzie had asked.

'I'm off round the world for a year with Mickey,' said Jo, referring to her latest toy boy. 'You remember him, don't you? We're going to *find* ourselves, and maybe get married in Thailand.' She giggled excitedly. 'You can stay at my cottage for as long as you want – stay all year if you need to, babe.'

'Really?' Kezzie gulped through her tears. It sounded like the best solution she could think of. She had to get away from London, from the car crash that had been the end of her relationship, and the mess she'd made of everything. She needed time and space to regroup, and sort herself out. Staying here moping after Richard was doing her no good whatsoever. He was never coming back to her, and all she was doing was prolonging the agony.

So here she was shoving things in boxes. Every little thing

reminded her of the last two brilliant years with Richard, from the framed certificate stating she'd passed the Landscape Gardening Course she'd taken at his suggestion, to the picture of the two of them walking in the Lakes earlier in the year, when he'd asked her to move in with him. And then there were the gardening gloves he'd given her at Christmas, and the silver earrings, which had been a birthday present. In London, all she could think about was Richard. Escaping was the only chance she stood of getting over him.

She picked up her phone and rang Richard's number. This was the last time she'd do this. The very very last time.

His answer phone kicked in. 'Hi there, Richard isn't here right now, but leave a message and I'll get back to you later.' She kept doing this, just to hear his voice. She couldn't help it, even though she knew it didn't do any good. It was time she stopped and moved on.

Taking a deep breath, and trying to ignore the telltale wobble in her voice, she said, 'Hi, Richard. This is Kezzie. I'm leaving town. You won't hear from me again.'

She put the phone down, trembling, tears spilling over her cheeks. But it was done. Kezzie surveyed the mess of the room she was in, and slowly started to rationalize the boxes. There wasn't any other option. The summer was over, and autumn had begun.