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Opening Extract from...

Summer Holiday

Written by Penny Smith

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Summer Holiday

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CHAPTER ONE

When Miranda Frayn was little, she'd wanted to be a vet, an astronaut or someone who got lots of free stickers and felt-tip pens.

At around twelve years old, she decided that being a vet was not a good job, since it seemed that all they did was put down hamsters, massage Minty, her Jack Russell, up her bottom, and get scratched by cats. Astronauts did not spend their days bouncing round the moon and far-flung planets, but instead did tedious experiments with seeds and rubbishy-looking rocks. She no longer wanted free stickers and felt-tip pens, but instead yearned to be famous and get married to Luke Skywalker or Han Solo.

With that in mind, she put her name forward for every school play and, by dint of hard work and the non-stop badgering of the drama teacher, managed, the year before she left, to achieve the giddy heights of Maria in *The Sound of Music*. The boy who wrote the review in the school magazine described her as radiant, moving – a star in the making. Miranda had discovered early that if you wanted something badly enough, you had to be prepared to kiss really unattractive people – sometimes more than once. If she had not virtually sucked his head off at the back of the cinema, he would have written a very different critique. He would have said

that as a nun she was unconvincing, and as a singer she'd made his ears bleed. He would have said that she should take up any other career but acting.

But, once caught, the performing bug is difficult to shake off, and there are any number of people willing to take your money for everything from head shots to acting lessons.

Luckily for the viewing public, fledgling starlet Miranda Frayn fell in love and decided that what she really, really wanted to do was get married and have babies. In her dreams, she imagined combining a career in film with bringing up children, but MGM failed to come knocking at the house in Oxfordshire, and instead she trod the boards in amateur plays, where the costumes were creaky, the sets were wobbly, and there was always a sweaty man playing fourth lead who wanted to have an affair with her.

It was all so dispiriting that, eventually, Miranda settled on acting the part of the devoted wife and became a passionate advocate of scarf knitting. She would have liked to create something a little more advanced but, frankly, with two small children and a man who wore Savile Row suits and cashmere from Brora, that was never going to happen.

Nigel Blake, her husband, was everything she had wanted: smart, funny, handsome and rich. She hadn't realised she wanted rich but, increasingly, it was the only thing he still was. When she divorced him after two decades, having discovered his long standing shagfest, as she called it, with his secretary, she would have described him as fat, boorish and rich. Or Knobhead, for short. But he was the father of her two children, so she reserved such comments for evenings when she was out with friends and for phone calls with the man himself.

Meanwhile, she was living in London, back on the dating scene and hating it. It was like constantly seeing bad films. She had started off excited about the prospect and then, over two years, a sort of malaise had crept over the whole thing and she had stopped worrying about matching underwear – or even matching outerwear. And as for her friends' view of what constituted handsome …

Here she was, for example, on yet another night out with an allegedly suitable man. Passers-by glancing into the little restaurant would have seen a couple who had probably been married for an eternity – they weren't speaking.

Miranda was bored again. She imagined her date as an icon on her computer that she was deleting.

And while she was at it, she might delete some of her friends' numbers. How on earth they could think that this pompous tit was her cup of tea … And her steak was tough. Still, at least it was giving her teeth a workout.

'Sorry?' She raised her eyebrows at her dining partner.

'I asked if you wanted more wine.'

'No,' she responded baldly. 'Thank you,' she added. No point in adding rudeness to the patronising she had already been. Mind you, he deserved it. Right-wing. Fascist. Fat. Twat. She smiled as she thought it.

'What?' he asked suspiciously.

'Nothing. I was just thinking silly words. Rhyming words. How much better they are than when they're on their ownsome.'

'As in?' he queried, trying to get on to her wavelength, although he had almost given up. He was not a man who struggled to get women. He was rich and lived at a very expensive address in Mayfair.

Miranda knew, as she opened her mouth, that it was going to be a hopeless conversation. The man had no imagination, the verbal dexterity of a Clanger and she honestly couldn't be bothered to try to explain what she found amusing about rhyming words. And of course she couldn't articulate the words she'd come up with to describe him, so she had to make up two more. 'Numpty and flumpty,' she said, off the top of her head.

'Which means?'

'Nothing. It's the rhyme that amuses me.' Oh, God. Now she was going to have to explain. Or feign partial death and get out of this place.

'What – so Humpty Dumpty's funny?' He wrinkled his nose.

As if I'd done a trouser cough, she thought, and smirked.

'Is it?' he asked, mistaking – again – her expression.

'I think you either find words funny or you don't. Have you finished? Shall we get the bill?' He looked at his very expensive watch, clearly hoping she'd clocked its exclusivity. 'I know it's a bit early,' she added, 'but I've suddenly remembered I have a five o'clock start tomorrow, and perhaps tonight wasn't the best for organising a long dinner.'

'A five o'clock start? What for?' he asked.

'Erm. Flight. Early flight. Late booking. I needed to get away. Going to …' her eyes fell on the tablecloth '… the Czech Republic,' she said brightly. Like I care whether or not you believe me. She tried to look innocent and apologetic at the same time.

To give him his due, he asked promptly for the bill, then insisted on paying. That was the one good thing about the blind dates: they

hadn't cost her anything. But they were all bankers or company directors, so she felt guilt free. In fact, with the bankers, she was practically doing the country a service.

She was barely home and through the door before she was entirely disrobed and in front of the television. What a waste of an evening. What a waste of a lot of evenings.

Miranda realised she was accidentally watching the news and it was all too depressing. She clicked it off and wandered up to the bathroom to wash her face and moisturise. After she'd cleaned her teeth, she looked at herself in the mirror. Put her hands to either side of her face and pulled them back to see how she'd look with a face lift. Would she have the guts to let someone literally take off her face, trim the edges and hem it again to smooth out the wrinkles? At least her eyesight was starting to go a bit. It was a relief not to be able to see the crow's feet quite so clearly.

She sighed and padded through to the bedroom. Odd, she still couldn't get used to sleeping alone. For almost a quarter of a century, another body had slumbered beside hers, getting larger, taking up more space, and snoring louder as the years passed. It was such a luxury to do a starfish impression and not touch flesh.

Tomorrow is the day I take control, she thought. Life has got to perk up, big-time. She lay between the cotton sheets trying to decide what control needed to be taken.

Her friends would have described Miranda Blake first and foremost as a laugh. Pressed to expand, they would have said she was attractive, with a penchant for extremely high heels. Her parents would have described their daughter as wayward but tamed by a decent man, whom she had divorced for no good reason (after all, everyone has a little dalliance on the side). Miranda herself would

have said she was all right, considering the alternatives. Everything was heading south and hairs were starting to sprout in strange places, but it could have been a lot worse. She had friends with prolapses, fallen arches, bad backs or bunions.

Early in their relationship, Nigel would have described her as a cracking bit of totty. The two had met at a party in Fulham where neither knew the host. Miranda was dressed for success in a little blue dress and very high black heels, which she found surprisingly easy to walk in. Nigel was wearing what she later came to describe as his out-of-hours uniform – a Pink's shirt and corduroy trousers with Gucci loafers. His thick brown hair fell in messy abandon to his shirt collar and his amber eyes looked admiringly into her sparkling blue ones as they shared the bottle of Château Latour he had brought, having mistakenly thought it was a dinner party.

He had looked around for a corkscrew and she had handed him one wordlessly – she'd been on the lookout for a semi-decent bottle since she'd arrived ten minutes earlier with a girlfriend. He had walked her home afterwards and they had kissed fervently on the doorstep of her minuscule studio flat. Within a year, they had married in a picturesque church in the Cotswolds and Miranda got pregnant on honeymoon. Lucy's birth was followed two years later by the arrival of Jack.

It wasn't until the children were on the verge of leaving home that Miranda realised she categorically loathed her husband. The sound of his key in the front door of the smart stuccoed building in fashionable Kensington filled her with a horrible *ennui*. It didn't help that he now resembled an overstuffed pork sausage. Maybe he had actually absorbed a whole other person. Watching him tie his

shoelaces was a lesson in physics: how did he bend in the middle when the middle was so much bigger than either end?

When she'd brought up the subject of divorce he had been stunned. 'On what grounds?' he had demanded.

'My unreasonable behaviour? Your unreasonable behaviour? Bird molestation? Giraffe bothering? I don't really mind, but I do want a divorce,' she had said, in a reasonable tone.

'Are you having an affair?' His eyebrows had come together.

'No. And I assume you aren't?' she asked, her eyes on his paunch. When a paunch got that big, did it become a super-paunch?

He went pink around the ears, and it dawned on her, with a shock, that he *was*. And as the conversation (now a shouting conversation) continued, she discovered that it was of long standing and with his secretary. She remembered yelling at some stage that he was a cliché. It was strange that even though she wanted a divorce, wanted never to see Nigel step out of his trousers ever again, it was still awful.

It was the division of the spoils that did it. There were days when she had cried over the toaster for her lost dreams. The things they had bought together when she had imagined herself in love. But now she could see that that had been youthful folly, a combination of lust and laziness. Marrying Nigel had relieved her of the need to get a proper job.

Lucy blamed Miranda for breaking up a happy family. Jack had been upset but understanding.

After the decree absolute, Miranda had bought herself a house in Notting Hill and put the rest of the money in the bank. It wasn't a huge amount, but she had reckoned that, if she was careful, she could have a lovely break before she found employment.

The time had come. But what job?

I need a change of direction, Miranda thought, putting her toes out from under the duvet and wiggling them. Tomorrow I'll do something to facilitate finding a job. At least it'll be a change from thinking about sodding dates.

Eventually, as her mind wandered off to variations on a theme of sheep, she drifted into sleep.

The next morning she arose full of purpose. She had a shower, washed her hair and put on a conditioning treatment, then vigorously applied a body scrub, which smelt slightly off. Wrapped in a fluffy new towel – she had thrown out all those that might have touched Nigel – she plucked her eyebrows and moisturised, using industrial quantities of cream. She applied blow-drying serum to her mid-length red-gold hair, then hung upside down to do the roots, leaving the rest to curl naturally.

'Right,' she said, as she strode to the wardrobe. She took out a thin pink shirt and a pair of jeans cut off to the knee. Looking critically in the mirror, she was in two minds about whether she was mutton dressed as lamb since she could see her bra through the shirt. But without a husband or children to declare either way, she decided to go with it.

She breakfasted on two pieces of toast, one with marmalade and the other with Nutella, which looked a little funny – she'd probably bought it when Jack was about eight, and a lot of buttery crumbs had gone under the bridge since then.

With a cup of tea in hand, she opened her computer, checked her emails and hovered over the Google search space. What should she put? Maybe, she thought, I should get into the habit of having a job before actually applying for one. It was a bit scary, the idea of

an interview. And she was a bit long in the tooth to be asking for work experience.

In the absence of anything springing to mind, she typed 'Constructive Things to Do' and clicked on the first result. A list of twenty-five possibilities popped up, including updating your MP3 player and throwing out clothes. Very therapeutic, but not what she was after.

Another suggested learning how to spin a pencil round your thumb. Not now. Although it would be a good trick – and certainly an advance on dating.

An hour later, Miranda had got herself on to a website advertising eco-produce. She went and made herself another cup of tea, and opened the kitchen cupboard to see if there was anything that might help it go down. There wasn't. That was the flip-side of living on your own – there was never a biscuit when you wanted one.

Back at the computer, she chose a different heading for Google: 'Constructive Things to Do In Your 40s'.

One word stuck out: 'Volunteering'.

'By Jove, I think she's got it,' she said, double-clicking on a link. By lunchtime Miranda Blake, divorcee, forty-three, had volunteered for canal clearing in the Cotswolds.

She printed off the list of suggested items to take with her, ticked off those she had, and ringed those she hadn't. What on earth was a 'wicking shirt' when it was at home? She Googled it. Oh, right, she thought. What we used to call Aertex when we were at school and forced to play hockey in inclement weather.

Her mobile phone rang. 'Hi, Lydia.'

'Miranda,' said Lydia, the wife of one of Nigel's friends. 'Wondered how the date with James went last night.'

'Erm. Fine. But I don't think he's right for me,' answered Miranda, suddenly remembering she had told James she would be on an early flight.

'Oh?'

'You know. Not really the same sense of humour. And things,' she ended lamely.

'Handsome, though,' stated Lydia, in her clipped way.

'Yes. Oh, yes. Definitely,' said Miranda, shaking her head vigorously even though Lydia couldn't see.

'And he's loaded.'

'Yes.' She had noticed his very expensive watch and the new Aston Martin.

'So, are you going on a second date?'

'Well … no,' said Miranda.

'But you'd be *perfect* together,' pronounced Lydia.

In what way? wondered Miranda. Perfect together as in chicken and Lego? 'Mm,' she said, debating where to go from here. 'Thing is, I don't think it would work. He's sort of similar to Nigel.'

'To Nigel?' Lydia almost shrieked.

'Banker. Square?' she essayed.

'Square?' repeated Lydia.

There was a silence while Miranda tried to form a sentence that wouldn't antagonise her friend. Or was she a friend? Would a proper friend have set her up with such a – such a muppet? 'I think what I'm looking for, Lydia, is a change,' she finally tried. 'Someone who isn't in the banking world, maybe. Someone to be silly with. Carefree with. A diversion.'

Lydia of the carefully styled coiffure was not having that. 'What you need is someone who is going to look after you. And that

means a man with a solid career. Money in the bank. James ticks all the boxes – *and* he doesn't have any children to get in the way. As I told you, he's newly out of a long relationship with a concert pianist. Which means he *can* be arty. And so on and so forth.'

Really! How could she have a friend who would say 'and so on and so forth'? She typed into the computer: 'How to End a Friendship with Someone Dull'.

'Are you typing?' asked Lydia.

'No,' responded Miranda, swiftly, smiling to herself at the options listed. She would read them all later.

'I think he's worth a second stab.'

'Maybe you're right,' lied Miranda. 'Leave it with me and I'll have a little think.' Anything to end this conversation. 'Now,' she added, 'I have to sort myself out. I'm going on an expedition and I reckon I need some wicking shirts and a pair of gaiters. I'll speak to you later.'

'Shall I tell James to call you?'

'No. I'll call him myself. 'Bye.' Why had she said that? Damn. She pursed her lips, then sent a text: **James. Thanks for dinner. All the best, Miranda.** No self-important alpha male could possibly take that as anything but a brush-off. Particularly not when he found out from Lydia that she was definitely in town and not in the Czech Republic.

She grabbed her list and her bag and left the house with a spring in her step. It was a beautiful day and she decided to walk to Kensington instead of driving. After all, she was going to have to get used to being in the fresh air, and it wasn't always going to be this sunny.

CHAPTER TWO

On Saturday, having told nobody about her new career as an eco-bod, Miranda woke up to the alarm and wondered whether she should cancel. She'd bet loads of people did, what with one bronchitis or another. She lay in bed for a minute, luxuriating in the beauty of being alone under her king-size duvet. No man-smells here, she thought. If Nigel had been there, he would have farted, scratched his scrotum and demanded breakfast in bed. And possibly nudged her with his early-morning broom handle, emerging from below his distended stomach. Urgh. Just the thought of it got her out of bed.

She meandered over to the curtains and threw them back. Damn. Raining. Typical. Maybe she wouldn't bother to wash her hair, after all. She checked the time. An hour to get ready. She pottered into the bathroom and turned on the shower, catching sight of herself in the big mirror over the bathroom sink as she reached for her toothbrush.

Whoa. What was that? She peered closer. Bollocks. A spot at my age, she thought. That is just *so* unfair. And then she smiled at her reflection. She was sounding remarkably like her daughter going through puberty. The difference was that Miranda would leave the spot to do its own thing and not fiddle with it, unlike Lucy who

would dig and squeeze until it virtually needed stitches and a few weeks to heal. It was amazing that Lucy's face had survived without a scar.

Miranda stepped into the shower – and couldn't get out again because of a severe bout of water-induced inertia. She was in the zone, just wanting to stand there for ever letting the water cascade down her back and creep round the front. What would snap her out of it? She had to make a move. Any move. A move that would break the spell. No. It wasn't going to happen. She'd be found on Wednesday by the cleaner. Blown up from water absorption and with five days' hair growth on her legs. Would there be maggots? Are there always maggots? 'Yuk,' she said, and reached for the shaver.

There was something wonderful about stepping out from a long shower into a warm mist, and it was even better not being able to see herself in the fogged-up mirror. She moisturised every available inch of skin, covered the spot with concealer, then hovered over the perfume. Was there any point? She sprayed some on the back of her neck.

She could just not turn up. Simply call in sick. How wonderfully naughty. Who would care? But she used to push the children into doing things they didn't want to and they usually came back saying it was the best day they'd ever had. She girded her loins and walked with purpose to the plastic carrier bag from which she had not yet unpacked the requisite items on the list.

My goodness, she thought, when she was dressed. I look like the sort of woman who's never heard of Brazilian waxing or eyebrow-plucking. In short … a mad feminist. All men are bastards. I'll take them down with my sharp wit and disused tweezers.

She fluffed up the duvet, threw on the coverlet and the six cushions, then decided she had just enough time for a quick coffee.

Ten minutes later she was wondering why, with all her experience of life, she hadn't put a dash of cold water into it. The burnt roof of her mouth hurt. On the bright side, there would be that strangely enjoyable peeling away of the skin tomorrow.

The green Jaguar purred into life and she put the postcode into the sat-nav as she waited for the garage door to lift. She drove west towards Shepherd's Bush and the A40, searching for something to listen to on the radio, finally settling for XFM because it made her feel connected to Jack. Her adorable Jack. Nigel hadn't been able to make him conform and he was now wandering the world with a clutch of A levels and a backpack. She did worry about his future and, in a secret, locked-away bit of her brain, actually wished he had gone into banking and done the hiking stuff later.

Lucy, mind you. Chip off the old block. Miranda tried out her singing voice along to some god-awful rackety piece of music.

The weather was getting worse. The rain was sluicing down as though a pipe had been uncorked. There was little traffic on the roads and she made it to the rendezvous within an hour, parking between a muddy old Fiat and a yellow VW Beetle. After she'd struggled into her brand-new, state-of-the-art Gore-Tex anorak, with zips under the armpits for letting off steam, she emerged from the car with a modicum of decorum and tiptoed to the boot in her trainers to get her wellingtons. Four people were watching her from under umbrellas. Their clothing looked like it had been stolen from a tip. They were filthy.

'Hi,' said Miranda, brightly, stuffing her new gloves into her jacket pocket.

The assembled group smiled and nodded, drinking tea from a flask and chatting about the work in hand. A man in a high-visibility jacket, with teeth that might have been thrown into his mouth by a blind parsnip-tosser, introduced himself as Will. 'We're basically going to be getting rid of the undergrowth and stuff on the towpaths so that the dredger can get through to clean out the canal,' he said. 'At the moment, as you can see …' he looked around and amended that '… as you can't see through this atrocious weather but I assure you is the case, the canal is all silted up and full of algae bloom and duckweed. The dredger can't do its work until we've done ours.' He waved a hand in the direction of the sky. 'Now, apparently the good folk at the Met Office are predicting that this rain is going to blow through pretty quickly. Since we're all here, with the exception of Alex, we may as well get cracking. At least nobody's cried off with the "flu".' He made quote marks in the air as though that was a usual excuse for someone not turning up. Miranda shook her head in disgust.

He walked towards the Land Rover and bent over, his large trousers gathering in an elephant's bottom of grey as he rummaged. 'I've got a collection of implements in here. Come and take your pick. Not literally.' He laughed – it was obviously a line he'd used before. Miranda smiled. Might as well show willing.

The others had obviously done this work before, since they showed no hesitation in lunging for the tools, leaving her with nothing but a pair of enormous leather gloves and the job of picking up litter. 'It's like being at home with children,' she commented

to the woman in front of her. Her name was Teresa: she had hair like a newly shorn sheep and a wart near her nose.

'What? Walking along wearing protective gloves?' Teresa asked, with a confused expression.

'No, having to pick stuff up. All their toys and things. Socks. Although usually I didn't wear big leather gloves to do it. Do you have children?'

'Cats,' responded Teresa, briefly.

'Lovely. Hairy ones?'

'Yes. Well, one short-haired and two long-haired.'

'Rescue cats or pedigree?' Like she really cared.

'Rescue.'

'Lovely.' Bloody hell! She had to stop saying 'Lovely' – she was beginning to sound like a game-show host.

They stopped speaking as they reached the rest of the group.

'Here's where we left off last week.' Teresa nodded to a newly cut section on a bush.

Will was hunched over, talking to one of the men, but turned and said something to Teresa, who moved forwards, leaving Miranda standing alone. She sniffed the air appreciatively. The rain had stopped, leaving a damp, green smell. It reminded her of finding a little patch of camomile in the corner of the garden and lying on it to see how comfortable it was. When Nigel had found it, he had covered it with weed-killer.

'So, Miranda,' said Will, 'you've picked the short straw, and are doing the tidying up. It's one of the most important jobs, but also one of the most unloved as it plays havoc with your lower back.' He rubbed his own and grimaced, his lips slightly parted to reveal one of his yellowy parsnip teeth. 'I'd recommend that you stand up and

stretch it out frequently or you'll wake up tomorrow unable to walk. And try not to get too close to the cutters – they can get a bit carried away, if you know what I mean.'

Miranda nodded, although she wasn't sure she *did* know what he meant. She added a smile, then turned quickly as loud running was heard through the gloom, followed by the sudden appearance of a superbly scruffy man with dreadlocks, wearing a jumper with so many holes that it resembled a string vest.

'Alex!' exclaimed Will, warmly, clasping his outstretched hand and clapping him on the shoulder. 'We were wondering where you'd got to. Thought you must have been struck down with summer flu or some other lurgy.'

'Camper van sprang a leak in the middle of the night. I've been doing emergency repairs. Couldn't leave until I'd made sure it was watertight. Don't want to get back and find all my Armani pumps wrecked, do I?'

'Ha-ha. No. You betcha you don't,' Will said jovially. He pointed a big square finger. 'I saved you a machete.'

'Can I have a machete?' asked Miranda, moving closer.

'Ha-ha!' He laughed again. 'No, I don't think so. Not on your first day.' He strode back to the Land Rover, his boots sliding on the muddy path.

'Alex,' said Alex, holding out his hand to Miranda.

'Miranda,' said Miranda, shaking it and looking into the greenest eyes she had ever seen. They were leaf green. Ireland green. Ridiculously green.

'First time, then.' He smiled down at her.

Miranda was tall, but he was taller still – and what her friends at school would have called 'well tasty'. Although she wasn't sure

about the dreadlocks. Didn't you have to be seriously grubby to get them? Not wash for months? She sniffed cautiously. He didn't smell. 'Lovely fresh air, isn't it?' she exclaimed, to cover herself, and then answered his question: 'And, yes, it is my first time. I wanted to get out of the city and do something constructive.'

'Which city?'

'London.'

'Which part?'

'Notting Hill,' she said semi-apologetically. Ever since the film *Notting Hill*, she'd felt something akin to embarrassment about living in a place that was synonymous with a romantic comedy starring Hugh Grant and Julia Roberts.

'Nice,' he said, as he accepted the machete from Will. 'Shall we?'

'"Lead on, Macduff,"' she said, even though they were already where she needed to be to start picking up rubbish.

'"Out damned spot,"' he threw back, as he advanced into the undergrowth, the crotch of his baggy trousers catching on foliage and shooting raindrops in arcs.

Was he flirting, Miranda wondered. How lovely. That bloody word again. 'Lovely, lovely, lovely, lovely,' she said, under her breath, to use them all up. 'Lovely, luvverly. Luvverly bunch of coconuts. Oh, wouldn't it be lovely? And the new word of the day is …' she paused, putting a big lump of greenery into the bag '… gorgeous. Scrumptious. Handsome. Steady on, Miranda.' What was happening to her?

She gave herself a stern talking-to. 'I am a forty-three-year-old woman with two children, one of whom is probably about the same age as he is. It's disgusting. Nigel's eyes would literally come out of his head on stalks if he knew what I was thinking. No, not

literally – particularly with all that lardy, piggy flesh holding them in.'

Her mind rambled on aimlessly as she bent to her task. She didn't notice the time slipping by because she had wandered into a rich seam in the creases of her brain and hopped incrementally to a reverie about Harrison Ford in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. Then she stood up. 'Ow,' she squeaked. A searing pain had shot up her back and exploded tiny pinpoints of light through her retinas.

Will ambled back to check she was all right.

'Yes. And, yes, I know you told me to stand up and stretch, but I got into a rhythm and completely forgot,' she panted, rubbing the base of her spine.

'Stand with your feet apart and drop your body forwards from your hips,' he ordered. 'Go all floppy. Take the strain off your lumbar region.'

She hung forward and felt her anorak slip up past her nose, so that she was breathing into the zip and smelling something she couldn't quite put her finger on. Was it man-made-fibre scent? She suddenly realised what it was: the smell of hard work, alias sweat, and she had obviously forgotten to put on any deodorant. How very, very … in a weird way, almost pleasant. If acrid.

She stood up to get away from it.

'Feeling better?' asked Will.

'Yup,' she announced – although, actually, she felt a bit sick from standing up so fast. 'Onwards and upwards,' she said, with determination.

She reapplied herself to the task in hand, stretching every few minutes and admiring the clean and tidy state of the path. Well, tidy but muddy and a damn sight better than the view in front,

with its branches and undergrowth melding together. She could just see Alex's dreadlocks whipping to and fro as he sliced the heads off unsuspecting plants.

It felt like days since she'd had her coffee.

She waved Will over.

'Problem?' he asked.

'Er, I hope not. I was suddenly overcome by a wave of hunger but I haven't brought a packed lunch with me. Which I seem to recall was on the list. A bothersome omission. Is there anywhere I could get something when we stop?'

'Yes – most of the regulars bring their own because they don't want what's on offer from the nearest shop. I'll warn you now, it ain't exciting. There might be a pie but it'll be more pastry than filling. And if the filling's meat, it might be a part of the animal you aren't familiar with.'

'A dollop of testicle, a dash of oink and an earlobe, eh? Beggars can't be choosers, as they say. That's what I'm going to have to do when we break. Which is when?'

Will checked his watch. 'Half an hour. Can you last that long?'

On cue, Miranda's stomach howled, like a small woodland creature in pain.

He laughed, and jerked his head upwards, revealing hairy nostrils. 'I'll take that as a no. If you could possibly hang on for a quarter of an hour, that would be better for us. We're dealing with a knotty branch and it would be nice if we could get that sorted before we have lunch.'

'I'll keep my stomach on a short leash, and tell it to pull its horns in, if that's not too much of a mixed metaphor,' she promised. She bent forward and pushed a great wodge of vegetation and sticks

into her bag, suddenly noticing a stripy snail stuck to one of the leaves. She picked it off and it retreated quickly into its shell. She held it until it came out again, then gently touched one of its antennae. It retracted. She poked the other.

'Aw. Leave him alone,' said Alex, who had arrived at her side without her noticing, absorbed as she had been in the snail's defence mechanism.

She smiled and put the snail on the side of the path where they watched it unfurl from its shell and make off. 'Racing home to his wife and daughters,' she said. 'Or her husband and sons. Having said that, they're hermaphrodites, aren't they?'

'Yes, they are. And the way they mate isn't what you'd want to be doing if you were out on a date. They twist themselves round each other and cover themselves in frothy slime. Then they both set off to bury their eggs in a mulchy bit of ground. They cover them with mucus, soil and excrement, and about a month later, bingo, loads of tiny snails are ready to munch their way through your prized garden plants. Some snails live to fifteen and they're excellent fodder for birds, toads and snakes.'

'Snakes?' she queried.

'And that's all you've taken from that superbly informative lecture?' he said sadly, shaking his head.

'Of course not,' she told him, 'but I don't know why, I thought snakes went for fast food. Mice. Rats. Humans, if they were hungry.'

'And the last time you read about a human in Britain being eaten by a snake?'

'Yeah, okay, Mr Biology. Although we've all heard about the bloke going to the loo and finding a huge great python.'

He smirked.

She blushed.

'Does a snail really vomit to move, as someone once told me?' she asked quickly.

'Well, it's a gastropod, which literally means "stomach foot". And I suppose it does essentially secrete mucus, which it slides on. So, yes. Vomit. Slide. Vomit. Slide.'

'Existing on a liquid lunch. And dinner,' said Miranda, beginning to walk back along the towpath. She could feel her stomach on the verge of making another announcement. 'Quite nice, though, to bury your eggs in the garden and let them hatch on their own, rather than spending nine months incubating them and several years saving them from themselves,' she threw back, over her shoulder.

'How many have you got?' he asked.

'Two. But they've gone now. So I'm foot-loose and fancy-free.'

'No father of the children?' he enquired, kicking a stone into the grass.

'He's gone too.' She flashed him a smile. Really, she thought, this is going to have to stop.