

THE CHAPTER OF ST CLOUD

The Chapter of St Cloud

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1

The voices of the choir soared into the arched spaces of the cathedral.

*Lux æterna luceat eis, Domine,
cum sanctis tuis in æternum,
quia pius es.*

*Requiem æternam dona eis, Domine;
et lux perpetua luceat eis;
cum sanctis tuis in æternum,
quia pius es.*

DI Collins looked at the singers so he would not have to look at the mourning parents in the front pew, or the tearful schoolfriends sitting across the aisle from him. It was almost too beautiful, this music. It gave voice to things that weren't there yet, perhaps never would be. Acceptance, serenity, strength. The broken couple staring at the coffin knew nothing of all that. All they had was the gaping emptiness where their daughter had been. Collins wondered who had chosen the music, who had organised this sad and dignified ceremony. Certainly neither Mr or Mrs Miller would have been capable of it, he had seen what their grief did to them.

There had been no need for him to come. The girl's death had been only briefly suspicious, and the inquest ruled her overdose an accident without any questions asked. The police were no longer involved. But he had been the one to tell the parents, breaking their world apart in one shocked moment, and later he had been the one to bring them the useless reassurance that she had not died at someone else's

hands. Somehow he felt responsible. So he had come to pay his respects, on his own, to listen to the choked-up tributes to a girl he had never known, and now never would.

Death by misadventure. What an odd phrase it was. It must have been an adventure for her, seventeen years old, out with her friends, something new – ‘go on, try it, it’ll be fun’. But she had been a wisp of a girl, and the pills in combination with the amount of alcohol she had already drunk stopped her young heart. Death by misadventure. She had been no more stupid or reckless than many of her contemporaries, just unlucky. But of course the neutral finding of the inquest did not stop people from apportioning blame. In newspapers, during coffee breaks, on web forums, people dealt in reasons and opinions. It was the drink, the drugs, the parents, the schools, young people today. It was all or none of these things. Sitting in his hard pew listening to the singing, Collins knew it was never so simple. The only way to prevent accidents like these was for parents to lock up their children until age twenty-five, and then they’d probably still break their necks trying to climb out of the window. The hardest thing of all was facing that there was no one to blame, nothing you could do. Naomi Miller died, the world went on without her, and the heavenly assurances of the choir could never change that.

2

Claire sang as she drove away from London. It was a perfect late-August day, with sunshine and clouds chasing each other across a big sky, but Claire would have been just as happy if the weather had been dismal. She was on her way to see Simon, and that was enough to make her sing. She would be staying with his family for a week, a good end to her holidays. Next year they would travel, they had promised each other, have three or four weeks in Italy. Simon wanted to show her Florence and Siena, show her the country that gave life to the art he loved. In preparation for this far-off prospect, Claire's luggage contained a teach-yourself-Italian course and a brand-new dictionary. She had even, schoolgirlishly, bought a new pen and a bright green exercise book. If she got bored during her week in the country she would know what to do. She couldn't stand it that Simon spoke a language she didn't, and she was determined to catch up with him.

She had met him at her best friend's wedding. Such a cliché, really, but one she was happy to embrace. Only last June, it was, and she'd been feeling old and left-over and not very generous towards her friend, who was trying to outdo the Duchess of Cambridge in radiance. Bryony had been the third of four friends to hook up. Gina was living with her boyfriend, and Julia was married ages ago. Only Claire was still single, and she was two years older than Bry. She'd been reflecting on this, watching the chattering couples around her – and they had all seemed to be couples – with a jaundiced eye, when a good-looking young man materialised beside her and started talking about the architecture of the church, of all things. They had

introduced themselves: Simon, art historian; Claire, medievalist. She noticed he had the same combination of dark hair and blue eyes she had herself, but although she did not consider herself particularly striking, in him it was startling and attractive. They had continued talking until Bryony broke them up, clearly feeling that one of her husband's guests was monopolising her friend. 'Who is he, Bry?' Claire had asked, but the bride just shook her head. 'Must be one of Paul's friends, I don't know half the people here.' Claire resolved on the spot that when she got married, they would have just a small party for people they really *knew*. Suddenly, it hadn't seemed such a strange thought. Especially not when Simon sought her out again after the best man's speech. She found herself telling him all about her research, her ideas for a book. He was the first man she'd ever met who didn't glaze over at the phrase 'feminine theologies'.

They continued to meet in the weeks that followed, until he was spending almost as much time at her flat as she was. Her friends were doubtful, but she ignored them. All right, he was younger than she was, but so what? There were horrible men of all ages, why discriminate against the nice ones? And sometimes they were just being silly.

'You're not going to marry one of Paul's posh friends, are you?' Gina had said, 'One public schoolboy among one's acquaintance is enough, thank you very much.'

'Simon's not like that at all,' Claire had protested, wondering what this implied about her opinion of Bry's new husband. Still, for all her casual reply, she was glad she hadn't told the others precisely where he lived. The first time he had taken her home she'd thought 'you have got to be kidding me'. Maybe she had even said it aloud, as they had approached his parents' house on the long drive.

'It's a former bishop's palace, built in the early seventeenth century,' Simon had explained, with art-historical detachment, 'It's been our family home for a long time.' If she hadn't been apprehensive about meeting his family already, she would have been then. But her fears were groundless. They were the most welcoming family in the world, and she felt at ease almost at once. And there was a lot to feel at ease with. When Simon said 'family home' he didn't just mean his family had been living there for generations, he meant that most of it was living there right now.

Claire grew up the eldest of two daughters, the gap between her and her sister just too big for them to be company. Her grandparents died early, her only set of cousins had lived too far away to visit often. She had dreamed of a large family as a girl, she wanted aunts and uncles and lots of cousins like other children had. Later she thought she would have a large family herself, she would have four children at least. That was pushing it a bit by now, half a year after her thirty-first birthday. She'd settle for two, if she had to. But arriving at Simon's parents' for the first time, she thought she had found her large family.

'It would be a wicked waste, for just one couple and their children to live in a house like this,' Simon's ridiculously young-looking mother Anna had explained to Claire, while giving her the tour. 'And each, um, sub-family I suppose you could say, has their own space, we don't have to be in each other's pockets all the time if we don't want to.' All this while ascending a staircase that would have made a comfortable house on its own. There were portraits on the walls, and some of them looked like Simon.

'So how many of you are there?' Claire had asked. She'd only met Simon's parents and his great-grandfather as yet,

though she had been promised brothers and sisters at supper. Anna had counted on her fingers, she had actually counted on her fingers. 'Twenty, give or take.'

'You're not *sure*?'

Anna had laughed at her astonishment, 'Oh, it varies a bit with the seasons. We home-school the children, you see, until they are eleven, and in term time we have some nieces and nephews staying who live away with their parents in the holidays.'

Now, on her way to visit the house for the second time, Claire still wasn't sure she'd met all twenty of them. Simon would keep saying things like: 'Oh that's Ezra, my cousin' or 'my aunt Martha' or 'Abby' or 'Luke' or 'Joshua' or... she despaired of ever getting to know them all. But they were certainly worth knowing. She had been impressed with how unashamedly intellectual they were, the wide array of professions they had chosen. It was so different from her own family home, where watching University Challenge on the telly was considered suspiciously highbrow. Here the children were precocious, growing up as they did amidst a bunch of incredibly knowledgeable adults. Maybe that was why Simon sounded so wise for his age. He was younger than she was, yes, but she often felt he had somehow managed to squeeze a lot more wisdom into his years than she had into hers.

'So you're in love with his beautiful mind, then?' Julia had asked, when she tried to explain this.

'Not just that,' Claire had said, 'But you know what I mean, don't you? It's a relief to meet a man who knows how to talk about other things than the footie and the property market. I've never met anyone who wasn't a colleague who could challenge me in my own field. There aren't that many

people who know enough about medieval Christianity to try.'

'Okay, with me it's more the cricket and the stock exchange,' Julia had conceded, 'But I see what you mean. Good for you, Claire.'

She got off the motorway after she passed Oxford and continued her journey on the friendlier country roads. The place names of tiny villages peeled off at either side, and her historian's mind automatically set them in their proper place in time. All those names recalling ancient fords and woods and settlements. No *thorpes* or *bys* here, this was pure Anglo-Norman, Domesday country. Well not 'pure' obviously, she corrected herself, Anglo-Norman already being a mixed breed. Away to her left, the square tower of the cathedral marked the presence of a town that had sat in this valley for ten centuries at least. The cathedral whose bishop had once seen fit to build his splendid residence in the next village along. She was getting near now. From the next bend, she caught her first sight of the house, deceptively close. She knew it would be nearly twenty minutes yet on the winding lanes, but already she felt she was coming home.

3

They came to her house, her sons' messengers, and offered her a set of shears and a sword – one blade or another. Clothilde, queen-mother, guardian of kings to come, looked at the gifts with perfect understanding. Would she let her grandsons be tonsured and put away safe in a monastery? Or would they be killed, and not trouble her sons' conscience anymore? It was a choice between the mildness of the religion she brought to her husband's family and the cruelty that was theirs by right of inheritance. Clothilde understood, and wretchedly, fatally, she chose...

Dominic chewed on the end of his pencil and looked down in mild horror at what he had written. What did he think he was, a novelist? This was no way to start a sober history of a monastic order, though in truth, it was how the order had begun. Instead of this colourful story, he should be writing an introduction carefully outlining his aims. But those aims were no longer as clear-cut as he would like. Sometimes he wished he'd never started on this project, especially lately, now it came to actually writing the book. Uncharacteristically, instead of working on his tiny, shiny netbook, for this study of the Chapter of St Cloud he had bought a handsome bound notebook, which he had gradually filled with pencilled lines. And now this flight of fancy. Maybe he had written it because at least this harsh scrap of legend went uncontested. The two eldest sons of King Clodomer were killed. The youngest child, Clodoald, entered the church, and later established his own abbey, which was renamed St Cloud after his death in honour of the founder. It was from that abbey that the order known as

the Chapter of St Cloud had grown. Dominic had thought it such a perfect subject when James dropped it in his lap. Right up his street, encompassing both the history and the historiography of a monastic order, and no one had done it before. Should he have been worried about that earlier? The Chapter of St Cloud still existed, and he had anticipated some resistance at the idea of a scholarly study. Information about it was hard to come by, he had found, sometimes even the written sources seemed cagey. People associated with the chapter were difficult to find and unforthcoming when tracked down. Its abbot was so completely unavailable that Dominic had started to doubt his existence. Or maybe he was just being paranoid. Maybe he should stop shilly-shallying and just write this straightforward monograph that any university press would be happy to publish at a small loss. With a clear, simple title, he had imagined it. *St Cloud: a history*, something like that. And sometimes he could almost convince himself that that was all there was to it.

He pulled Alfred Poole's book towards him. It wasn't actually very useful, belonging to the kind of history that reflected its own time more than its past, but it had the distinction of containing one of the very rare printed summaries of the development of the chapter. The spotty Victorian volume, printed in an age with a realistic attitude to the selling value of true crime, contained a lurid account of the author's murder in the back pages. A botched robbery had done for Alfred Poole before he could start on his projected history of the Chapter of St Cloud. It was as if the enterprise was cursed.

'Excuse me, is this place taken?'

'No, no. Please, sit down.'

A pretty dark-haired woman took the seat across from him. Noticing that his books had begun to take up more than their share of table, Dominic made room for her. They worked in silence for a while, the woman at her laptop with a neat stack of linguistics texts beside her, Dominic increasingly frustrated by the lack of information in his hoard. He noticed the woman was taking peeks every time he picked up a different title. 'I'm sorry,' she said eventually, 'I'm hopelessly curious, always looking what people are reading. What is your subject? That's an odd collection you have there.'

Dominic was happy to have an excuse to talk. 'I'm not making much headway,' he said, 'But it's the history of a religious order. It's a long history, hence the combination of Carolingians and twentieth-century Catholicism.'

'Oh. Is it interesting?' she asked, sounding mildly disappointed.

'I think so.' He was used to that reaction. Monks and nuns were inherently boring to the general public, even if the general public in this case – he'd taken a peek of his own – could be fascinated by *The Construction of Noun-Phrases in the Indo-European Languages*. But the woman was still looking at him expectantly, so he tried to explain a little more. 'I think even historians sometimes tend to forget that for a long time the religious wasn't part of everyday life, it *was* life. We think of the cloistered as missing out on something – this age abhors celibacy – but a monk in the twelfth century was fully part of life, and performing an important function. The concerns of a religious order were the concerns of its times.'

'I see.' She appeared amused by his insistence, and perfectly content to continue talking. He hoped she could be engaging

on the subject of Indo-European noun-phrases. 'But what makes this particular order your fascination of choice?'

'Partly, I'm afraid, that it has been the least studied of them. The mendicants, the white monks, the military orders especially, they've all been researched to death. The Chapter of St Cloud is obscure, but it's been obscure for a very long time. And it seems to have kept its character remarkably well, through the centuries. There's always the same focus in its religious thought, which is odd, given the number of reforms and renaissances it's gone through. And it has a history of strong, charismatic abbots. That is, as far as I can tell.' Was he explaining too much?

'Why? You seem uncertain.'

'It's very hard to find primary sources. There are some charters, chronicles written after the fact, a seventeenth century copy of the Rule. But there is little original material, and modern scholarship is very insistent on primary sources. Something that didn't bother him yet.' He patted Alfred Poole. 'He made all kinds of connections that seemed eminently reasonable to him, and now I'm having to go over it all again to see if his assumptions were warranted.'

She smiled. 'Don't you love those self-confident Victorians? Mind you, we wouldn't have been anywhere without them. We owe the whole historical-linguistic edifice to their willingness to make assumptions.'

Here we go, Dominic thought, *noun-phrases*. They turned out to be unexpectedly entertaining.

On his way home he bought an evening paper at a newsstand. The lead article was about yesterday's murder. A young man, the barman of a local pub, had been shot in his home. No motive, no suspects. Not very cheering, but at least it put Dominic's own worries in perspective. Murder

was still rare enough in this town to make headlines. He had moved here only a few months ago, but Dominic knew the young man's – the boy's, really – place of work, knew he must have seen him around. And now he was dead. An Inspector Collins was quoted as saying the police were keeping an open mind as to the motive and identity of the perpetrator, which presumably meant he hadn't a clue.

Dominic's steps had automatically brought him into the Close, and he tucked his newspaper under his arm and went through the church's small south entrance. There was no choir practice today, but he still liked to go home by the cathedral, even through it, on most days. It was nearly closing time, and the tourists had left. He loved a big church when it was quiet, even though he knew that in the days when it was built it wasn't meant to be. Now he moved silently through the south aisle until he reached the westernmost bay. There he leant companionably against a massive compound pier and looked upwards to drink in the cathedral's towering gothic beauty. It never ceased to amaze him, the proportionate perfection of the arches, the clear lines of the vaults, the little builders' quirks he was only beginning to notice. The cathedral had been one of the reasons he chose to come here. He would never have taken a job at a university in a town that didn't have a proper gothic building at its heart. He had grown up in a cathedral town, and he was determined he would eventually die in one.

He crossed the nave and went out on the north side, through the devil's door. The door that would have been kept permanently closed in former days now sported a practical wheelchair ramp, and Dominic felt no compunction about slipping out where the devil once slipped in.

He remembers the building of the abbey. He remembers the great blocks of limestone that went into raising the walls, the churning watermill and the terrible draught in the refectory when the wind blew from the east. He remembers the chants and the prayers in the night; the simple life of the monks, away from the world, before greed and doubt and ambition returned. He remembers the scholars of the emperor's court, many years later, when the scriptorium was never empty, and how the name of the abbey spread far and wide. He remembers the return to the Rule, and the first daughters and their priors, bright and zealous. Weren't those days the best? With houses all over France and England, with scholars at Paris and a voice in the curia. Oh, the books and the good works he remembers, and the great number of monks and nuns who sheltered under the abbey's wings. He had been proud of his flock. He had shrugged at the rise of the new preaching orders, he had felt rooted in that ancient house on the Seine. Safe, he had believed they were, safe for years, even when they grew smaller, just a few abbeys, a priory here and there. Those years all run together now. They must have been happy. There must have been peace, for he remembers the violence that ended it. He remembers the king's soldiers who took away the plate and the reliquaries. He remembers the abandoned cloisters, the years of hiding, of furtive meetings and unspoken words. Years of fear and silent prayer, right until the creeping words exploded into blustering debate, every man shouting for his own god. He remembers the stones of the kingless rabble that smashed a church's windows into painful shards, and the pamphleteers'

dripping poison. But they had come out of that ordeal strengthened, renewed. They had learned to be quiet, had learned patience and wisdom. No worldly ambition marred the abbey's new face. No blocks of stone marked its place now, nothing that could be pulled down. It lived in his mind, and in the souls of his followers. And the years that succeeded were strange, but they have brought him here, to this place and time, where he can survey history and maybe make sense of it, all the way from that first course of masonry until now. But there is so much he remembers, there is too much. The abbey is there, the abbey is eternal, but he knows there were thoughts before he knew even that.

He recalls, but dimly, his proud, long-haired brothers, his stern-faced grandmother, who loved him. His memory of that time is confused and its colours are crude. He is not sure what really happened, what he was told later, what is true or false. He knows they were his older brothers, and they died where he was spared. It's not so strange that he doesn't remember them well. He was only a child. And after all, it was nearly fifteen-hundred years ago.

5

When he got home Dominic put on a recording of Allegri's *Miserere*. They had just started rehearsing it with the choir, and he liked to get a feel for the music as it was performed by others. A large production together with St Oda's Singers, it would be his first big project since he joined the Cathedral Choir. Now he hummed along bits as he started getting supper together. *Asperges me hysopo...*

He had been living in the flat for five months, having taken over at the history department during a lecturer's pregnancy leave. From the new term onward he would be teaching his own courses full-time. It had been a good move. Things had been all right in Canterbury, but while he was there he would always feel like half of a couple that no longer existed. It was the place of his life with Blake. They had broken up nearly two years ago now – two years! – but only since he moved had Dominic felt all right with that, here in his own place. Now, when he took stock, he could be content. Dominic Walsingham, 36, lecturer in the history and historiography of the middle ages, reasonably accomplished tenor voice, unreasonable fondness for gothic architecture, nice brown eyes. Not bad, really.

It was James Sutherland who had supported his candidacy for the post, he suspected. James had been his thesis supervisor when he was still at university, he owed him a lot. It must have been the conference last year that put him in mind of Dominic again. *The Third International Conference of Monastic Life in the Middle Ages* at Kalamazoo, Michigan. He'd laughed when he saw that incongruous place name tagged on. But he had never been to the States before, and he had been invited to present a paper, so he went. The

conference was held on a large everything-provided campus, which seemed to exist without any relation to the outside world. There were medievalists from all over the world, with the largest contingent from the home university. There was a lot of top quality work coming from there, Dominic knew, and yet it always struck him as a little unlikely, that someone, a lot of someones, in the American Midwest had chosen to study the history of another continent. Where he grew up, the next medieval church was five minutes' walk away, ten minutes on a bus brought you to a full-scale castle. How did you get interested in the European Middle Ages when there weren't any physical ties to that time? He always planned to ask the question when he met a real Midwestern medievalist, but they all proved more interested in talking about the paper he read. He'd been quite proud of it. *The Monastic Rule in History and Memory: Creative Contradictions*. There were some vociferous disagreeing voices during question time, which was always good. The essay was to be printed in the proceedings, they assured him he'd have a copy any month now. He had enjoyed the conference. In the evenings, when there were no discussions or lectures, the Brits had tended to stick together in the bar, exchanging university gossip and bemoaning the transatlantic inability to brew a proper cup of tea. It was on one such evening that James had mentioned the Chapter of St Cloud. They were at their table as usual, James and Dominic, Claire Althorpe, and Stuart Tanner from Aberdeen. They had been listening to an address about monastic filiation that afternoon, maybe that was what brought it on.

'I assume you've heard of the Chapter of St Cloud?' James asked, 'French order, grew from an abbey founded in 550. Joined the Cistercians in the twelfth century, founded

abbeys in England and all over the place, the usual story. Except that it still exists. A student of mine was going to write a thesis on its history, but he decided against it at the last moment. Went for teacher's training instead.' James grimaced. 'But you know, a history of the chapter has not been written yet. So there it is, up for grabs.'

'Why don't you write it yourself, James?' Claire had asked.

'Not my thing, dear,' he had shaken his head, 'No, this is stuff for an up and coming young academic to make his mark with.' James had never learned to modify his speech on feminist principles, and Claire had winced, but only a little.

'St Cloud was Clovis's grandson, wasn't he?' Stuart had said, 'I know my Merovingians. I wouldn't be much good at the later stuff, though.'

Dominic hadn't said much then. But the name stuck in his mind, and when he got home he had, idly at first, then with more sense of purpose, started to find out about the chapter. James had been right when he said it still existed, but only up to a point. There apparently still was an organisation calling itself the Chapter of St Cloud, *Le Chapitre de St Cloud* in France, though how much it had to do with the original order was unclear. But as a medievalist, he was more interested in the earlier centuries anyway. After he moved house, Dominic had seriously started to research the history of the chapter, from the founding of the first abbey onward. It was mentioned in secondary sources fairly often, but very little in the historiography of the monastic orders. Dominic had started to wonder why historians had kept away from it. There was little material for the early years, but that hadn't stopped people writing books about things whose existence was even more doubtfully documented – the Holy Grail sprang to mind.

And it wasn't as if the chapter had been insignificant, some respectable scholars had emerged from behind its walls. Every student of medieval thought knew Thomas of St Cloud's *De Vita Sancta*, mostly in James Sutherland's translation, and religious historians still read Judith of Paris. But something stopped earlier students of the chapter from getting very far, and no book about it ever appeared.

Dominic dished up his supper and took it through to eat on the settee. He put an end to the repeating *Miserere* and put on a Tallis CD instead. Maybe that friendly linguist would be in the library again tomorrow. It had been nice talking to someone new, he hadn't proved very good at making friends in this new town so far. He hadn't asked her name, he now realised, nor she his. How typical.

6

The prior stood looking out of the window, his back to the young sister who had come to report to him. This part of the Chapterhouse overlooked the apple orchard, and he could see the abbot there enjoying the dappled sun, as yet unaware of any threat to his peace. If only it could stay that way!

'You are sure, Sarah?' he asked.

'Oh yes. It's gone beyond a proposal now. I spoke to him in the library today. He thinks he's not making much progress, but he's gone too far to stop.'

'Then we must make him stop.' Already his mind was looking for ways and means. This wasn't the first time they had been confronted with something like this, and usually it was easily dealt with. 'Could you scupper his chances with the Press?'

'I could try,' she said doubtfully, 'But that would not eliminate the risk, you know. It's an attractive project, on the face of it. He would take it to another publisher, and then I would not be there to keep an eye on it.'

Sarah was advisory editor to the local university press. Recently, a proposal had been received for a history of the Chapter of St Cloud. Their chapter. And for a variety of reasons, none of them were eager to ever see it in print. The prior was taking this very seriously.

'What does he know?'

'The usual stuff. He has read that old book of Poole's. He knows James Sutherland personally,' Sarah replied, 'And he has reached the point where he starts to find it strange that there isn't more to be found.'

'Will that discourage him sufficiently?'

'I'm afraid not. I think this one is good at what he does.'
The dangerous ones always were. That's what made them dangerous. The prior had rather hoped a little discouragement would go a long way. But he had to make sure.

'We'll have him watched,' he told Sister Sarah, 'See what we can do about it.' Even to her, one of the most trusted, he would not give away too much of his thoughts.

'Do you want me to talk to him again?'

'I don't think so. Let him live in ignorance for a while.'

'All right. I'll send Lucas and Joseph to see you about this.'

Sarah left. The prior followed a moment later, knowing he had better inform the abbot of this development.

'Trouble brewing, my son?' the abbot asked, when he joined him in the orchard. The old man still had a sharp mind, he didn't miss much.

'Father,' the prior inclined his head politely, 'Just another inquisitive historian.'

'You think he is a threat?' The abbot did not appear to be much troubled.

'One that will be taken care of, I assure you.' As it always had been.

'What's his name?'

'Walsingham. Dominic Walsingham.'

Claire added her Ford Ka to the motley collection of cars parked in the drive and contemplated the house. It looked like something that should be administered by English Heritage, with its façade practically unaltered since it was built, and the handsome wings added in a later century harmonising rather than clashing with the original building. Architecture wasn't her strong point, but she knew she liked this. As she was getting her bags from the boot, Simon came running down the steps to catch her in his arms. That was one of the things she loved about him, that he would give her a full-on snog even though he knew half his family must be watching. He wasn't easily embarrassed.

'*Ciao cara*, I'm so glad you're here.' He took one of her bags, and together they walked up to the front door, where his mother was waiting, a smile on her face. 'Hello Anna,' Claire said, kissing her on both cheeks, 'Good to see you again.' She marvelled again at how young Anna looked, more like Simon's sister than his mother. And she was always so unruffled and smartly turned out, you wouldn't say she was raising three adolescents either. Sometimes Claire felt like a frump in comparison.

'I've put you in the same room as last time,' Anna said, 'You remember the way? Then I'll leave you to your own devices. See you at dinner, my dears.'

'She thinks you're one of the family now,' Simon grinned, 'So she's not going to play hostess. Do you want to change for dinner?'

'How much time do we have?'

His grin became even broader. 'Time enough.'

There were four generations living in the house, from Simon's octogenarian great-grandfather Toby down to his eleven-year-old brother Titus. Simon was the first to admit that it was an odd arrangement.

'But I suppose the house sort of asks for it, and we've always been close, as a family.'

'Yes, you said so before. I still think it's wonderful,' Claire said, 'Is everybody here now?'

They were lying side by side on the wide guest bed, listening to the life of the house going on behind the door.

'Bennett and Maisie are still on holiday. And dad's been in France for a while, but he'll be back any day now.'

'You'll have to explain a bit more, you know,' Claire said, rolling onto her side to smile at him, 'Who are Bennett and Maisie?'

'My great-uncle and -aunt. You've met their daughter, my cousin Bethany.'

'Of course, I liked her. So what's your father doing in France?'

'Oh, I'm not sure. Something to do with property we have there, I think.'

They were so easy to get along with, Claire sometimes forgot that Simon's family must be, by her standards, quite ridiculously rich. She couldn't imagine not being sure about whether her family had property in France or not. But they didn't act rich, and they all had quite normal jobs. Except for Anna. It had come as a complete surprise to Claire that Simon's mother was better known as the chick-lit author Laura Garnett. She had found out by accident during her last visit, when she had picked up a bundle of letters addressed to the author.

'That's you?' she had asked Anna, 'I know the books, of course, but I thought Laura Garnett...'

'...was a cheerfully single thirty-something?' Anna smiled, 'The publishers are very careful not to let on that I'm married with five children, it would spoil the image. And 'Laura Garnett' works so much better than plain 'Anna', don't you think? I always wanted to be a Laura as a girl, and Garnett's my maiden name.'

'And my sisters would die if their mates found out their mother writes chick-lit,' Simon had put in.

They had chatted on about her books, until Claire suddenly caught up with what Anna had actually said.

'Five children? But there's only Simon and the two girls and Titus...'

Anna suddenly looked older.

'Jacob's no longer here,' Simon said shortly.

'Oh! Oh, I'm so sorry.'

He shrugged. 'You couldn't know.'

'It's not-' Anna began, but she thought better of what she had been going to say, and with a visible effort, had returned to the subject of writing. Simon's other brother had not been mentioned again.

'I'm so glad you're visiting us again, Claire,' Bethany said, as they sat down to dinner, 'Simon doesn't know how lucky he is. What will you do while you're here? Sightseeing?'

'Some of that, I suppose,' Claire replied with a smile. She had taken to Bethany at once when she met her, she was easier to get along with than Simon's two sisters, who seemed to live in a teenage world Claire was carefully excluded from. She told Bethany about her plans to learn Italian.

'Rather you than me,' she said, 'Simon speaks it fluently, of course. He went there for four months during his last year