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Helen Naylor
Excerpt
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Chapter 1 *The city heat*

'When we get to Polreath on Saturday, I'm going to do nothing,' said Anna.'I just want to sit and have cool drinks and read and watch the world go by.'

'Me too,' replied Stephen.

It was the hottest summer for twenty years. It had started at the end of May. Everyone thought the heat would only last for a few days and then the rain would return, but this summer was different.

'And don't expect any intelligent conversation from me,' Anna continued. 'It'll take a day or two for me to become a member of the human race again!'

'Mm,' said Stephen, not really listening. 'What about this cottage we've booked, do you think it's going to be all right? To be honest, I'm a bit worried about it – we were so late making our decision and it was still available. Why didn't anyone else want it? It makes me think there must be something wrong with it.'

'Don't worry. I'm sure it'll be fine. And even if it's not, we'll still be away from here. Just think – three weeks by the sea, without any work. It sounds wonderful.'

In the city the heat was uncomfortable. People were not used to high temperatures day after day. Journeys to work became hot and sweaty, and increasingly bad-tempered in the crowded trains and buses. By the beginning of July, nobody could remember when it had last rained. Every-

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where you looked seemed to be brown – the grass in the parks was burnt and most of the flowers had died. The sun was burning hot and the air seemed to be getting thicker and thicker. At the weekends, the place was empty as many people left for the countryside.

But Stephen and Anna couldn't leave – not until the weekend anyway.

* * *

Stephen was thirty-two with dark, curly hair. He had noticed a few grey hairs that morning when he was drying it after his shower. But he didn't mind too much; in fact, he rather liked the idea of a few which might make him look serious. But his face showed signs of stress and worry.

Stephen left the flat just before seven. He was earlier than usual this morning because he wanted to avoid the rush hour, but it seemed as if everyone else had had the same idea – the roads were busy and there had been an accident half way along Sussex Gardens. He waited impatiently while the police sorted out the chaos but by the time he arrived at work, he was late and not in a very good mood.

He locked the Saab and went into the cool building. The offices of Jardine and Makepeace, advertising agents, were on the fourteenth floor of a modern block with wonderful views over Regent's Park. But this morning, when Stephen found himself climbing the stairs (the lift was out of order again!), he would happily have given up the views for an office on the ground floor.

'Please let everything go smoothly today,' he said to himself as he made his way up the stairs.

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Stephen was worried about work – the agency had lost an important client that week. He felt that Charlie Jardine, the agency boss, blamed him. A couple of days before, he'd passed by Charlie's office and had heard him saying on the phone, 'Yes, well, I'll have to talk to Stephen about that. He was the one working on their new advertisement.' Stephen hadn't heard any more but he thought that Charlie sounded a bit angry.

He wondered if it was a bad time to go on holiday – perhaps his job would disappear when he was away. But he didn't want to miss this break – and in any case, Anna would kill him if he suggested cancelling. So he said nothing to her about his worries. He often found it hard to talk about his problems, even with Anna. God knows why, she was usually willing to listen.

In his mind, he would think through different ways of opening the conversation with her, but everything he thought of sounded so obvious – 'I'm worried about work' or 'I'd like to talk to you about something'. In any case, he really preferred to work things out himself. But he knew he was not easy to live with when he didn't talk much.

'Morning Mark. Another lovely day,' panted Stephen, and sat down to get his breath back. His shirt was wet and sticking to his back.

'Morning Stephen,' said Mark. 'I'm not sure if it is a lovely day. Clare's away – she's got food poisoning or something – so between us we've got to do her work as well as our own.'

'Oh hell! Just what I needed to hear!' replied Stephen.

Anna's last day began even earlier. At 6.30 that morning she yawned as she walked across to St Phillips Hospital. It

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was another beautiful morning – for her the best time of the day when the air was still fresh and the day was still full of promise.

Her nurse's cap sat comfortably on her short blond hair. She looked fresh and efficient in her blue uniform. She loved her job as a nurse but it was hard. There always seemed to be so much to do – more than ever since the new manager had arrived.

'This weekend, when we're away,' she thought, 'I'm going to get up early and walk along the beach before anyone else is awake.' Then she laughed at the idea of getting up early when she didn't have to! Well, maybe she would – who knows, holidays can change people. Maybe that's what she needed – change. She was thirty and had been working at St Phillips since she'd finished her training – perhaps it was time to move on.

Later in the day she went to say goodbye to Michael Barton, a favourite patient who was recovering from a major operation.

'Have a wonderful holiday!' he said.

'Thanks, I will. And I hope I won't see you when I get back,' replied Anna. And as soon as she said it, she realised what a stupid thing it was to say.

'I mean, I hope you won't still be in hospital, you know, you'll be back at home,' she said quickly.

'It's all right, love. I know you weren't talking about me dying! I hope I don't see you either – although I'll miss you looking after me. Bye – all the best.'

She left the ward knowing that this time tomorrow she would be in a different world. She got off the hospital bus at the end of her street and walked slowly home, thinking

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about a cool beer in the back garden. They were lucky. Their flat was on the ground floor of a nineteenth-century house and the garden at the back was theirs. The garden wasn't big but it was a wonderful place to escape to in the summer. She wondered what sort of day Stephen had had. She knew something was worrying him but was too tired to do anything about it. Anyway, she knew from past experience that it was no use asking directly. He'd once told her that he could only talk about difficult things after they were past and no longer difficult. 'I'll find out what it is on holiday,' she thought. 'When we've got more time and energy.'

As Stephen was about to leave the office that evening, Charlie Jardine called him into his office and told him that there were going to be some changes in the next month, that probably one member of staff would have to go – 'be made redundant' was how Charlie said it, but Stephen thought 'sacked ... fired ... dismissed' was what he really wanted to say. Then Charlie said, 'But of course, I don't want to lose you.' Why didn't that make Stephen feel better? He left work with a heavy heart.

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