

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Tainted

Brooke Morgan

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About the Book

He was to be her future. But what of his past...?

When Holly Barrett meets Jack Dane, she falls rapidly and passionately in love for the first time in her life. Within six weeks they are married and Jack opens up a whole new world for Holly and her young daughter Katy, offering them a way out of the small-town Massachusetts existence in which they have become trapped.

But Holly knows very little about the enigmatic Englishman who has come into their lives so unexpectedly. Parts of his life story seem destined to remain forever shrouded in shadow yet, happier than she has ever been, Holly sees only interference and jealousy when her beloved grandfather, Henry, and best friend, Anna, tentatively start to raise questions about Jack's past.

However, as the truth starts to emerge, it soon becomes frighteningly possible that everything that Holly has ever believed in could be a terrible lie. And that rather than marrying the man who will save her and Katy from their safe but small world, Holly may have brought a monster into all their lives ...

About the Author

Brooke Morgan is an American living in London. *Tainted* is her first novel.

Tainted

BROOKE
MORGAN



arrow books

*For Keith Barnes, with love.
It's always the right kind of stormy.*

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1

HOLLY LIKED TO sit at the front of the bus. The wide windshield gave her a feeling of space and a view forward which quashed any potential travel sickness. And she liked watching the bus driver swing the heavy front door open and closed. There seemed always to be big men driving the route between Boston and Cape Cod; heavyweights with gruff voices and a palpable command over their vehicles. Sometimes they'd crack jokes and talk to her. 'This is my ship of the road,' one had once commented. 'I'm the captain, sailing her over the highways.' He must have been in his fifties and over three hundred pounds, but there was such a wistful romance in his voice as he said it, she gave him a nickname: the Poet. Every subsequent time she boarded a bus, she hoped she'd see the Poet again, but he'd disappeared. To another highway, another ship.

She was early enough for the eight-thirty a.m. bus to be the first on and snag the front seat, the one beside the window. If she was lucky, no one would come and sit beside her and she could stretch out, have the front all to herself. People trickled on behind her: an elderly couple who went straight to the back, a lone middle-aged woman who took a seat a few rows behind her to the left, two teenage girls who wandered down the aisle toward the middle. *Keep going*, she thought. *Keep going past and down the aisle. Maybe I'll get lucky.* But then she looked out the window and saw a line beginning to form. It was going to be pretty

crowded, she gauged. She probably wouldn't get away with two seats to herself.

She almost didn't see him. He had been stooping over, pushing his bag into the cavernous luggage holder and she had almost turned her gaze away from the queue of people when she caught sight of him as he straightened up. *Faintworthy*. That was the expression Anna had come up with to replace 'drop dead handsome'. 'Look -' Anna had pointed at a guy in the bar the night before. 'Look, Holly - there's a faintworthy over there. At least, he's close to being faintworthy. Let's go talk to him.' Holly had laughed and told her to be quiet. She wasn't going to go talk to some stranger in a bar. Anna could, and Anna usually did. But last night Holly had managed to rein Anna in and they'd stayed where they were, finishing their drinks and then leaving to get some supper.

He was tallish, dark, thin and tanned. He'd rolled the sleeves of his white shirt up over his elbows. Clean-shaven, straight-nosed, strong-chinned. Wearing khaki trousers and loafers. No sunglasses. An old watch with a leather strap. Looking serious and nonchalant at the same time. So, so handsome she felt his looks hit her in a punch of pleasure. Like the first sight of a beautiful painting. He was staring ahead, not up. He couldn't see her looking at him, so she allowed herself to and was reminded of the time she'd been sixteen, in Friendly's, waiting to get an ice-cream cone and seeing, suddenly, at the front of the line, a man she thought she recognised as Noah Wyle, one of the actors in *ER*. She'd stared and stared, taken aback by his looks. He was more attractive in person than on TV and for a second, when he'd bought his cone and turned, he'd caught her eye and she'd blushed. He'd smiled and walked out. Later, she'd learned he was filming a movie around Buzzards Bay, so it was definitely him. When she'd told Anna, all Anna could say was, 'Why didn't you get his autograph, Holly? God, how could you let that opportunity slip?' and she'd

thought she was much happier with that one fleeting smile than a tangible piece of paper.

Faintworthy had handed the driver his ticket and was climbing the stairs. Quickly, Holly turned her stare to the floor of the bus, feeling that same blush she'd had at Friendly's begin to rise. *A blush is like being sick to your stomach, she found herself thinking. You can't stop it. You have no control. It just happens. But he'll walk by and not notice me and as long as I keep my eyes down, I'll be all right.*

'Do you mind if I sit here?'

'Sure.' She had to look at him. 'I mean, I don't mind, no. You can sit here. I don't mind.' She knew she was sounding supremely inarticulate. Her whole body was blushing.

'Thanks.' He sat down.

Her eyes dived back to the floor.

'I know there are other seats, but I like to sit at the front,' he explained. 'I like to see out.'

'Right.'

He had an English accent. So his voice was as attractive as his looks. It wasn't fair. She'd have to spend an hour and fifteen minutes with him beside her and she'd doubtless be hot and sweaty and monosyllabic the whole time. She hadn't brought a book, she had nothing she could do to pretend to be engrossed. He was empty-handed as well, sitting there quietly, his arms crossed.

Holly had yet to meet one person who didn't say he or she was shy as a child; even the most outgoing, rambunctious personalities, even someone like Anna, would say, 'Oh, but I was such a shy kid. You wouldn't believe it.' And Holly always felt like saying, 'No, I don't believe it. Because I was a shy child and I'm still shy and I don't see how you grow out of being shy, ever.'

The last passengers were boarding the bus. A woman came on holding a toddler in her arms and sat down in the seats behind them. She looked tired and stressed and so

grateful for a chance to sit down she hadn't even noticed this impossibly handsome man she'd just passed in the aisle. *Children do that*, Holly thought. *They make you concentrate on the really important things - like collapsing into a seat and taking a break from the constant demands for an hour or so.*

She could feel her blush finally subsiding as the bus driver climbed into his seat and swung the door closed. *Pretend you're Anna*, she told herself. *Say something feisty and funny. Make him think you're completely comfortable in this situation. As if it happens every day. A gorgeous man sits beside you and you start a scintillating conversation.*

As if.

She remained mute.

'It's interesting. The word "mind". In England, in London, at tube stations, they say, "Mind the gap," meaning, "Watch out for the gap." Between the train and the platform. And then there's "mind" in the sense of, "Do you mind me sitting here" like I just asked. And then there's "mind" as in "brain". Not that ...' he paused. 'Not that you're interested in me banging on about a word. Sorry. I'm going for a job interview. I'm a little nervous.'

'No. It *is* interesting. I promise.' His anxiety immediately wiped out hers. She allowed herself to look up, into his eyes. They were a dark shade of blue, the same colour as the sweater Billy had worn when she'd danced with him. *Bad memory. Cancel it out and move on.* She smiled and he smiled back, offering his hand.

'Jack Dane.'

'Holly Barrett.'

A brief, strong squeeze.

'My grandfather always shakes hands with his left hand. He says it's closer to the heart.'

'Makes sense.' Jack Dane nodded. 'But it might be difficult to retrain the entire Western world.'

'I don't think he's trying to convert anyone. In fact, I think he likes it being his private idiosyncrasy. Anyway, what job are you interviewing for? Or is it bad luck to talk about it?'

'Bad luck? No. I hope not. It's not a big job. Just a waiter at a new restaurant in a small town. But it's by the sea and I've always wanted to be by the sea.'

'Where by the sea?'

'A place called Shoreham.'

'You're kidding. Figs? Is that where you're interviewing? That's where I live. In Shoreham.'

'That's the place.'

'Figs is the first fancy restaurant we've ever had. It's big news in town. We're used to diners and clam shacks and Dunkin' Donuts and pizza places. I looked at the menu in the window just a couple of days ago. It's seriously grown up.'

'Seriously?' Jack Dane laughed.

'Very, very seriously. They have exotic sauces. They have pomegranate cocktails. I think I even remember some herb-encrusted salmon dish.'

'The restaurant I used to work at in Boston has salmon cocktails with herb-encrusted ice cubes.'

'That's ridiculous. What are they think—' Holly saw his sly smile and another blush started. 'Oh, God. I can't believe how stupid that was.'

'No - it wasn't stupid at all. Yes, I was teasing, but I wouldn't put salmon cocktails past that place. Or herb-encrusted ice cubes either.'

'You're just being nice.'

'No way. I worked there, remember?'

'You're from England, aren't you?'

'Yes. But I've never met the Queen, Prince William, Prince Harry or David Beckham. I'm such a disappointment to Americans. I'm beginning to think either I should

pretend that I *have* met them or I should lose my accent. Not raise false expectations.'

'Oh, no, you shouldn't lose your accent, it's—'

A child's wail came from behind them and then a woman's voice saying wearily, 'Stop it, Tom.' But Tom wasn't stopping. His cry moved up a pitch and Holly could hear him pummelling the seat - Jack Dane's seat - with his little legs. Jack turned and rose, putting his face over the seatbacks.

'Could you control your child, please?' he asked.

'He's tired and irritable,' the mother replied. Holly could hear her exasperation. 'I'm sorry. Tom - stop that now.'

Jack Dane turned back and sat, frowning.

'What were you saying?' he asked.

'Only that you shouldn't lose your accent.'

He flinched as another bout of flailing legs hit the back of his seat.

'Tom, Tom, stop. I mean it.'

Holly peered through the crack between the seats and saw the mother struggling to keep hold of the squirming little boy, but he was determined to keep kicking. 'You're bothering that man, Tom. Stop it or I'll put you to bed as soon as we get home. Do you hear me?'

'Bloody useless,' Jack Dane muttered.

'She's trying.'

'Not hard enough.'

Whack, whack, whack - unrelenting tiny feet pounded the seat.

He stood up.

'This is really annoying and it's not going to stop. I'm off.'

Don't go. Please don't go. Can I say I'll move with you? No. I can't. I'll sit here like an idiot and you'll be sitting beside someone else, teasing someone else as this bus hits Route 128.

'Come on.' He leaned over, took hold of her hand and pulled her up. 'There are two seats in the middle back there. Let's go.'

She followed him as he led her down the aisle, not looking at the mother and child, knowing how embarrassed that mother would be. He motioned for her to go in first and take the window seat, a row behind the two teenage girls she'd noticed before.

'That's better.' Settling in beside her, he immediately relaxed. 'I hope you don't mind me dragging you with me.'

'I don't mind,' she smiled. 'And we're right back where we started - with that interesting word "mind".'

'The secret of a good dinner party is a running theme - or two. Some story or joke the table shares and then can refer back to, embroider on. Food and drink count, but it's the conversation that really matters.'

When had her father told her that? She had to have been young, maybe eleven or so. He'd been sitting with the *Boston Globe* on his lap; it was in the morning and her mother was in the kitchen. Preparing for a dinner party? Holly didn't know. She remembered thinking she'd have to try to create running themes when she gave dinner parties. Whatever running themes were. Now that she did know what they were, the other part of the equation was missing. She'd never given a dinner party. She couldn't imagine ever giving one.

'So tell me. What's Shoreham like?'

'Wonderful. At least I think it is. It's basically a one-street town. You know, like you see in old movies. A bank, a fire station, a hairdresser's, a grocer's, a liquor store, a diner and that's it - we used to have a movie theatre but that was ages ago. And now of course we have Figs.'

Shut up, she told herself. You're babbling. You're so used to being the one who listens, you get nervous when someone asks you a question.

'So he's like asking me out on a date, but I don't know if it's a date date or just a going-out thing. It's so not clear. And I'm like trying to figure him out.'

The obnoxiously loud voice came from one of the teenage girls in front of them. Holly waited for the other one to reply but the first one kept talking.

'You think so? I mean, I'm with Teresa on the bus here and she's been saying it's a date date but I'm not so sure and what does that mean anyway? I mean, what do I wear?'

'Oh, no.' Jack Dane shook his head. 'We know how to pick them, don't we?'

'No way. The pink top sucks.'

'They have cellphone-free places in the trains, but not in the buses,' Holly said apologetically, thinking, *And I'm just as bad as she is. I'm acting like a teenager too. When you asked me to move seats with you, when you just said 'we', my heart did a little dance.*

'OK, OK, I hear you. Look, I gotta go. Teresa is handing me a sandwich and my stomach's like empty. Talk later. Yeah.'

Jack Dane scrunched down in his seat so his head was level to hers; he leaned over and whispered, 'She's going to eat. We're saved.'

His breath was warm, clean, so intensely male, she held it inside her as if it were a drug.

'Which is worse?' she whispered back. 'The little boy kicking the back of your seat or the cellphone screamer?'

'It's a tie. Although I should be used to cellphone screamers. They inhabit restaurants too. Someone like me who hates noise shouldn't work in restaurants - but I do, so I should be used to it. Anyway, tell me, Holly Barrett. How old are you?'

'Twenty-three.'

The tones of their voices, the softness of the whispers and the proximity of their heads made Holly feel as if they were side by side in bed, plotting something. Except she'd

never been side by side with a man in a bed. But this was how she'd imagined it would feel.

'I'm twenty-six, so those days are even longer ago for me - but what were you like when you were a teenager?' he asked. 'Did you have a group of friends who all talked too loudly and too fast?'

'No. I didn't have a group. Aside from one friend, I was pretty much a lone wolf.'

'I doubt it.' Jack Dane was studying her face so intently, from so close up, it took all the courage she had not to turn away from him. 'No, you weren't a lone wolf. Lone wolves are the ones who get kicked out of the wolf pack. They straggle along behind, at a distance, hoping to gain re-entry into the pack. Whereas you, Holly Barrett, were the quiet, shy one who was serious at school, who studied hard and who didn't go in for silly teenage stuff. Which may have set you apart from the pack, but it wasn't a pack you wanted to join. You had a different world, a world of your own, a much more adult one. You're an old-fashioned girl.'

'Yeah, it's me again. Yeah, it was a fucking tiny sandwich. So what do you think? If I wear that black top with the pink pants - you think that will send the right signals?'

He threw up his hands in a gesture of surrender and drew back from her.

'It's useless. No one knows how to put a sock in it. Wankers. Listen, I think I'm going to take a kip for a while - a nap, I mean.' He put his hand in his pocket, pulled out a small iPod. 'We can't talk properly with the cellphone screamer in full flow, so I'm going to tune out. I don't mean to be rude. But I had a late night last night. I need to recharge. Sorry.'

'You don't have to apologise,' she said quickly. 'No problem.'

'You don't mind?' he smiled.

'I don't mind.'

Putting his earphones in, Jack Dane leaned back in his seat, fiddled with the iPod controls and closed his eyes.

Holly was still feeling his physical presence, the closeness of him. She'd felt something almost like it once before, the time she danced with Billy. Billy's sweater had smelled of autumn leaves; he'd held her close to his chest, she'd breathed in the scent, she'd felt herself melt into him. When they'd had sex a few weeks later, there'd been no melting, only his rank desire and her desperation.

Looking out the window, she saw that they were passing the Foxboro racetrack, so they'd reach the junction with Route 495 soon. Which meant they didn't have that much further until they arrived in Shoreham.

There were certain types of people who took pleasure in telling you about yourself, Holly knew. Anna being a prime example. 'I saw this great ad for white-water rafting. I might go. You'd hate it though, Holly, I know. You never take risks,' or, 'Hey, Holl - I was going to buy you a skimpy top for your birthday but I knew you'd never wear it.'

Exactly how, Holly wanted to ask, did Anna know? Maybe Holly would have liked white-water rafting, or the skimpy top. *I took a risk*, she'd wanted to yell. *I took a huge risk with Katy*. But Anna had her typecast as a mouse from the age of thirteen and nothing Holly could ever do would change that.

Jack Dane was different. Out of nowhere, he'd looked straight into her and pulled out the truth of her early teenage years. Aside from her unlikely friendship with Anna, Holly had been apart from the pack. She had had her own world - with her parents, her books, her imagination. And yes, it had been largely an adult world, although she'd never thought of it in that way before.

The only part Jack Dane was wrong about was her not wanting to join the pack. She'd wanted to, all right. But she hadn't known how to. She was so self-conscious, she felt paralysed. Other girls could be wild and fun and funny, but

she felt as though she was outside herself, watching, and would appear foolish if she tried to join in. Every time she had worked up the courage to make an effort, she'd been ignored. Not rebuffed exactly - no one bullied her or was mean. They just didn't notice her, except as Anna's friend.

'I can't figure out why Anna hangs out with Holly Barrett,' she'd overheard a girl named Debby say in the gym one afternoon. 'I mean, what's the deal? Holly Barrett isn't exactly a winner. What's Anna doing with her?'

'She probably does Anna's homework for her,' another girl, Wendy, had replied.

And Wendy had been right.

'Hey.' Jack Dane nudged her, offering her one of his earphones. 'Listen to this.'

Holly took it, placed it in her left ear. It took her only a second to identify the song: Coldplay's 'Fix You'.

'Brilliant, isn't it?' he said when the song ended, holding his palm out. 'It's possible, you know.'

'What's possible?'

'To get fixed. Hang on, don't look so frightened. I didn't mean drugs. I meant, it's possible to feel better. You looked sad staring out the window, that's all.'

She put the earphone into his outstretched hand, smiled.

'Thanks.'

He rearranged the earphones in his ears, closed his eyes again. Was he going to sleep for real this time? Holly wondered. Or would he be watching her as she stared out the window?

She wasn't wearing nice clothes; instead she had on her usual worn jeans and black T-shirt. No make-up. No jewellery. No perfume. Dirty white sneakers. Who dressed up for a bus trip? Holly wished fervently she had. She wished even more fervently that she had figured out somewhere along the way how to flirt, but most of all, she wished she knew what was supposed to happen next. Would he ask for her phone number? If he didn't, could she

ask for his? No. Definitely not. It would be way too embarrassing. The odds were he was already going out with someone anyway. 'Spoken for' as Henry, her grandfather, would say. He'd been making conversation, he'd been having a little fun. He'd probably call his girlfriend in Boston straight after the interview and she'd meet him at the bus station when he got back.

Closing her eyes too, Holly tried to recapture the smell and texture of his breath when he'd whispered to her. She wanted to put herself back into that moment of intimacy and stay there for a while, savouring it. Instead, images of him walking hand in hand with a tall willowy blonde appeared. Her eyes flew open and she turned to look out the window again.

Way too quickly, the Mill Pond Diner was in sight. The bus driver signalled, braked and pulled into the car park.

Holly touched him on the arm; his eyes opened, he disengaged the iPod.

'We're here?'

'Yes.'

'Excellent.'

The pneumatic door swung open with a swishing sound of air and Holly and Jack both stood. They appeared to be the only two on the bus getting out at this first stop. Jack Dane stepped into the aisle, motioned for Holly to precede him. She did, conscious of her sloppy clothes. Neither spoke as they climbed down the bus stairs then grabbed their bags from its underbelly.

'Nice meeting you, Holly Barrett.' He extended his right hand. No 'Can you give me your cell number?', no other words followed. Once again, they exchanged a brief, strong shake.

I can take a risk, Anna. I have to take a risk.

'If you need a lift into town, my car's here. I can drive you to Figs.'

'Thanks, but the manager said he'd meet me.' He put his hand over his eyes to shield them from the summer sun. 'There's a man over there, by that blue car. Looks like he could be waiting for me.'

'Charlie Thurlow. Yes, I heard he's the manager.' Wanting to say more, but knowing he was anxious to leave her, Holly said, 'Good luck, Jack Dane. I hope you get the job. It was nice meeting you too.'

By the time she had reached the 'It was nice' part of the farewell, Charlie Thurlow had waved to Jack, Jack had started off towards him and her final words ended up directed to his back.

I don't mind, she said to herself, hoisting her bag on her shoulder and walking to the other side of the car park where her car sat baking in the heat of the sun. *I was crazy and deluded to hope for anything more. I don't mind at all.*

2

AFTER THE TEN-MINUTE drive from town, Holly arrived back home in Birch Point and found a note on the kitchen table: *We've gone down to the Back Beach clamming. Join us if you feel like it. All is hunky dory, H.*

She put down her overnight case, went up to her bedroom and changed into a black one-piece bathing suit. 'Old-fashioned' Jack Dane had called her. Before not asking for her number and walking away without a backward glance. At least this bathing suit wasn't flowery with a ruffled skirt at the bottom. But if he'd known how old-fashioned she really was, he'd probably have sprinted to Charlie Thurlow's car.

Today was a perfect one for him to come to Shoreham; one of those June mornings with endlessly clear skies and just enough warmth to make swimming an attractive prospect. In the dog days of late July and August the heat could be wet, muggy and stifling. She would go to the beach for relief only to be attacked on the way by swarming mosquitoes and find the water invaded by jellyfish when she got there. Jack Dane might want to live by the sea, but he might not know there were times when the sea was as uninviting as city pavement.

Grabbing a towel and a baseball cap, she left the house and walked the fifty yards to the beginning of the dike. Each time she reached the rusty gate where the dike began, she silently thanked whoever had come up with the

incredibly brilliant idea all those years ago to make the Cape Cod Canal.

In the process of digging out a channel cutting through Massachusetts to shorten the shipping route between New York and Boston, the US Corps of Engineers had inadvertently given her family a two-mile, effectively private, beach. Holly still hadn't figured out the mechanics of it, whether they'd simply dumped the sand in one long stretch or made some kind of rock foundation for it first, but whatever the logistics, they'd fashioned the dike - a long sandy finger sticking out from the end of Birch Point - built a small lighthouse at the far end and declared it government property.

The left side of the dike fronted the canal; the right side created a bay and met up with the original beach at the end of the point. Holly's family had always referred to the canal side as the Back Beach, the bay side as the Front Beach. On the Back Beach the water was colder and there could be dangerous undertows from passing boats, so most people swam on the Front Beach. But Holly liked the Back Beach better: as a child she'd spent hours watching the boats go by, inventing stories of where they were going, where they'd come from, and what the people on them were like.

Because parking on Birch Point was illegal unless you lived there, the only way to access the dike was by foot or boat. Holly's house was the next to last on the Point, so it took her approximately one minute to get to the beginning of the Back Beach. She headed off down a small path leading to the shoreline, careful not to touch any of the red-leaved poison-ivy plants which bordered it. She could see that the tide was low, the only time it was possible to dig the clams out of their hiding places in the sand. Henry and Katy would be having a field day digging in the area of sand on Widow's Cove to her left, so she sped up, anxious not to miss any more time with them.

Within a minute, she'd caught sight of Henry, bending down, and Katy, squatting beside him, her little hands clawing up mounds of wet, grey sand. Stopping, she watched them for a moment, her heart melting with pride and love and a yearning to halt time and keep everything exactly the way it was for eternity. Her happy blonde little daughter digging sand in the sun with no worries, no fear, nothing difficult or sad or bad ever happening to her.

'Hey,' she called out, waving, and Katy turned, looked up, waved frantically.

'Mommy! Come here. Look at all the clams!'

'Wow!' Holly ran over, picked up Katy, hugged her. 'Let me see the bucket.'

Putting her back down, she peered into the bucket beside Henry.

'Monster haul! There's been some serious clamming going on today. Looks like I'm not needed.'

'Hi, sweetie,' Henry gave her a kiss on the cheek. 'How was Boston?'

'Fine.' She pulled Katy to her, gave her another hug. 'Thanks for taking care of her.'

'It's a great-grandfather's privilege. We had a whale of a time. You should leave us to our own devices more.'

'A not-so-subtle hint, Henry.'

'Subtle or not, you should take it. You need to get out more. And I'm perfectly capable of looking after Katy.'

'I know you are.' She squeezed his arm, turned her attention back to Katy. 'So what are we going to do with all these clams, chicken?'

'Henry says we're going to make clam chowder.'

'Excellent.'

'But it has to be perfect.'

Holly shot Henry a look. Katy had been, for the past month, on a mission to make everything 'perfect'. It was her new word and had become like a mantra to her. At five years old, she wanted perfection in everything: the 'perfect'

amount of milk in her cereal, the 'perfect' bedtime story, the 'perfect' day. Henry shrugged and rolled his eyes.

'We'll try, Katy. That's the best you can do with perfect - try.'

'I think we have the perfect number of clams,' Katy said, staring into the pail. 'Don't we?'

'Definitely.' Henry stretched, rubbed the small of his back. 'She's a taskmaster. Wouldn't let me take any breaks. She kept saying, "Don't stop, Henry," and I kept telling her what's easy for a five-year-old isn't necessarily easy for a seventy-five-year-old.'

'But she didn't listen.'

'She's a serious girl, you know. No fucking around.'

'Henry.'

'Oh, come on. She'll hear it in the playground.'

'We're not in an inner city, Henry. We're in Shoreham.'

'And people don't swear in Shoreham, do they, sweetie? God forbid.' Henry laughed and picked up the pail. 'I'm going back to the house. Why don't you come by after lunch and we'll start on the chowder?'

'OK - and thanks again for having her last night.'

'My pleasure.' He put his hand on Katy's head. 'She was the perfect guest.'

'Bye, Henry,' Katy said. 'See you and Bones later.'

'You will indeed see us both, young lady.' He walked over to where the beach met the long grass and picked up a light jacket. 'Meanwhile I'll look up recipes for perfect clam chowder on the Web.'

'Any excuse,' Holly smiled, picturing Henry hunkered down at his desk, surfing the Net. She was constantly amazed at how computer-friendly he was and figured he spent at least three hours a day on his Apple. When he had gone, she crouched down in the sand so that she was Katy's height.

'What do you want to do now? Would you like to spend some more time on the beach or go back up to the house?'

‘Can we stay on the beach and look for shells?’

‘Absolutely. Let’s take a walk.’

They strolled down the beach, picking up the odd shell, until Katy asked if they could stop for a while and watch the boats go through the canal. Holly spread her towel out and they parked themselves on it – a front-row seat for the canal traffic. Tugboats, speedboats, yachts and cargo ships passed by, heading from New York to Boston or vice versa.

Henry had told her that in the old days boats would pass on their way through the canal at night with people in evening dresses and tuxedos dancing on board. Now there were whale-watching trips in a nearby town called Onset and day cruises, but the glamour of those overnight trips from Boston to New York had gone. People flew, took trains or drove.

‘Look, Mommy. There’s an Australian flag.’ Katy pointed to a beautifully sleek racing-green yacht. She was right about the flag, but then Holly knew she would be. Henry had given her a book of national flags for Christmas and Katy took the task of learning which flag was which seriously; also she had a phenomenally good memory for a five-year-old.

Holly wasn’t one of those mothers who saw signs of genius in every single thing her child accomplished, but she knew Katy’s ability to remember verged on the ‘special’. For a while, she even feared that this was a sign of autism and started to research autism on the Web; until Henry caught her doing it and told her she was being an ass. But still, she worried whether Katy was normal and totally adjusted. Did she laugh enough? Was she too introspective? Too serious?

She’d obviously had fun digging the clams, so she was clearly capable of joy; she just didn’t jump up and down and let herself go wild very often. Was that bad? Holly looked at her daughter staring intently at passing ships, searching for the flags.

How do you ever know as a mother? There are landmines everywhere, waiting to blow up in your face. Am I too strict? Not strict enough? Should I tell Henry, for example, that he really has to stop swearing in front of her or is that being over-protective and silly? Will Katy be sitting in a shrink's office some day, blaming me for everything wrong in her life? Will she make the same mistakes I did?

Holly turned her gaze to the lighthouse at the end of the dike and beyond. The skies were so clear she could see all the way to Martha's Vineyard - or at least she thought she could. She was never sure which islands in the distance were which on days like this.

'God, Holly, you don't have any idea, do you? I mean, how long have you lived here - and you don't know whether that's Martha's Vineyard or Nantucket or whatever out there?'

'I'm not very good at geography.'

'Oh, come on - you're good at every subject.'

She was seventeen, he was eighteen. They were sitting on the cold hard sand, on a tiny beach carved out amidst rocks three-quarters of the way to the end of the dike. The Thanksgiving had been one of those crisp, clear ones. Holly's parents had come down from Boston to install winter heating in the house and Billy's had come to check out the November cut-price motorboat sales. Billy had dropped by to say hello and they'd decided to go for a walk.

Billy Madison, who had danced with her two weekends before, a few days after her friend Anna had ditched him; who had held her closely to him when a slow song had come on; Billy, whom she had had a desperate, unrequited crush on since she was fourteen and saw him on the Front Beach for the first time. He was beside her now, wearing the same dark blue sweater he'd worn to the dance, his cheeks pinkish in the cold.

'I study a lot, that's all. I guess most people think I'm a geek.'

'I don't think you're a geek.'

He'd put his arm around her shoulder, drawn her in to him. She didn't remember how it had gone from there, how exactly he'd kissed her or how he'd taken off her jeans: what she remembered was the unyielding sand, her back driven into what felt like concrete as he entered her; the surprise and fear and longing and hope she felt. This was Billy Madison and they were having sex on the sand and her life was going to change for ever afterwards. She wouldn't be a virgin, she would have a boyfriend, she would know what it felt like to be loved back. What was happening to her now, as her back was being smashed into the sand, wasn't romantic or intimate, but it would be in time. Because Billy Madison was perfect.

'Yuk.'

Holly turned to see Katy with a shell on the palm of her outstretched hand.

'You know what that is - an Indian coin.'

'It looks like a yukky toenail. A gross yellow old horrible toenail.'

'At some point whatever the Indians used for money must have looked like that and that's why it's called an Indian coin.'

'I wouldn't want to have much money if I was an Indian and my money looked like this.' She dropped it and buried it in the sand. *'Wow - look at the tugboat coming.'* Katy pointed down the canal to the railroad bridge, toward Boston. A massive hulk of cargo was being pulled by a tugboat. *'How can something so little carry something so big?'*

'I don't know.'

'I don't know too.'

'Henry put sunscreen on you, didn't he?'

'Yup,' Katy nodded, still staring at the little red tugboat.

'But you've been out a long time. I think we should go in now.'

'OK.'

'Did you have a fun time with Henry last night?'

'Yes. I love Bones so much.'

'And he loves you.' Getting up, Holly retrieved the towel, shook the sand off it and draped it over Katy's bare shoulders.

Was it normal for a five-year-old to spend hours lying beside an old black Labrador, patting its head and whispering in its ear?

'She's not pulling wings off butterflies, for Christ's sake,' Henry had said when she'd professed her worry about Katy's attachment to Bones. *'Will you please relax, sweetie? She's a wonderful child and you're a wonderful mother and all you really have to do is love the hell out of her - which you do.'*

They were walking on the edge of the sand, their feet just touching the incoming water. When Katy held her hand out, Holly grabbed it, then pulled her up to her chest and hugged her tightly.

'I love you, chickpea,' she whispered.

'I love you too, Mommy. And I missed you.'

Holly switched Katy's body to the side so she rested on her hip. They came to the path that led back up to the road and the house and Holly stopped to look over into the small field of long grass that began where the sand stopped. There was no marker or memorial stone, but somewhere in that field lay the ashes of her parents.

I love you both. And I'll never stop missing you.

As soon as they reached the road, Holly put Katy back on the ground and they walked past another little path cut out from the wood, leading to Henry's house on the left. Henry's was at the very end of Birch Point, and looked straight out over the dike, with a magnificent, unobstructed view, while Holly's, about fifty yards away, was hidden in

the trees. It was possible to see a sliver of ocean if you looked closely from Holly's side porch, and in winter, when the leaves fell off the trees, the view improved, but she could get a guaranteed view only from the second-floor windows. At times she wished she could hack all the trees down and have the vista her grandfather did.

She knew she wouldn't, though. Not only because it might affect the wildlife, but also because she didn't want to change anything. Her parents had lived here; she wanted all her memories intact. She'd kept all their weather-beaten old furniture; perversely, she liked the way the cushions absorbed damp on wet days; the musty smell that permeated the house matched the low tones of the foghorns in the Cape Cod Canal. The kitchen, aside from a dishwasher her mother had installed a year before she'd died and a new electric coffee-maker Holly had bought recently, was pretty much antediluvian.

A 1950s refrigerator was always seemingly on its last legs, making continual rumbling sounds of protest at having to keep working well past its prime; there was a separate, chest-shaped freezer which would have the starring part in any mystery story as the natural place to hide a murdered body, cupboards full of faded, chipped china, a toaster so ancient it was now retro-chic, an old, battered oak table and an oven with four electric hobs on top - two of which no longer functioned.

After they reached the house, Holly went into the kitchen and rummaged through the cupboards for peanut butter and jelly to make a sandwich for Katy's lunch. She thought of Jack Dane's face beside hers on the bus, his breath, the smell of him. And she saw yet again his back as it receded into the distance.

Yes, I'm old-fashioned, Jack Dane. I wonder what I'd be like if things had been different. If we hadn't come here that Thanksgiving weekend, if there hadn't been that boat sale, if Billy hadn't come here then too.