

SOPHIE KINSELLA

writing as

MADELEINE WICKHAM



Two families, one villa—
who's sleeping with whom?

Sleeping Arrangements

About the Book

Chloe needs a holiday. She's sick of making wedding dresses and her partner is having trouble at work. Her wealthy friend Gerard has offered the loan of his luxury villa in Spain - perfect.

Hugh is not a happy man. His immaculate wife seems more interested in the granite for the new kitchen than in him, and he works so hard to pay for it all, he barely has time to see their children. But his old schoolfriend Gerard has lent them a luxury villa in Spain - perfect.

Both families arrive at the villa and get a shock: Gerard has double-booked. An uneasy week of sharing begins, and tensions soon mount in the soaring heat. But there's also a secret history between the families - and as tempers fray, an old passion begins to resurface...

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About the Author

Also by Madeleine Wickham

Copyright

I have written many novels over the last ten years and am probably best known for my comedies under the name Sophie Kinsella. However, long before I dreamed up the *Shopaholic* series I wrote seven books under the name Madeleine Wickham (my real name).

I'm often asked why I write under two names and the reason is that these books are in a different style from my Sophie Kinsella books.

Although I have not written as Madeleine Wickham for several years, I am immensely fond of these novels and hope you enjoy this one!

Madeleine Wickham

aka Sophie Kinsella

SLEEPING ARRANGEMENTS

Madeleine Wickham

For my parents, with love.

CHAPTER ONE

The sun was a dazzling white ball, shining brightly through the window, making Chloe's tiny sitting room as hot as a roasting dish. As Chloe leaned closer to Bethany Bridges, she could feel a bead of sweat beneath her cotton dress, making its careless way down her backbone like a little beetle. She inserted a pin into a fold of heavy white silk, yanked the fabric hard against Bethany's skin, and felt the girl take a panicky inward gasp.

It was too hot to work, thought Chloe, standing back and pushing tendrils of wispy fair hair off her forehead. Certainly too hot to be standing in this airless room, corseting an anxious overweight girl into a wedding dress which was almost certainly two sizes too small. She glanced for the hundredth time at her watch, and felt a little leap of excitement. It was almost time. In only a few minutes the taxi would arrive and this torture would be over, and the holiday would officially begin. She felt faint with longing; with a desperate need for escape. It was only for a week - but a week would be enough. A week had to be enough, didn't it?

Away, she thought, closing her eyes briefly. *Away from it all*. She wanted it so much it almost scared her.

'Right,' she said, opening her eyes and blinking. For a moment she could barely remember what she was doing; could feel nothing but heat and fatigue. She had been up until two the night before, hemming three tiny bridesmaids' dresses - a hasty last-minute order. The hideous pink patterned silk - chosen by the bride - still seemed to be

dancing in front of her eyes; her fingers were still sore from clumsy needle-pricks.

‘Right,’ she said again, trying to muster some professionalism. Her gaze gradually focused on Bethany’s damp flesh, spilling over the top of the wedding dress like over-risen cake mixture, and she pulled an inward face. She turned to Bethany’s mother, who sat on the small sofa, watching with pursed lips. ‘That’s about as good a fit as I can get. But it’s still very much on the tight side . . . How do you feel, Bethany?’

Both women turned to survey Bethany, whose face was slowly turning puce.

‘I can’t breathe,’ she gulped. ‘My ribs . . .’

‘She’ll be fine,’ said Mrs Bridges, eyes narrowing slightly. ‘You just need to go on a diet, Bethany.’

‘I feel sick,’ whispered Bethany. ‘Honestly, I can’t breathe.’

She gazed with silent desperation at Chloe, who smiled diplomatically at Mrs Bridges.

‘I know this dress is very special to you and your family. But if it’s really too small for Bethany . . .’

‘It’s not too small!’ snapped Mrs Bridges. ‘She’s too big! When I wore that dress, I was five years older than she is now. And it swung around my hips, I can tell you.’

Involuntarily, Chloe found her eyes swivelling to Bethany’s hips, which pressed unhappily against the seams of the dress like a large mass of blancmange.

‘Well, it doesn’t swing round mine,’ said Bethany flatly. ‘It looks awful, doesn’t it?’

‘No!’ said Chloe at once. ‘Of course it doesn’t. It’s a lovely dress. You just . . .’ She cleared her throat. ‘You just look a little bit uncomfortable around the sleeves . . . and perhaps around the waistline . . .’

She was interrupted by a sound at the door.

'Mum!' Sam's face appeared. 'Mum, the taxi's here. And I'm *baking*.' He wiped the sweat elaborately from his brow with his T-shirt, exposing a tanned, skinny midriff.

'Already?' said Chloe, looking at her watch. 'Well, tell Dad, would you?'

'OK,' said Sam. His eyes shifted to Bethany's miserable, trussed-up form - and an ominous mirth began to spread over his sixteen-year-old face.

'Yes, thank you, Sam,' said Chloe quickly, before he could say anything. 'Just . . . just go and tell Dad the taxi's here, would you? And see what Nat's doing.'

The door closed behind him and she breathed out.

'Right,' she said lightly. 'Well, I've got to go - so perhaps we could leave it there for today? If you *do* want to go ahead with this particular dress—'

'She'll get into it,' cut in Mrs Bridges with quiet menace. 'She'll just have to make an effort. You can't have it both ways, you know!' Suddenly she turned on Bethany. 'You can't have chocolate fudge cake every night *and* be a size twelve!'

'Some people do,' said Bethany miserably. 'Kirsten Davis eats what she likes and she's size eight.'

'Then she's lucky,' retorted Mrs Bridges. 'Most of us aren't so lucky. We have to choose. We have to exercise *self-control*. We have to make *sacrifices* in life. Isn't that right, Chloe?'

'Well,' said Chloe. 'I suppose so. Anyway, as I explained earlier, I am actually going on holiday today. And the taxi's just arrived to take us to Gatwick. So perhaps if we could arrange—'

'You don't want to look like a great fat pig on your wedding day!' exclaimed Mrs Bridges. To Chloe's horror

she got up and began to tweak her daughter's trembling flesh. 'Look at all this! Where did this all come from?'

'Ow!' exclaimed Bethany. 'Mum!'

'Mrs Bridges . . .'

'You want to look like a princess! Every girl wants to make the effort to look their best on the day they get married. I'm sure you did, didn't you?' Mrs Bridges gimlet gaze landed on Chloe. 'I'm sure you made yourself look as beautiful as possible for your wedding day, didn't you?'

'Well,' said Chloe. 'Actually—'

'Chloe?' Philip's mop of dark curly hair appeared round the door. 'Sorry to disturb - but we do have to get going. The taxi's here . . .'

'I know,' said Chloe, trying not to sound as tense as she felt. 'I know it is. I'm just coming—'

- when I can get rid of these bloody people who arrive half an hour late and won't take a hint, her eyes silently said, and Philip gave an imperceptible nod.

'What was your wedding dress like?' said Bethany wistfully as he disappeared. 'I bet it was lovely.'

'I've never been married,' said Chloe, reaching for her pinbox. If she could just prise the girl out of the dress . . .

'What?' Mrs Bridges eyes darted to Bethany, then around the room strewn with snippets of wedding silk and gauze, as though suspecting a trick. 'What do you mean, you've never been married? Who was that, then?'

'Philip's my long-term partner,' said Chloe, forcing herself to remain polite. 'We've been together for thirteen years.' She smiled at Mrs Bridges. 'Longer than a lot of marriages.'

And why the hell am I explaining myself to you? she thought furiously.

Because three fittings for Bethany plus six bridesmaids' dresses is worth over a thousand pounds, her brain swiftly replied. And I only have to be polite for ten more minutes. I can bear ten minutes. Then they'll be gone - and we'll be gone. For a whole week. No phone calls, no newspapers, no worries. No-one will even know where we are.

Gatwick Airport was as hot, crowded and noisy as it had ever been. Queues of charter-flight passengers lolled disconsolately against their trolleys; children whined and babies wailed. Tannoy voices almost triumphantly announced delay after delay.

All of it washed over the head of Hugh Stratton, standing at the Regent Airways Club Class check-in desk. He felt in the inside pocket of his linen blazer, produced four passports and handed them to the girl behind the desk.

'You're travelling with . . .'

'My wife. And children.' Hugh pointed to Amanda, who was standing a few yards away with the two little girls clutching one leg. Her mobile phone was clamped to her ear; as she felt his gaze she looked up, took a few steps towards the desk and said,

'Amanda Stratton. And these are Octavia and Beatrice.'

'Fine,' said the girl, and smiled. 'Just have to check.'

'Sorry about that, Penny,' said Amanda into the mobile. 'Now before I go, let me just check the colours for that second bedroom . . .'

'Here are your boarding passes,' smiled the girl at Hugh, handing him a sheaf of wallets. 'The Club Class lounge is on the upper level. Enjoy your flight.'

'Thank you,' said Hugh. 'I'm sure we will.' He smiled back at the girl, then turned away, pocketing the boarding passes, and walked towards Amanda. She was still talking

into her mobile phone, apparently oblivious that she was standing bang in the path of passengers queuing for Economy check-in. Family after family was skirting around her – the men eyeing up her long, golden brown legs, the girls looking covetously at her Joseph shift dress, the grannies smiling down at Octavia and Beatrice in their matching pale blue denim smocks. His entire family looked like something out of a colour supplement, Hugh found himself thinking dispassionately. No imperfections; nothing out of place.

‘Yup,’ Amanda was saying as he approached. She thrust a manicured hand through her dark, glossy crop, then turned it over to examine her nails. ‘Well, as long as the linen arrives on time . . .’

Just a sec, she mouthed at Hugh, who nodded and opened his copy of the *Financial Times*. If she was on the phone to the interior decorator, she might be a while.

It had emerged only recently that several rooms in their Richmond house were to be redecorated while they were in Spain. Which ones precisely, Hugh still wasn’t sure. Nor was he sure quite why any of the house needed redoing so soon – after all, they’d had the whole place gutted and done up when they’d bought it, three years ago. Surely wallpaper didn’t deteriorate that quickly?

But by the time Amanda had brought him on board the whole house-doing-up project, it had been obvious that the basic decision – to do up or not to do up? – had already been made, presumably at some level far higher than his. It had also become crystal clear that he was involved only in a consultatory capacity, in which he had no powers of veto. In fact, no executive powers at all.

At work, Hugh Stratton was Head of Corporate Strategy of a large, dynamic company. He had a parking space in front of the building, a respectful personal assistant, and

was looked up to by scores of young, ambitious executives. Hugh Stratton, it was generally acknowledged, had one of the finest grasps of commercial strategy in the business world today. When he spoke, other people listened.

At home, nobody listened. At home, he felt rather like the equivalent of the third-generation family shareholder. Permitted to remain on the board because of sentiment and the family name, but frankly, most of the time, in the way.

'OK, fine,' Amanda was saying. 'I'll call you during the week. Ciao.' She put her mobile phone into her bag and looked up at Hugh. 'Right! Sorry about that.'

'That's fine,' said Hugh politely. 'No problem.'

There was a short pause, during which Hugh felt the flashing embarrassment of a host unable to fill the silence at his dinner party.

But that was ridiculous. Amanda was his wife. The mother of his children.

'So,' he said, and cleared his throat.

'So - we're meeting this nanny at twelve,' Amanda said, looking at her watch. 'I hope she works out OK.'

'Sarah's girl recommended her, didn't she?' said Hugh, eagerly taking up the threads of the conversation.

'Well,' said Amanda. 'Yes, she did. But these Aussies all recommend each other. It doesn't mean they're any good.'

'I'm sure she'll be fine,' said Hugh, trying to sound more confident than he felt. As long as she wasn't like the girl from the Ukraine who had once come to stay with them as an au pair, wept in her room every evening, and left after a week. Hugh was still uncertain what precisely had gone wrong: since the girl had had no English lessons before she left, her final stream of tearful wailing had all been in Russian.

'Yes, well, I hope so.' There was an ominous tone in Amanda's voice; Hugh knew exactly what it meant. It meant *We could have gone to Club Med with babysitting thrown in and avoided all this hassle.* It meant *This villa had better live up to its promise.* It meant *If anything goes wrong I'm blaming you.*

'So,' said Hugh hurriedly. 'Do you . . . want to have a coffee? Or buy anything in the shops?'

'As a matter of fact, I've just realized I left my make-up bag behind.' Amanda's brows knitted slightly. 'So annoying. My mind just wasn't with it this morning.'

'Right!' said Hugh heartily. 'Project Make-up.' He smiled at Octavia and Beatrice. 'Shall we help Mummy choose some new make-up?'

'I don't have to choose,' said Amanda as they began to walk off. 'I always have the same. Chanel base and lips, Lancôme eye pencil and mascara, Bourjois eye shadow number 89 . . . Octavia, please stop pushing. Thank God I packed the sunblock separately . . . Octavia, stop pushing Beatrice!' Her voice rose in exasperation. 'These *children* . . .'

'Look, why don't I take them off somewhere while you go shopping?' said Hugh. 'Beatrice? Do you want to come with Daddy?'

He held out his hand to his two-year-old daughter, who gave a little wail and clung to her mother's leg.

'Don't bother,' said Amanda, rolling her eyes. 'We'll just whiz into Boots and whiz out again. Although what I'll do if they don't stock Chanel . . .'

'Go without,' said Hugh. He reached up and traced a line down her lightly tanned cheekbone. 'Go naked.'

Amanda turned and gave him a blank stare.

'Go *naked*? What on earth do you mean?'

‘Nothing,’ said Hugh after a pause, and attempted a smile. ‘Just my little joke.’

The sun seemed to mock Philip as he stood on the scorching pavement, passing suitcases to a sweating minicab driver. It had been the hottest British July for twenty years: day after day of baking, Mediterranean-style heat that had taken the nation by pleasant surprise. Why go abroad? strangers kept asking each other smugly in the street. Why on earth go abroad?

And here they were, about to fly off to an unknown villa in Spain.

‘Any more bags?’ said the driver, standing up and mopping his brow.

‘I’m not sure,’ said Philip, and turned towards the house. ‘Chloe?’

There was no answer. Philip took half a step towards the house, then stopped, full of heatwave apathy. It was too hot to move ten feet. Let alone hundreds of miles. What the bloody hell were they doing? What had they been *thinking* of, organizing a holiday in Spain, of all places?

‘No hurry,’ said the driver comfortably, and leaned against the car.

A little girl on roller-skates passed by, eyeing Philip curiously over her ice-lolly, and Philip found himself glaring resentfully back. No doubt she was on her way to the sanctuary of some cool, shady lawn. Some green and pleasant English garden. Whereas he was forced to stand out here in the blistering heat, with nothing to look forward to but a cramped ride in an un-airconditioned Ford Fiesta, followed by an even more cramped ride in a packed plane. And then what?

‘Paradise,’ Gerard had called his villa, waving a brandy glass in the air. ‘Pure Andalusian Paradise, my loves. You’ll

adore it.' But then, Gerard was a wine reviewer: words like 'paradise', 'nectar' and 'ambrosia' fell off his tongue all too readily. If he could describe a perfectly ordinary Habitat sofa as 'transcendental' - and it was on record that he could - then what might this 'Paradise' of a villa turn out to be like?

Everyone knew how disorganized Gerard was; how thoroughly hopeless when it came to practical matters. He claimed to be DIY-dyslexic; unable even to change a plug, let alone wield a hammer. 'What exactly *is* a rawl-plug?' he would ask his assembled guests, raising his eyebrows; waiting for the roar of laughter. When one was sitting in his luxurious Holland Park flat, drinking his expensive wine, this ignorance always seemed like just another of his entertaining affectations. But what did it bode for their holiday? Visions of blocked drains and crumbling plaster began to fill Philip's mind, and he frowned anxiously. Maybe it wasn't too late to abandon the whole idea. For God's sake, what did this holiday have to offer that couldn't be accomplished just as easily - and a lot more cheaply - with a couple of day trips to Brighton and a night out at a tapas bar?

At the thought of money his heart began to thump, and he took a deep breath. But already a few wisps of suppressed panic were beginning to escape; to circle his mind looking for a place to lodge. How much were they spending on this holiday? How much would it come to, after all the outings and extras?

Not much in the grand scheme of things, he reminded himself firmly, for the hundredth time. Not much compared to other people's extravagances. All things being equal, it was a modest, unambitious little holiday.

But for how long would all things remain equal?

A fresh spasm of fear leapt through him and he closed his eyes, trying to calm himself. Trying to empty his mind of the thoughts that attacked him whenever he allowed his guard to drop. He had promised Chloe faithfully that he would try to relax this week; they'd agreed that they wouldn't even mention it. This would be a week of escape on all levels. God knew, they needed it.

The taxi driver lit a cigarette. Philip quelled the desire to ask for one, and looked at his watch. They were still in good time for the flight, but even so . . .

'Chloe?' he called, taking a step towards the house. 'Sam? Are you coming?'

There was a stretch of silence, during which the sun seemed to beat down on his head more strongly than ever. Then the front door opened and Sam appeared, closely followed by eight-year-old Nat. Both boys were dressed in baggy surfing shorts and wrap-around shades, and walked with the confident loose-limbed swagger of youth.

'Awright?' said Sam confidently to the taxi driver. 'Awright, Dad?'

'Awright?' echoed Nat in his high-pitched treble.

Both boys dumped their bags in the boot and went to sit on the garden wall, headphones already plugged in.

'Boys?' said Philip. 'Nat, Sam, could you get in the car, please?'

There was silence. Nat and Sam might as well have been on a different planet.

'Boys?' repeated Philip, raising his voice sharply. He met the taxi driver's sardonic eye and quickly looked away again. 'Get into the car!'

'There's no hurry,' said Sam, shrugging.

'Sam, we're about to go on holiday. The plane leaves in . . .' Philip tailed off and glanced unconvincingly at his

watch. 'In any case, that's not the point.'

'Mum isn't here yet,' pointed out Sam. 'We can get in when she arrives. No hass.' He settled calmly back on his perch and Philip stared at him for a few moments, a little impressed despite his annoyance. The truth was, he thought, Sam wasn't being deliberately impertinent or obstructive - he merely believed his own opinion to be just as important as any adult's. At sixteen, he considered the world to be as much his as anyone else's. More so, perhaps.

And maybe he was right, thought Philip morosely. Maybe the world did belong to the young these days, with its computer language and teenage columnists and Internet millionaires; with its demand for speed and novelty and now. Everything was immediate, everything was online, everything was easy. And the slow, redundant humans were simply thrown out, like pieces of obsolete hardware.

A familiar gnawing began in Philip's chest, and to distract himself, he reached into his inside jacket pocket to check the clutch of four passports. At least they hadn't put *these* on computer yet, he thought savagely. These were the real thing, solid and irreplaceable. He leafed through idly, glancing at each photograph in turn. Himself - only last year, but looking about ten years younger than he did these days. Nat, aged four with huge, apprehensive eyes. Chloe, looking about sixteen, with the same blue eyes as Nat's; the same blond wispy hair. Sam at twelve with a sunburned face, grinning insouciantly at the camera. 'Samuel Alexander Murray', declared the passport.

Philip paused for a moment, staring with a tweak of fondness at Sam's irrepressible, twelve-year-old face. Samuel Alexander Murray.

S. A. M.

They'd changed his name by deed poll from Harding when he was seven, when Chloe was pregnant with Nat.

'I don't want my boys having different names,' she'd said, her voice full of a hormonal weepiness. 'I don't want them being different. And you're Sam's dad now. You *are*.'

'Of course I am,' Philip had said, taking her in his arms. 'Of course I'm his dad. I know it, and Sam knows it. But what he's *called* . . . that's irrelevant.'

'I don't care. I want it.' Her eyes had filled with tears. 'I really want it, Philip.'

So they'd done it. For courtesy's sake, she had contacted Sam's real father, who was now a professor in Cape Town, to tell him about the proposed change in Sam's name. He had replied briefly that he really didn't care what the child was called and could Chloe please keep her side of the bargain and not contact him again.

So they'd filled in the forms, and had Sam reregistered as Murray. And to Philip's surprise, as superficial a change as it was, he'd found himself strangely affected by it: by a seven-year-old boy - with no blood ties to him - taking on his name. They'd even cracked open a bottle of champagne to celebrate. In a way, he supposed, it was the closest they'd ever come to having a wedding.

His thoughts were interrupted as the front door opened and he saw Chloe ushering her last customers out of the house - a red-faced girl in shorts and a waspish mother whose eyes met his suspiciously, then darted away again. Beside the pair of them, in her flowing cotton dress, Chloe looked cool and unruffled.

'Think about it, Bethany,' she was saying. 'Goodbye, Mrs Bridges. Nice to see you again.'

There was a polite silence as the woman and her daughter walked towards their Volvo. As their car doors slammed shut, Chloe breathed out.

'At last!' She looked up at Philip, her eyes lit up. 'At last! I can't believe it's actually here.'

'So you still want to go,' said Philip. He was, he realized, only half joking.

'Idiot.' Chloe grinned at him. 'Let me just get my bag . . .'

She disappeared back into the house and Philip looked at Sam and Nat.

'OK, you two. You can either get in the taxi now - or we can leave you behind. Your choice.'

Nat's head jerked nervously, and he glanced at his older brother. There was a slight pause - then casually Sam stood up, shook himself down like a dog and ambled round to the passenger door of the car. With a distinct air of relief, Nat followed, and buckled himself into his seat. The taxi driver switched on the engine, and a DJ's cheery voice cut through the still air of the street.

'Right!' Chloe appeared at Philip's side, slightly flushed, clutching a large wicker bag. 'I've locked up, so we're all set! Off to Spain.'

'Great!' said Philip, trying to muster a matching enthusiasm. 'Off to Spain.' Chloe looked at him.

'Philip . . .' she began, and sighed. 'You promised you'd try to . . .'

'Enjoy myself.'

'Yes! Why not, for a change?'

There was silence.

'I'm sorry,' said Chloe, and rubbed her forehead. 'That's not fair. But . . . I really need this holiday, Philip. We both do. We need to get away from the house and . . . and people . . . and . . .'

'And . . .' said Philip, and stopped.

'Yes,' said Chloe, meeting his eyes directly. 'That most of all. Just for a week, I don't even want to think about it.'

An aeroplane came into earshot overhead; although they were used to living on the flight path, involuntarily they tilted their heads back to look at it.

'You do realize the report's due out this week,' said Philip, staring up at the blue sky. 'The decision will be made, one way or the other.'

'I do,' said Chloe. 'And you do realize there's absolutely nothing you can do about it. Except worry and obsess and give yourself several more ulcers.' She gave a sudden frown. 'Have you got your mobile phone on you?'

Philip hesitated, then pulled it out of his pocket. Chloe took it from him, walked up the path to the house and posted it through the letterbox.

'I'm serious, Philip,' she said, as she turned round. 'I'm not letting anything spoil this holiday. Come on.' She walked to the taxi and opened the door. 'Let's go.'

CHAPTER TWO

The nanny was late. Amanda sat at the appointed Costa Coffee table, drumming her fingernails, sighing with impatience, and squinting every so often at the monitor.

'You realize they'll be boarding soon,' she said at intervals. 'You realize we'll have to go. What are we supposed to do, accost every twenty-year-old girl we see on the plane and ask if she's called Jenna?'

'She's sitting next to us,' Hugh pointed out mildly. 'It's bound to be pretty obvious who she is.'

'Yes, but that's not the point,' said Amanda twitchily. 'The whole point was, she would meet the girls and get to know them a little bit before the flight. Then *she* can take care of them, and *we* can relax . . . It was all worked out! Really, I don't know why I—' She stopped rigid as her mobile began to bleep. 'God, don't say that's her. Don't say she's bloody cancelling on us, that's all I need. Hello?' Amanda's face relaxed. 'Oh, Penny. Thank God.' Amanda swung away on her stool, putting a hand over her other ear. 'Everything OK? Has the paint-effects girl arrived yet? Well, why not?'

Hugh took a sip of espresso and smiled at Octavia and Beatrice, who were silently making their way through a plate of *biscotti*.

'Looking forward to the holiday?' he asked. 'Octavia?'

Octavia looked blankly at him, rubbed her nose and bit into another *biscotto*. Hugh cleared his throat.

‘What subject do you like at school?’ he tried, to another stony silence.

Did five-year-olds have such things as subjects? he wondered belatedly. She did go to school, he knew that much. Claremount House, £1,800 a term plus lunches, drama club and something else club. Dark green uniform.

Or dark blue. Definitely either dark green or dark blue.

‘Mr Stratton?’

Hugh looked up in surprise. A girl in scruffy jeans with dark red dreadlocked hair and a row of eyebrow rings was peering at him with narrowed eyes. In spite of himself, Hugh felt a lurch of apprehension. How on earth did this girl know his name? Was she going to ask him for money? Perhaps this was the latest scam. They found out your name from your luggage labels, followed you, waited till you were relaxed . . .

‘I’m Jinna.’ The girl’s face broke into a broad grin and she extended a hand. ‘Good to meet you!’

Hugh felt his throat constrict in shock.

‘You’re . . . Jenna?’ He was aware that his voice had come out as an incredulous squawk; thankfully Jenna didn’t seem to notice.

‘Yis! Sorry I’m late. Got caught up shopping, you know how it is.’

‘That . . . that’s quite all right,’ said Hugh, forcing himself to smile pleasantly at her. As though he’d been quite expecting a nanny who looked more like Swampy than Mary Poppins. ‘Don’t you worry about it.’

Far from worrying, Jenna wasn’t even listening. She had slung her backpack onto the floor and perched on the seat between Octavia and Beatrice.

‘Hi, girls! Octavia and Beatrice, right?’ She didn’t wait for an answer. ‘Now you know what? I’ve got a problem. A

bi-ig problem.'

'What?' said Octavia reluctantly.

'Too many Smarties,' said Jenna, shaking her head solemnly. 'My backpack's full of 'em. Think you can help me out?'

From nowhere, she produced two tubes of Smarties and handed them to the girls, who emitted small squeals of delight. At the sound, Amanda swivelled back round on her stool, still talking into her mobile phone, and stopped dead as she saw the lurid packets.

'What—' Her eyes fell on Jenna, taking in her dyed hair, eyebrow rings, a tattooed flower on her shoulder, Hugh suddenly noticed. 'Who on earth—'

'Darling,' interrupted Hugh hastily, 'darling - this is Jenna.'

'Jenna?' Amanda met his eyes disbelievingly. '*This* is . . . Jenna?'

'Yes!' said Hugh with a false heartiness. 'So now we're all here. Isn't that splendid?'

'Pleased to meet you,' said Jenna, holding out her hand to Amanda.

There was a pause - then, rather gingerly, Amanda took it.

'How do you do?'

'I'm smashing, thanks.' Jenna beamed. 'Lovely girls you've got here. Great kids. I can always tell the good ones.'

'Oh,' said Amanda, taken aback. 'Well . . . thank you.' A sound from her mobile phone jolted her. 'Oh sorry, Penny! I've got to go. Yes, everything's fine. I . . . I think.' She switched off her mobile phone and put it in her bag, all the while gazing at Jenna as though at a rare breed of octopus.

'I was just telling your husband here, I got caught up in the duty-free shop,' said Jenna, and patted her carrier bag. 'Stocking up on the old cigarettes and booze.'

There was a sharp silence. Amanda's eyes darted to Hugh's; her jaw began to tighten.

'Joke!' said Jenna and nudged Octavia, who began to giggle.

'Oh,' said Amanda, disconcerted. She attempted a laugh. 'Well, of course—'

'Actually it was condoms, for my night off.' Jenna nodded seriously. Then her eyes twinkled. 'Joke!'

Hugh opened his mouth and closed it again. He didn't dare look at Amanda.

'So we're off to Spain,' continued Jenna blithely, producing a couple of lollipops for the girls. 'I've never been to Spain. Is it near the sea, where we're going?'

'I gather the place is up in the hills,' said Hugh. 'We've never been there before.'

'An old friend of Hugh's has very kindly lent us his house for a week,' said Amanda stiffly, and cleared her throat. 'The wine reviewer, Gerard Lowe. He's quite well known, I expect you've seen him on television.'

'Can't say I have,' said Jenna, shrugging. 'Mind you, I'm not really into wine. Beer's more my drink. And tequila when I'm in the mood.' She looked at Hugh. 'You'll have to watch me, mister - when the sun's shining and I've got a Tequila Sunrise in my hand, I'm anyone's.' She unwrapped a lollipop, put it in her mouth and winked. 'Joke!'

Hugh glanced at Amanda and stifled a smile. In eight years of marriage, he had never seen her look at quite such a loss.

The traffic approaching the airport had been terrible: solid tailbacks of holidaymakers in cars and coaches and taxis

just like theirs. As they'd sat in the chugging, fume-clogged silence, Philip had felt acid begin to churn at the lining of his stomach. Every thirty seconds he had glanced at his watch and felt another spasm of alarm. What would they do if they missed the flight? Were the tickets transferable? Would airport staff be helpful or scathing? Should he have taken out some kind of insurance against this happening?

In the event, they had arrived just in time. The Regent Airways check-in girl had quickly issued them with their boarding cards and told them to proceed straight to the gate for boarding. No time to check the luggage, she'd said - they'd have to take it with them.

'Well!' Chloe had said as they turned away from the check-in desk. 'That was a stroke of luck!' She'd ruffled Nat's hair cheerfully. 'We didn't want to spend our holiday at the airport, did we?'

Philip had stared at her, unable to understand how she could, already, be laughing about it. To him it hadn't felt like a stroke of luck. It had felt like a warning. A reminder that, for all the planning in the world, one could not govern one's own fate. That one might as well give up trying. Even now, sitting safely in his seat, clutching a complimentary orange juice, he still felt a lurking anxiety, a premonition of failure.

He clenched his glass tightly, hating himself; wanting to rid himself of the insecurities which constantly teased him. He wanted to turn back into the person he used to be; the person who was happy in his own skin. The person Chloe had fallen in love with.

'OK?' said Chloe, next to him, and he smiled.

'Fine.'

'Look at Nat.'

Philip followed Chloe's gaze. The family had been split up into two pairs of seats, and Nat and Sam were sitting

several rows in front of them. Sam was already plugged into his headphones and staring ahead as though in a trance - but Nat had clearly taken the cabin crew's warnings to heart and was solemnly perusing the laminated safety sheet. As they watched, he looked up, glanced anxiously around the cabin - then, as he spotted the emergency exits, subsided in relief.

'I bet he tells Sam where all the emergency doors are,' said Chloe. 'And how to use an oxygen mask.'

She smiled fondly, then reached into her bag for a paperback and opened it. Philip took a swig of orange juice and shuddered at the sharpness against his seething stomach. He could have done with a brandy. Preferably a double.

He opened his complimentary newspaper, then closed it again. They'd agreed no papers on this holiday. In his jacket pocket was a thriller about Russia - but he knew that in the frame of mind he was in, he wouldn't be able to concentrate enough to follow the plot. He raised his glass to his lips again, put it down - and as he did so, met the eye of the man sitting next to him. The man grinned.

'Disgusting stuff.' He pointed to his own glass. 'Get yourself a beer. Only a quid.'

He had a thick south London accent and was wearing a Lacoste polo shirt which stretched over his muscled chest. As he reached for his beer, Philip noticed that his watch was a chunky Rolex.

'On holiday, are you?' he continued.

'Yes,' said Philip. 'And you?'

'Go every year,' said the man. 'Can't beat Spain for sun.'

'Or Britain, at the moment,' pointed out Philip.

'Yeah, well,' rejoined the man. 'Can't *count* on it, can you? That's the trouble.' He extended a fleshy hand. 'I'm