

Praise for *The Glass Painter's Daughter*

'Fans of *Possession* and *Labyrinth* will recognise the careful historical research Hore has undertaken and enjoy the seamless blend of past and present narratives into one beautiful story'
Waterstone's Books Quarterly

'A delightful and romantic tale' Barbara Erskine

'Reflection, refraction and reconciliation are the three resonant themes of this exquisite novel . . . perfect book to pack on holiday'
Lancashire Evening Post

Praise for *The Memory Garden*

'With her second novel, Rachel Hore proves she does place and setting as well as romance and relationships. Tiny, hidden Lamorna Cove in Cornwall is the backdrop to two huge tales of illicit passion and thwarted ambition . . . Clever stuff'
Daily Mirror

'Rachel Hore knows the tricks of her trade and keeps the pages turning by adding a hint of a past mystery, too. Cleverly done'
Now

'Rachel's Hore's second novel is pitched perfectly for a holiday read'
Guardian

'An engrossing read!'
Yours

Praise for *The Dream House*

'A beautifully written and magical novel about life, love and family . . . tender and funny, warm and wise, the story of one woman's search for the perfect life which isn't quite where she thought she would find it. I loved it!'
Cathy Kelly

'What a treat . . . It's so very real and utterly unputdownable'
Chris Manby

'I loved it. It's brilliantly evocative, wonderfully romantic and it kept me guessing right through to the end'
Daisy Waugh

'I found this a totally absorbing, intriguing and romantic read, and the period detail, in particular, was beautifully evoked. A wonderfully atmospheric debut by a writer to watch'
Isabel Wolff

'*The Dream House* is a book that so many of us will identify with . . . engrossing, pleasantly surprising and thoroughly readable'
Santa Montefiore

'Warm, very true to life and totally engrossing'
Jenny Colgan

Also by Rachel Hore

The Dream House
The Memory Garden
The Glass Painter's Daughter

*A Place of
Secrets*

RACHEL HORE



POCKET
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For Jenny, my sister



Look at the stars! Look, look up at the skies!
O look at all the fire-folk sitting in the air!
The bright boroughs, the circle citadels there!

'The Starlight Night'
by Gerald Manley Hopkins

If you are cheerful, and wish to remain so, leave the study of astronomy alone. Of all the sciences it alone deserves the character of the terrible . . . if on the other hand, you are restless and anxious about the future, study astronomy at once. Your troubles will be reduced amazingly. But your study will reduce them in a singular way, by reducing the importance of everything. So that the science is still terrible, even as a panacea . . . It is better – far better – for men to forget the universe than to bear it clearly in mind.

Two on a Tower by Thomas Hardy



The night before it all begins, Jude has the dream again.

She is stumbling through a dark forest, lost and crying for her mother. She always wakes before the end so she never knows whether she finds her, but it's very vivid. She feels the loamy earth, hears twigs crack under her feet and smells the rich woody fragrances that are always strongest at night, when the trees are breathing. It's chilly. Brambles catch at her hair. And the panic, the despair, they're real enough as she claws her way to consciousness; she scrabbles for the light switch and lies waiting for her sobbing breaths and racing heart to slow.

This is the nightmare she had when she was a child. What's brought it back now, she cannot say. She passed many terrible nights after losing Mark, but was never haunted by this particular dream. Just as she thinks she's regaining control of her life it scorns her feeble attempts and pulls her back into powerless infancy.

She once asked a school friend, who had an interest in dreams, what it could mean.

'A *dense* forest, was it? Mmm.' Sophie reached for a book from her shelf, flipped the pages till she found what she wanted and read out, "Loss in trade, unhappy home influences and quarrels among families." Ring any bells?' She looked at Jude hopefully.

'That sounds like a horoscope in a magazine,' Jude said. 'You can take it any number of ways. One, I was short-changed

in the chemist today, and, two, my family is always bickering, like any other.'

'They are weird, though, your family,' Sophie said, closing the book.

'No weirder than yours,' Jude retorted.

But in the weeks that follow the return of her dream, she comes to realize that Sophie had a point.

Part I



Chapter 1

June 2008

How tiny and random are the events that shape our destiny.

By the time she left for the office the next morning, Jude had almost forgotten her dream. Waiting for the train at Greenwich station, the sudden wail of a toddler brought back fragments of her distress, but by the time she reached Bond Street these too were displaced by other, more mundane worries. She had no sense that something important was about to happen, something that on the face of it was quite insignificant.

It was Friday lunchtime in the Books and Manuscripts department of Beecham's Auctioneers in Mayfair. She'd been sitting at her computer screen all morning, cataloguing rare first editions of eighteenth-century poets for a forthcoming sale. A painstaking job, it meant describing the contents of each slim volume, noting its condition and recording any quirks or flourishes – a handwritten dedication, say, or scribbled annotations – that might tickle the interest of potential buyers. Annoying then, when anyone broke her concentration.

'Jude.' Inigo, who inhabited the next desk in their open-plan office, came over clasping a mess of paper festooned with multicoloured sticky-backed notes. 'Proofs of the September catalogue. Where do you want them?'

'Oh, thanks,' she murmured. 'Give 'em here.' She dumped the pile on the already overflowing tray beside her computer, then started to type another sentence. Inigo didn't take the hint.

'I really do think you should look at the Bloomsbury pages again,' he said in his most pompous tone. 'I jotted down a couple of points, if you'd like to . . . ?'

'Inigo –' she said, trying and failing to frame a polite way of saying 'mind your own business'. The Bloomsbury Group first editions were her responsibility and she didn't report to him in any way on them or on anything else. That never stopped him from interfering. 'Can we talk this afternoon? I *must* finish this.'

Inigo nodded and glided back to his desk where he started to get ready to go out. Jude couldn't stop herself watching, fascinated, as he slid his tweed jacket on over the matching waistcoat, tucked his fountain pen into the breast pocket, straightened his silk cravat and ran smoothing fingers across his schoolboy fair hair. It was a kind of ritual.

'Going somewhere important, Inigo?' she remarked.

Looking pleased that she'd asked, he whispered, 'I'm meeting Lord Madingsfield at Chez Gerard,' and tapped the side of his nose to indicate confidential business.

'Lord Madingsfield *again*?' she said, surprised. 'Well, have fun.' She turned back to her keyboard. Inigo had been toadying up to this wealthy collector for months now. In her private opinion the wily old aristocrat was stringing him along.

'We're in quite a delicate stage of negotiation, actually,' Inigo said and pursed his cherubic lips, as though the idea of having fun was beneath him.

Jude and Suri, the trainee cataloguer who sat at the desk opposite, exchanged mock-impressed glances. Suri looked back quickly at her work, but Jude could see her shoulders quivering with suppressed mirth. Inigo took everything in life too

seriously, but most of all, his place in it. He locked the drawers of his desk, then, grasping his hand-tooled leather briefcase, he departed, pressing the release button of the door to the lobby with his usual little flourish. Through the glass, the women saw him jab at the lift button several times, his dapper figure fussy as a dog with a flea. Only when the lift arrived and swallowed him up did they give way to their laughter.

'I wonder what he'd say if he saw a video of himself,' Suri managed to say between giggles. She stood up to go out herself, adjusting the clasp in her glossy black hair and swinging her handbag onto her shoulder.

'He'd probably fall in love, poor boy,' Jude said as she typed. 'Enjoy your lunch.'

'Can I get you anything?' Suri said. 'I'm going past Clooney's if you want a sandwich.'

'Thanks, but I'll be OK,' replied Jude, smiling at her. 'I'll break the back of this copy, then maybe slip out myself.' When Suri had gone, she took a mouthful of mineral water from a bottle hidden under the desk. Lunch must be forgone. There was too much to do. Anyway, the waistband of her new trouser suit was too tight and she couldn't risk the buttons popping off at dinner tonight.

She picked up a musty volume from one pile, studied it quickly and laid it down on another. *Full calf* – she wrote – *rebacked with raised bands. Blind tooling to boards. A good clean copy of an important contemporary work.*

It was at that moment that the Hand of Destiny struck.

The phone on Inigo's desk began to shrill, piercing her concentration. Insistent, self-important, like its owner. She stared at it, willing it to stop. The caller would probably be a time-waster: a quavery old dear hoping to make a mint out of her dog-eared Agatha Christie collection, or a know-it-all

antiquarian bookseller demanding a personal audience. But it would ring eight times, then transfer to Suri's phone and ring another eight before going to message . . . Snatching up her own phone she pressed a button.

'Books and Manuscripts. Hello?'

'Inigo Selbourne, please,' came a plummy male voice.

'I'm afraid he's at lunch,' Jude said, and in case the caller assumed she was Inigo's secretary, which happened dispiritingly often, she added, 'I'm Jude Gower, another valuer. Can I give him a message?'

'If you would. My name's Wickham. I'm telephoning from Starbrough Hall in Norfolk.'

Jude felt a frisson of interest. Norfolk was home turf. Where on earth was Starbrough Hall, though? She leaned closer into the phone.

'I've a collection of eighteenth-century books I want him to look at,' Mr Wickham went on. 'I've been assured by a friend that they're likely to have significant value.'

Jude flipped to a fresh page on her notepad and wrote 'Starbrough Hall' at the top in neat capitals, then stared at the words, trying to understand why they tugged at her memory. She didn't think she'd ever been to Starbrough Hall, but for some reason a picture of her grandmother rose in her mind.

'Does Inigo have your number, Mr Wickham?'

'No.' When he recited it the local code was familiar. The same as her sister's, in fact. That was it. Starbrough Hall was part of the big estate where Gran had lived as a child. She wrote down the phone number and doodled a jagged star shape round it.

If she finished the call and passed the message on to Inigo, she'd have done her job. But the name Starbrough meant something to her, and she was intrigued. On the other hand, the material he wanted to sell might prove of little interest to Beecham's. 'Mr

Wickham,' she asked, 'what sort of books are they? It's only that the eighteenth century is my particular period.'

'Is it?' Wickham said. 'Well perhaps I should be dealing with you instead of Mr Selbourne.'

She opened her mouth to say that Inigo was perfectly competent to deal with the collection, and found she didn't want to. It was a conundrum. Robert Wickham had asked specifically for Inigo. Jude would be furious if Inigo took work from her – and Suri told her that he had done that once despite her name being recommended by another client. Still, she didn't want to sink to his level. It was ridiculous really, that they played this constant game of comeuppance. The head of department, Klaus Vanderbilt, was always banging on about how they should work together to wrest business from the other big auction houses. In fact she had a lot of respect for Inigo's professional abilities; it was his constant pushiness that irritated her. She could never quite relax with him in the office.

'Do you know Inigo Selbourne?' she asked Robert Wickham. 'I mean, was he recommended to you?'

'No, never heard of the man until a moment ago. Your switchboard suggested him.'

So she wasn't muscling in on something that was rightly Inigo's.

'Well in that case,' she told Wickham, with a shameful sense of triumph, 'I'll deal with the matter, if you like.'

'I'm happy with that. The collection belonged to an ancestor of mine, Anthony Wickham. He was something of an amateur stargazer, and most of the books relate to his hobby. I'd like you to value them with a view to possible placement for sale.'

'An astronomer, was he? That's interesting.' Jude was scribbling down details. Scientific tomes, particularly from the eighteenth century – the Age of Discovery – were a lively area

at the moment. She could think of two or three dealers who would want to know more.

'There are several first editions among them, so I'm told. And I should mention the manuscripts,' Wickham went on. 'His charts and observation records. Can't make head or tail of them myself. My mother is more familiar with the material. Anyway, I expect you'll be able to tell straight away once you're down here.'

'How many books are we talking about? I don't suppose there's any chance you could bring them to the office?' she asked.

'Oh heavens, no. There are a couple of hundred or more. And the papers, well they're very delicate. Look, if it's a nuisance, I can always call Sotheby's. I was thinking of doing so anyway. It's just that my friend said to try you first.'

'No, don't worry, I'll come down,' she said hastily. 'I thought it worth asking, that's all.'

'We have some of his instruments, as well. Bits of telescope. And a whatnot . . . One of those spherical models of the solar system.'

'An orrery, you mean?' This whole thing was beginning to sound worth a journey. She shuffled books and papers with her free hand, looking for her desk diary.

'Orrery. That's it,' Robert Wickham continued. 'Shows the planets going round the sun. So you'd be prepared to make a visit?'

'Of course,' she replied. She caught sight of the diary in her in tray, under the mess of proofs Inigo had left. 'When would suit you?' She turned the pages. Could she get away next week? If Wickham was threatening to show other auction houses as well, she needed to be ahead of the game.

'I'm away now for a few days,' he said, 'so it'll have to be after that.' They agreed that she would visit Starbrough Hall on Friday, in a week's time. 'You'll be driving, will you? I'll email

directions. It's too complicated for the phone. The nearest place of any size is Holt. And you can stay overnight if you like. Plenty of room here and my mother and I would be delighted to entertain you. My wife will be away with the children, so you'll have some peace and quiet.'

'That's very kind. I probably won't need to stay,' Jude said. 'I've got family in the area, you see.' She hadn't been home to Norfolk for ages. It would be a good opportunity. Perhaps her boyfriend, Caspar, would come, too.

After she put down the phone she prowled the department, unsettled. The Starbrough Hall collection was important, she was absolutely sure, though she couldn't put her finger on why she felt this. And if it was important and she could secure it for Beecham's it would look good. And looking good was important right now, because Klaus Vanderbilt was approaching retirement age and Beecham's would need a new head of department.

She was mulling over, as she often did, what her own chances of promotion were against Inigo's, when her eye fell on her notepad and the words 'Starbrough Hall'.

She still couldn't visualize the place. Going across to the department's reference shelves she extracted an outsize volume entitled *Great Houses of East Anglia* and laid it on Inigo's desk. When she turned to 'S' she found a grainy black and white photograph. Starbrough Hall was a graceful, if stark-looking Palladian villa with a gravel forecourt and a great featureless expanse of lawn. 'Two miles from the village of Starbrough. Built 1720,' said the short text, 'by Edward Wickham Esq. on the burned-out ruins of the old manor house of Starbrough.' Starbrough. That was very near Claire. She had certainly driven through Starbrough village at some point; she remembered the outsize church, a green with a pretty village sign and a bench girdling a mountainous oak tree. Gran's father had

been gamekeeper on the Starbrough estate, she believed, but she didn't know where they'd lived.

She sat musing for a moment in the empty office, then reached for the phone to ring Gran.

The old lady drowsed in the afternoons now, especially when the sun played across the floor of her living room, filling it with warmth and flickering light. It being the last Friday in June, the coastal village of Blakeney was busy with holidaymakers, but if she removed her hearing aid the sounds of people and boat trailers passing her window, which looked out on the little Norfolk harbour, subsided to a soothing background murmur. In her drowsy state, pictures of the past seemed to dance across her eyelids. Half-deaf she might be now, but long-ago voices, skirls of happy laughter, bubbled up in her memory as fresh as spring water.

She was remembering being a child again, little Jessie, playing hide and seek at the edge of the forest. She'd been good at this game, could swarm up a tree in an instant and curl up in the crook of a branch, small and still as a little brown bird, so that the others never found her. But once she'd wandered too far, deep among the trees beyond the folly, where her father had told her never to go because little girls could get lost, or worse. It was that day that she first saw her – the wild girl. She sensed her before she saw her; she knew by a prickly feeling that she was being watched. Pausing, rigid, listening, her mind formed threatening shapes out of the shadows of the great trees and the flickering latticework of leaves and branches overhead. And all at once, something flashed silver among the lowest branches of a spreading oak. Jessie gasped, 'I can see you.' And after a moment the wood-creature slid down from its hiding place. It was a girl of about her own age, eight, and at first

Jessie was reminded of a picture in a story book at school. She looked like a flower fairy, this child, in a shabby brown tunic dress with leaves caught in her hair. 'Hello,' Jessie said, 'why were you watching me?' But the girl only shrugged. 'Can't you speak? Why can't you speak?' Jessie breathed. The child placed her fingers across her lips and said, 'Shh. It's a secret.' Then her eyes widened with merriment, and she beckoned. 'Where are we going?' Jessie asked, as the girl plunged deeper into the forest. 'I must go back. I'm not allowed . . .' The sprite shook her head and ducked down under a dead branch. And, following her, Jessie saw a crop of small pink flowers. 'Orchids!' She knew immediately, for her father had once brought home one he'd found while checking traps. The flower fairy stooped and plucked one and gave it to Jessie. 'Pretty!' Jessie said and she and the girl smiled at one another, complicit . . .

She drifted back to consciousness, dimly aware of a distant ringing, fumbling with her hearing aid as she made her way to the phone.

'Judith!' She would hesitate to say that Jude was her favourite grandchild, but she felt a closeness to her she never quite felt with Claire, dear cross little Claire.

'I'm going to Starbrough Hall next Friday, Gran. Can I stay with you on Thursday night?' Jude was saying. 'I'd love to ask you about the place.'

'Starbrough?' Jude heard Jessie's surprise, but all the old lady said next was, 'It would be lovely to see you, dear. Will you get here for tea?'

When she put down the phone, Jessie leaned against the sideboard, deluged by a flood of memories. Starbrough Hall. She'd thought about the wild girl a great deal recently; in fact her mind these days was like a reel of old film, playing random scenes from the distant past. And now her grandchild was

going there. Why? She hadn't said. Starbrough. Perhaps the opportunity had come to make things right again.

Later in the afternoon, after an irritating couple of hours in which the phones didn't cease ringing, and a pedantic argument with Inigo over the Bloomsbury first editions, Jude finished writing her copy then took refuge in the storeroom next door to sort books into lots for auction. She always found it a soothing, absorbing task and it freed her mind. Musing about the Starbrough Hall collection she suddenly thought of her old friend Cecelia. They'd met at university, but whereas Jude had gone out into the Real World of work, Cecelia was still burrowing away in university libraries researching the scientific revolution of the late eighteenth century. When they'd last met, for a drink a year or so ago, she was sure Cecelia had said something to do with a book she was writing about astronomy of the period. She'd have to get in touch with her.

What seemed a very short time later, Suri put her head round the door. 'I'm off now, Jude. We're going straight down to my parents' in Chichester and the traffic will probably be awful. Have a lovely weekend.'

'Heck, it's nearly six. I mustn't be long either!' The storeroom had no windows, which could be disorientating.

'We're going to dinner with some friends of Caspar's tonight,' she told Suri, as they returned to the main office. 'Did I tell you, we're all going on holiday to France in a couple of weeks? I've only met them twice. Mad, aren't I?'

'It's brave, if you don't know them,' said Suri, looking unsure whether she was expected to agree. 'What happens if you don't get on?'

'I expect we will,' Jude said, trying to sound positive. 'They seem good fun. Anyway, lots of vino always oils the wheels.'

After Suri had left, Jude tidied her desk, returning books to shelves in swift deft movements and straightening the piles of paper. She wasn't sure she liked what she had seen in Suri's gaze – a kind of pity. At twenty-six and newly engaged to a boy she'd met at uni, Suri still saw life with a fresh innocence. Her world was wonderful, full of colour and hope and happiness, and Jude loved her for it. Even Inigo's patronizing comments rarely managed to cloud Suri's lovely glowing aura. *I was like that once*, she realized, with a little stab of self-pity.

Half-past six found her pushing her way through the aimless summer crowds choking the alley that ran alongside Charing Cross railway station down to Embankment tube.

Even if she hadn't known him, her eye would have been drawn to the figure leaning against a pillar, tapping something into his BlackBerry. Caspar was a powerfully built man in a navy designer suit and starched white shirt. Five years older than Jude's thirty-four, he was handsome and lively, with dark curly hair combed back into submission with the merest slick of gel. She'd met him a few months ago at a friend's drinks party. She, touching five feet ten, and voluptuous, was a good physical match for him. He was drawn by her soft dark eyes and the cloud of wavy strawberry-blond hair, which she wore clasped at the nape of her neck. 'Quite a Madonna, you are. You looked sad, but then you smiled,' he said, when she once asked him teasingly why he'd been drawn to her that evening. 'So many people only smile with their mouths, but you smiled with your eyes like you cared. I liked that.'

She in turn had liked the way he moved fluidly amongst this sophisticated group of city-dwellers, so obviously enjoying himself, belonging. He'd never married, nor indeed had many of his large network of friends truly settled down. They were too busy working hard at careers they loved – Caspar and his friend Jack ran the New Media advertising consultancy – and

playing hard, too. Even his married friends on the whole didn't have children. This was another thing that drew her to him, she knew, this living for the moment. They never talked about the future, but then the present was still all she could manage. When he asked her to come on holiday with some of his friends she hesitated, then thought, why not? 'It'll be a laugh,' he said. 'We have a great time.' She had every reason to believe him, but a worm of worry still wriggled inside her.

All her own friends, it seemed – the ones who witnessed her marriage to Mark six years before – were sending invitations to their own weddings, or announcements of the births of their children. As well as a niece, six-year-old Summer, she already had another godchild and was about to attend the christening of a third, Milo. Little Milo, aged eight months, the child of an ex-colleague, was a scrumptious wide-eyed bambino whom she had accompanied, with his mother, to London Zoo a few weeks back. She hardly saw three-year-old Jennifer, whose parents – Sophie was Jude's best friend from school – had moved to the States last year, but the photographs Sophie emailed Jude tugged unbearably at her heart.

'Hi. Sorry I'm late,' she said, her hand briefly resting on Caspar's tailored sleeve.

'You're not,' Caspar replied, pulling her to him for one of his quick but expert kisses. His dark eyes gleaming, his gaze flicked over her appreciatively, and she was glad she'd bought the trouser suit – and skipped lunch to fit it. 'Pretty earrings,' he commented, recognizing them, and she touched one of the elegant silver cube studs he'd given her for her birthday at Easter, soon after they'd first met. She was sure she had hinted that she usually wore gold, but she loved them anyway because they were his choice.

'Luke and Marney want us at eight,' he said. 'Let's go get a drink.' They found a wine bar nearby where Caspar magically

secured the last table. After the first few mouthfuls of syrupy Burgundy on her empty stomach, Jude felt light-headed.

'How did your presentation go?' she asked him. He and Jack were pitching for a teenage sports fashion account.

'Good,' he replied. He'd drained his glass already and was pouring his next. 'They went crazy for the movie-clip idea. If we find the right kids for the shoot, it could be amazing. Jack's started going through the agencies. How's the dusty world of dead-tree technology?' He was always teasing her that her job involved handling old books when the future of modern media was online. The prices they sold at impressed him, though.

'Something quite beguiling has cropped up,' she told him. 'It's the collection of an eighteenth-century astronomer. I'm going up to Norfolk on Friday. It's funny really, it's just where Gran was brought up. Caspar, I wondered . . .' The alcohol gave her courage to ask. 'We weren't doing anything next weekend, were we, you and me? I'm staying with Gran on Thursday night and working on Friday, so I mean Friday and Saturday nights. I've got to go to Milo's christening on Sunday, but that's do-able. You could drive down and meet me in Norfolk on Friday evening. Or earlier, if you like. And come to the christening. I know Shirley and Martin would love to meet you.'

'Friday's the fourth, right? I think it's Tate and Yasmin's flat-warming – no, that's the Saturday.' He picked up his BlackBerry and started pressing keys. 'Yeah, but we don't have to do that.'

'Really? Only we could see my sister, Claire, and her little girl. You haven't met them, you see, and I thought . . . Their place is too tiny for both of us, but there's a bed and breakfast in the village or maybe we could go out to the coast. The countryside's beautiful; we could go walking . . .' She stopped, aware that he wasn't listening.

Caspar's eyes narrowed as he stared at his BlackBerry, the blue light from the screen flickering eerily across his face. He seemed tense, worried.

'Ah,' he said, suddenly cheered by something he'd found. 'I'm really sorry, Jude, but I'm due in Paris on the Sunday for a presentation on Monday. Jack and I'll need Saturday to prepare.'

'Oh, that's a shame. You haven't met my family. I particularly thought you'd like Claire.'

'She's . . . the disabled one?'

'She has a slight limp, that's all.' Disabled is not how Jude thought of her sister. Pretty, feisty, outspoken, an astute businesswoman, yes, but never disabled. She'd been born with one leg slightly shorter than the other; something that had meant a childhood punctuated by hospital operations. 'Her little girl's called Summer. I haven't seen them properly for weeks.'

'I thought you all met up at the airport last week.' They'd gone to see their mother off to Spain with her new husband, Douglas, who was renovating a villa in the hills behind Malaga.

'Stansted airport is hardly a relaxing place for a chat.'

'Well, I'll have to meet Claire and Summer – cute name – another time.'

Now he'd worked his way into the part he managed to look sincerely sorry, but Jude was disappointed. It wasn't the first opportunity he'd turned down of meeting her family, and it mattered to her. Come to think of it, she hadn't met any of his relations either. He was the only child of Polish parents, who lived in Sheffield, he'd told her that much. In all the time she'd known him, he'd never gone home to visit them and if they'd come down to London he hadn't told her. This hadn't struck her as odd before, but now it did.

One of the little earrings was hurting. She put a hand up and loosened it carefully. It came apart. She caught the bits just in time.