

NOW AND THEN FRIENDS: Excerpt

CHAPTER ONE

RACHEL

"My corns are bothering me terribly today."

"Are they?" Rachel Campbell managed to combine a bright smile with a look of sympathy for ninety-three-year-old Iris Fairley. "Cup of tea, then?" she suggested, and maneuvered around the tiny kitchen with its cracked linoleum tile to fill the brass kettle Iris's father had bought in a Turkish bazaar before the First World War. She had no intention of examining Iris's corns, which is undoubtedly what the elderly lady wanted her to do.

"Biscuit?" Iris suggested hopefully and Rachel reached for the packet of custard creams she'd brought.

"Can't have a cuppa without a biscuit."

"You shouldn't have sugar, you know that, Iris," Edith, her twin sister, called from the sitting room.

Rachel winked and slipped Iris a custard cream. She'd been cleaning for the Fairley twins for eight years, and she'd long ago learned that tea and biscuits were just as important, if not more, than wiping counters or mopping floors. The twins didn't get out much and they loved a bit of a chat over a cuppa, especially Edith. Iris just liked the biscuits.

Rachel glanced out the window at the pale blue sky, fleecy clouds scudding across it. Muddy pasture stretched onto the sea, winking gray-blue in the distance. Although it was late March it still felt wintry in this cold corner of Cumbria, and there had been frost on the tiny patch of grass outside Rachel's house that morning.

The kettle began to whistle shrilly and Rachel whisked it off the ancient cooker as Edith stumped into the kitchen.

"Have you had a biscuit?" she asked Iris accusingly and Rachel busied herself making the tea.

"I haven't," Iris said and Edith pointed a finger at her face.

"You have *crumbs* on your chin."

"Oh, give way now, Edith," Rachel said cheerfully as Iris brushed at her chin. "A biscuit or two won't hurt anybody." She slid Iris another one with a small smile. "Anyway, they're low calorie. I bought them specially." Rachel slid the opened packet back into the cupboard before Edith could get too close a look at it. "Now let's all have a cup of tea before I get on with the hovering." Low calorie or not, Rachel figured at ninety-three you were entitled to a few cookies.

Two hours later she let herself out of the tiny terraced cottage at the top of the village and breathed in the chilly, damp air. The blue sky of a few hours ago

had predictably given way to gray, with dark clouds hovering low over the horizon. Rachel turned up the collar of her coat and checked her phone: nothing from Meghan about their mother, and nothing from her little sister Lily who had headed off to sixth form college after Rachel had gone on her first cleaning job of the day. No messages was a good thing; her sisters only called her in a crisis. And they'd had more than their share of crises over the years.

She climbed in her car and headed down through Hartley-by-the-Sea, past the primary school, the post office, and the pub, the steep, narrow street opening onto a muddy sheep pasture, the square church tower visible in the distance. She'd lived in Hartley-by-the-Sea her whole life save two precious, fleeting weeks in Durham, and its cozy charm charmed and depressed her in turns.

Rachel turned down the beach road and up the steep lane that led to Four Gables, her next cleaning job. The house would thankfully be empty, as the Wests lived in London for most of the year, and Rachel was looking forward to a few hours of peace and quiet. The Fairley twins were lovely, but they could be hard work.

She unlocked the door, breathing in the slightly stale scent of lavender potpourri and lemon furniture polish. The kitchen was as pristine as ever, untouched

from week to week, and so Rachel decided to do the bathrooms. The house had five.

She'd just opened the door to the first ensuite bathroom when she stopped, nonplussed. There was a wet towel on the floor.

After a few surprised seconds she took in the other details of the room: the condensation on the mirror, the streaks of water on the glassed-in shower, the warm humidity of the air. Someone had just taken a shower.

Rachel put down her mop and pail filled with cleaning supplies, the back of her neck prickling with alarm. There had been no car in the drive, and she knew the Wests were in London; they always let her know in advance when they were coming back, as Marie West tended to be very particular about the cleanliness of her house.

Their son Andrew was doing something related to engineering in America; their daughter Claire was partying her way through Portugal.

So who had just taken what must have been a very long, hot shower?

"Hi, Rachel."

Rachel spun around, stiffening at the sight of Claire West coming around the corner of the bedroom. Her hair was wrapped in one towel, her body in another.

"Claire!" Rachel's voice sounded loud, even jolly, and it made her inwardly cringe. "The prodigal daughter

returns." Claire flinched a little and Rachel quickly clarified, "I thought you were in Portugal. It's been what... four, five years?"

"I'm not sure when I was last here," Claire answered, a note of uncertainty entering her voice. Rachel remembered that hesitant lilt and then the shy smile from primary school, and how it had made her seven-year-old self want to protect Claire West. "It's been awhile," Claire said, and there was the smile.

Rachel nodded, trying to remember the last time she'd seen Claire. From a distance, maybe, six years ago when her parents had thrown her a party for graduating from university, complete with a live band and a fountain spurting Bollinger. Rachel had helped out with the catering, serving champagne and canapés and shooting glances at Claire, who had, as usual, been surrounded by admirers.

But when had Rachel last actually *talked* to Claire? She'd have to go back decades, maybe even to those days in primary school, when they'd been best friends standing shoulder to shoulder—or rather, shoulder to waist since Rachel had always been about a foot taller than Claire—against the bullies of Year Two.

Rob Telford, who now ran The Hangman's Noose in the village, had once pushed Claire in the schoolyard and Rachel had given him a bloody nose in retaliation. She'd

been called into the office of the Head Teacher, who had telephoned her mother, who had clipped her on the ear, but she hadn't cared about the consequences because she'd protected Claire.

It had been a long, long time since she'd stood up for Claire West.

"So how are you?" she asked, trying to pitch her tone somewhere between friendly and polite. "Back from Portugal?" Obviously.

"Yeah... for a few months." Claire tugged the towel a little higher up on her body.

"Well... great." Rachel nodded several times as she put her hands on her hips and then dropped them; suddenly her body had become awkward, as if she had too many limbs. "Huh. Wow." The last she'd heard, Claire had been engaged to some hotshot property developer, someone with a double-barreled name and a father who was a baronet. Claire's mother—after telling Rachel to clean the bathrooms "just a touch more thoroughly"—had regaled her with the endless wedding plans for her only daughter. An afternoon reception at the fancy hotel overlooking Derwentwater. An evening ball at another hotel in Windermere. And then a whole raft of events down in London.

"Have you come back to plan the wedding?" Rachel asked.

"Um, no." Claire's smile slipped. "The engagement's off, unfortunately."

"Oh." Rachel squashed the inevitable *schadenfreude* she felt at knowing that at least one thing had not gone well for Claire. "I'm sorry."

"Yeah, me too."

Claire shifted where she stood, dripping water onto the carpet Rachel would have to vacuum later. "Sorry," Rachel said. "I'll get out of your way."

"No, don't bother," Claire said quickly. "You're obviously busy. I'll just..." She gestured to the bedroom, one of the house's four guest rooms although perhaps this one had been Claire's as a child. Rachel didn't know; she'd never been invited to Claire's house when they were friends. She was the riffraff whose father was sometimes on the dole and whose mother cleaned houses. Definitely not good enough to be Marie West's only daughter's friend, even though they'd been inseparable during school for four years.

"It's fine," she said, and scooping up her mop and pail, she moved past Claire. "I'll do one of the other bathrooms," she called over her shoulder. "Just let me know when you're done."

She opened the door to another of the ensembles, flicking on the switch before she sat down hard on the

toilet seat. Distantly she could hear Claire moving around, turning on taps.

Claire. Claire West. For a second Rachel pictured Claire as she'd been the first time she'd seen her. They'd both been six years old, starting Year Two, taking off their coats in the crowded cloakroom at school. Claire had shrunk back from the noisy press of children and parents, and Rachel had seen from the corner of her eye how shiny her black patent Mary Janes were, her coat a kind no self-respecting six-year-old would wear, made of red wool with black epaulets and a Peter Pan collar. She wore a matching tam o'shanter, red with a black silk bobble on top, and she'd looked like an overdressed extra from a Shirley Temple film. Rachel had seen how the other girls in their sparkly jean jackets and puffy pink parkas had kept shooting her incredulous, disparaging looks. Her dark, silky hair had been neatly braided into two plaits, with shiny red ribbons tied into big bows on the ends. One of the boys had leaned forward and yanked one of those ribbons, and Claire had jerked back as if she'd been slapped.

Rachel had stepped forward, elbowing the boy—had it been Rob Telford or Nathan Bradley?—out of the way and then she'd turned to Claire and asked if she needed help with her buttons. Claire had nodded wordlessly and Rachel had stooped to undo each button of her coat while Claire

had remained still and accepting, her gaze averted. Then Rachel had said, kindly, "Maybe you shouldn't wear that coat tomorrow."

Claire had blinked at her, surprised, and then she'd given her a shy smile of gratitude and whispered, "I think you're right."

From that day on they'd stayed together. Claire had clung to Rachel, and Rachel had anchored her to her side. It had been wonderful to have someone you could count on, a forever-partner in PE, someone who would always save you a seat at lunch. And more than that, someone who listened.

Claire had always been good at listening. At recess they'd often run off to a rhododendron bush on the side of the schoolyard. They'd wriggle underneath its tangled branches and sit there on their knees, mindless of the dirt or mud. Under that bush Rachel had admitted how she wished her father had a proper job, and Claire had whispered how she wished her mother wouldn't worry so much. Rachel had secretly wished she'd had a mother who worried; her mother was too busy cleaning houses and keeping them afloat financially to worry whether Rachel was having a good day at school.

For four and a half years they'd wriggled under the rhododendron, sat together during lunch, and said goodbye at the bottom of the school lane because Rachel had

known, without Claire ever having to say anything, that she would never be invited up to Four Gables to play. She'd told herself she hadn't minded, and she hadn't, until their friendship had come to an abrupt halt in Year Six, when they were eleven years old.