

# One of the Family

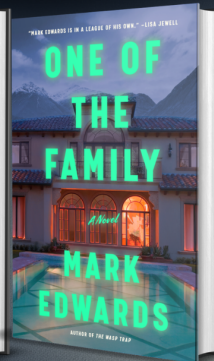
**A WEEK IN PARADISE...  
WITH THE FAMILY FROM HELL**



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# 1

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‘Are you scared?’

We had been driving west for three hours, further and further from any populated area with every passing mile. Inverness Airport, where we had picked up our rental, seemed a long way behind us. The last car we’d seen had gone by twenty minutes ago, just after we’d driven past the sign telling us the main road across the peninsula was closed because of snow and that we’d have to take the much longer coastal route. I was a city dweller, used to traffic jams and red lights, to noise and people, not silence and sheep. I wasn’t accustomed to driving on single-track roads along clifftops that dropped to deserted rocky beaches. I wasn’t used to it at all.

But that wasn’t why Holly had asked me if I was scared.

It was because I was going to meet her family. Her brother and her sister and her sister’s husband.

And her dad. Charles Grant.

The way he loomed in my imagination, she might have been taking me to meet Charles Manson.

‘Scared?’ I asked. ‘Not at all.’

‘Nervous, then?’

‘No. I’m excited.’

She knew I was lying, but she reached across from the passenger seat and lay her hand on my thigh, just above my knee.

‘That’s the spirit. They’re going to love you.’

‘And if they don’t?’

‘Hmm. Well, if my dad suggests a trip out to sea in a small boat, that’s when you should start worrying. Apparently, the water here is deeper than at any other point around the British Isles.’

‘Noted. Avoid trips in small boats.’

She laughed. ‘Don’t worry, Patrick. I’m not going to let that happen. I’m sure you and Dad will get on brilliantly.’

I glanced over at her. Nine months into our relationship, she could still take my breath away, even in the long, quilted coat that could easily have been mistaken for a sleeping bag. When I’d first shown her picture to my friends the general reaction was that I was ‘punching’, which I pretended to find offensive. But the truth was, with her natural red hair, feline green eyes and the way she always looked like she was thinking of something wicked-but-funny, I was still not quite able to believe my luck.

She was gorgeous. And her family was rich. Not just well off. Seriously, famously, loaded. It had made me uncomfortable at first, and a little worried. I had never been skiing, or stayed in a five-star hotel. I knew nothing about wine or stocks and shares, and to me ‘the season’ was the period when football was played, not the time of year when the other half enjoyed Glyndebourne and the Proms and Ascot. What would Holly, and her family, think of someone from a modest background like me? But when I’d raised this with Holly very early in our relationship, she had been taken aback.

‘Do I really seem like the kind of girl who goes to the Proms? I’m just like you, Patrick. Completely ordinary.’  
‘Thanks.’

She had laughed. ‘I didn’t mean it like that. I think we see the world in the same way, don’t you? And just so you know, my dad grew up with no money. He’s a working-class lad. He’d much rather go to a Villa match than bloody Glyndebourne.’

I didn’t point out that he’d be sitting in the most expensive seat in the stadium. I liked hearing her say we were the same, because I believed it, too. Halfway through our first date, when she had told me, while attempting a really bad Arnie impression, that *Terminator 2* was her favourite movie, I had begun to experience something that had only happened once or twice before. The sensation of meeting a kindred spirit. We liked the same music and books and food. Hated the same things, too – from virtue-signalling to the word ‘nom’ – and agreed about politics. That first evening, in a vegetarian restaurant in Brighton, there hadn’t been a single moment of awkwardness or silence. After kissing her goodnight I hadn’t been able to stop grinning all the way home.

‘How about you?’ I asked now. ‘Are you nervous?’

‘Oh, I’ve met my family lots of times.’

It was my turn to laugh. ‘I meant about meeting Jasmine.’

Instead of answering, Holly exhaled and turned her face to the window. Beneath us, the grey sea beat against the shore, foaming and clawing at the dark pebbles.

‘I’m excited,’ she said. ‘In exactly the same way you are.’

‘It’s going to be much harder for her, though.’

Holly didn't reply. We had first heard Jasmine's name a month ago, when a flurry of texts had landed on Holly's phone, followed by hours of WhatsApp chat with her siblings, and days of speculation that had ended with a FaceTime call with Charles, who had confirmed that yes, he had met someone. He'd been keeping it quiet because he wanted to be sure before he shared the news with the rest of the family. And then the bombshell:

They were engaged. Planning to marry in the next few months.

Since then, I'd heard Holly on the phone to her siblings, Lewis and Miranda, on numerous occasions, murmuring in other rooms, but whenever I broached the subject she said there was nothing to talk about. 'Not until I actually meet her,' she had said, the last time I had brought Jasmine up, a few days before we'd departed for this trip. 'Then I'm sure I'll have lots to say.'

'Good stuff, hopefully.'

'Actually, I've decided to be optimistic. Dad's been on his own for a long time, so this Jasmine must have something special about her. He's very choosy.' She had put her arms around my neck. 'Like me.'

We drove on. The landscape was all greens and greys, the craggy hills ascending to our left, the cold sea below to our right. In the distance, beyond that forbidding, churning water, the dark mountains of Skye: the Cuillins, the Red and the Black. As soon as Holly asked me if I would like to join her and the other Grants on their annual trip to Applecross, I had looked it up on Google Maps. This was my first ever trip to the Scottish Highlands and I didn't want to appear

completely ignorant about the local geography in front of her family.

‘We always spend Hogmanay there,’ she had told me. ‘New Year’s Eve, to you and me.’

‘I do know what Hogmanay is.’

‘Oh, I know. But my parents always insisted we say Hogmanay while in Scotland. They bought a holiday home there thirty years ago.’

‘When you were, what? Four?’

‘Yep. We’ve been every year since. A couple of weeks every summer, and the week between Christmas and New Year – apart from, well, you know.’

She meant her lost years. The decade she’d spent in Asia and Australia.

‘We hardly ever went on foreign holidays,’ she went on. ‘Dad never took us to Disneyland or the Maldives. It was always Scotland.’

‘Deprived of visiting the Maldives. You poor thing.’ My family’s idea of an extravagant holiday had been a week in a caravan in Camber Sands.

‘I know, I know.’ To her credit, she had cringed. ‘I was a totally spoilt, privileged brat. Please, whenever I say something like that, you have my permission to tell me to shut the fuck up.’

We rounded a bend, and Holly said, ‘You’ll need to take a left turn in a minute, just before the visitors’ centre.’

Ahead of us, at the end of this stretch of road, was a one-storey prefabricated building, a church looming behind it.

‘The centre is closed in winter, before you get excited and start planning touristy activities and wondering if there’s a

gift shop. There's no supermarket either, before you ask. Not even a Tesco Express.'

'Is *everything* shut?'

'Everything except the pub.'

She reached across and squeezed my thigh again. This was a very Holly thing to do. She was always grabbing hold of me, pulling at my sleeve or the front of my T-shirt, tugging my hair. Sometimes she would pinch me and say, 'Just checking I'm not dreaming.' I wasn't sure that was how it was supposed to work – weren't you supposed to pinch yourself? – but I liked it. She was physical, kinetic, restless. And I wondered what she would be like here, where it seemed there was so little to do. It seemed like the kind of place that would make people go mad.

We took the left turn and drove along a straight road that ran parallel with a river. And then we were climbing again, up a curving slope, and Holly said, 'That view. That's what made my mum fall in love with this place. Why we came back here again and again.'

I slowed the car almost to a halt and followed her gaze, mouthing a *wow*. From up here, we had a perfect view of the bay on the eastern edge of the peninsula. Following the curve of the bay was a row of white houses, and I could see more houses in little clusters further back. The clouds had parted, just a crack, to reveal a streak of blue sky, and the sea shimmered, but only for a moment. The gap closed up again and the waves and the land beyond turned a shade darker, and then we were moving again, around another bend, and Holly said, 'There it is. Up on the cliff.'

There was a sharp incline to our right. I drove up it, glad the rental car was an automatic, the house coming into view

as I rounded a bend. If I'd been on foot I would have stopped dead and rubbed my eyes like a cartoon character.

'*This* is your house?'

'Yep.'

'Holly, it looks like a castle.'

It was as grey as the rainclouds above, presumably constructed of granite, three storeys high with sloping stoneslabbed roofs and four or five chimneys jutting towards the sky. It looked solid, built to withstand the worst the Scottish weather could throw at it rather than cannonballs and arrows, but to me it was the kind of place a laird would live. Possibly a baron. To add to the effect, a flag flew from a pole on the roof: the blue and white of Scotland, even though English people owned it.

'It's nothing like a castle,' Holly protested.

'Says the woman who described her enormous flat in Brighton as "cosy".'

We reached the top of the slope, drove across a gravel courtyard and pulled up in the parking area at the front of the house, next to a little red Fiat, and I got out. Turning, I realized we were only thirty or forty feet from the edge of the cliff, and I walked to the edge to take in the view of the sea and the islands beyond. Light rain kissed my face and I pulled my coat tightly around me, shivering a little. In the distance, beyond the bay and its row of white houses, another huge building stood on high ground, a building that was substantially larger even than the Grants' holiday home. Now, that would be where the local nobility lived, I thought, though even from this great distance I could sense there was something off about it, an air of abandonment.

Holly came over to join me, her coat rustling as she walked. ‘Ready?’ she asked.

I hesitated. I *was* nervous, even though I knew none of the family would have arrived yet.

Holly sensed it and put her arm around me. ‘Be afraid,’ she said.

‘Oh my God, are you about to tell me to be very afraid?’

*The Fly* was another of our joint favourite movies. The first time Holly had seen my wardrobe she’d joked I was like Jeff Goldblum because, like his character, I always wore the same clothes: in my case, 501s, Converse and a black sweater or T-shirt.

‘I’m joking. Obviously.’ Then her expression turned serious.

‘Things might actually get a bit intense this week. But I want you to know that whatever happens, me and you—’

She never finished the sentence. Because somewhere inside the house, a woman let out a scream.

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“One of the Family by Mark Edwards reminded me exactly why he's one of my favorite authors. Every time I pick up one of his books, I tell myself I'll read "just one more chapter".. and suddenly it's way past bedtime.”

“From the very first chapter, I was completely gripped. True to the author's style, the story pulls you in immediately and doesn't let go. It's a real page-turner, packed with suspense and tension that kept me eager to see what would happen next.”