

# THE COMPANION

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*An Aries Book*

## I

‘Boys’ day out. Let’s do it.’ Bouncing on his heels, James Ritchie rubbed his hands.

‘You haven’t shaved and you’re late.’ Opening the front door only inches, Anna Petty groused, ‘Wilbur’s been ready over twenty minutes.’

‘It’s a beard. Hey, cut me slack, Anna.’ James saw himself as a punctual person who was inexplicably never on time. Today he’d stopped to, as he called it, farm Facebook. A ‘like’ here, a laughing emoji there to show the good guy he was. He’d been gratified to see that his post on the page for old pupils of his school – *Who remembers that music teacher Mr Braid who chucked board rubbers at the boys for looking out the window?* – had garnered eleven comments and twenty likes. Ridiculous how happy it had made him, if only for a few minutes. He’d checked to see if Anna had liked it – loved it – she hadn’t.

Lots of forty- and fifty-something men had been hit on the head by the rubber’s wooden grip. A woman had posted that Mr Braid ‘sadly passed in 1994 of a brain tumour

which might explain his unpredictability.’ ‘A brain tumour without a brain? How’s that work?’ James finger-typed, infuriated by the sanctimonious tone of this Susan Parker. She’d apparently started at school the year he’d left, what did she know? He’d heard Anna’s voice in his head saying how James always had to be smarter, cooler and nastier and deleted it. To bolster his dipping mood, James had scrolled through his friends, last count 403. That’s when he saw that Anna had unfollowed him.

Now, he told Anna, ‘Mr Braid, you know, the music teacher with the bad skin? He died of a brain tumour.’

‘How do you know?’

‘I saw it on Facebook.’

‘Sorry, did we tear you away from social media for a day out with your son?’

*Crap.*

‘You’re not my friend any more. Why’s that?’ James couldn’t help himself.

‘Jamie, don’t let’s do this now.’ Anna touched his arm.

Anna had cited James’s hours of tweeting and facebooking as one reason for wanting a divorce. ‘*There are three of us in the marriage; ooh, silly me for forgetting. I mean four and counting...*’

Twenty minutes past eleven on Saturday and Anna wore make-up, a short tweed skirt topped with a Fair Isle poloneck, undyed blonde hair carefully twined into a careless bun. James’s beard was spur of the moment, he hadn’t washed or shaved. His hair, grey since his twenties, was finger-raked. He’d slept in his shirt.

‘Are we going?’ The dark patches under Wilbur Ritchie’s eyes were more typical of a depressed sleep-deprived adult

than a nine-year-old boy. His parents, thrashing through the thorns and tangles of their own lives, were blind to the toll it was taking on their son.

‘*Let’s go fly a kite...*’ Singing the Mary Poppins song in a rich baritone, workman’s flat cap at an angle, James was Dick van Dyke. Anna covered her smile with a hand, James had always been able to make her laugh.

‘Don’t let him near the cliff, a man went off there flying a kite.’ The day before when James had rung to propose the trip and Anna had objected, she’d agreed not to mention the tragedy – some years before – in front of Wilbur. ‘It’s a common accident.’

‘Mum, come with us.’ Wilbur became animated.

‘It’s just us, remember?’ James said. Then, because he too wanted Anna to come, ‘You can if you want.’

‘I’m going shopping. When you’re back tomorrow, we’ll have roast chicken for tea, your *favourite*. A treat even though it’s a school night.’ Anna was showing James she knew what Wilbur loved. The hectic outings, go-karting, paintballing, kite-flying, were for James, not his son.

Wilbur pecked his mother on the cheek. He wouldn’t let his dad see he wanted to stay with his mum. ‘Mummy’, when it was just them. Heart heavy, Wilbur trotted to his father’s Toyota Aygo – the flashy Qashqai a casualty of their separation – and numbly strapped himself in the front seat.

‘He loves this stuff. Spoiling him with food will make him fat.’ James spun on his heel.

Anna Petty waved at Wilbur, the wan face like something out of *Turn of the Screw* burned into her memory. The image would alter over time, from brave little soldier to scared

eyes to abject terror until Anna came to believe Wilbur had mouthed *Help* through the glass and would blame herself for staying behind.

‘If you had, you’d be dead too,’ people said.