



ralph's party



lisa jewell



RALPH'S PARTY

by Lisa Jewell

PROLOGUE

Smith put the phone down and glanced around the living room. A few people had already been round that night, and the flat was still relatively tidy after an earlier blitzing.

He picked up empty mugs and glasses and carried them through to the kitchen. It was strange and vaguely unsettling to think that these objects still carried the lip marks, the fingerprints, the traces of saliva and microscopic organisms left there by the strangers who had been into his home that evening, strangers he had shown his bathroom, who had seen his grubby dressing-gown hanging behind his bedroom door, strangers who had sat on his sofa in unfamiliar clothes with unfamiliar mannerisms and names and lives, strangers who had been given the opportunity to peer into other strangers' private lives.

Ralph and he had reached decisions quickly and cruelly. It would be obvious in a moment that someone was unsuitable, but they all got the tour: 'And this is the kitchen - you'll be pleased to hear we've got a dishwasher *and* a washer-dryer!'; the talk: 'Smith's up with the lark during the week but we both like a lie-in at the weekends'; the interview: 'What do you do for a living?'; and the conclusion: 'Well, there's still a few more people to see the flat — give us your phone number and we'll let you know.' Always the full fifteen minutes,

so that the unwanted stranger would leave feeling like he'd been in the running, like he'd been given serious consideration.

Jason had sounded hopeful on the phone but turned out to be looking for a ready-made social life. 'I just want to live somewhere that's got a bit of life - d'you know what I mean?' he'd said, his eyes wide and over-keen.

‘Erm, maybe you could explain?’ Ralph had asked, thinking of the nights that he and Smith spent hopping mindlessly through forty-seven cable channels without talking and going to bed, stoned, at midnight.

Jason sat forward on the sofa and cupped his kneecaps with his hands. ‘Like, for example, where I live at the moment, all that happens is I get home from work every night and nobody wants to do anything. It pisses me off, d’you know what I mean?’

Ralph and Smith had nodded sympathetically and felt old.

Monica had been a born-again Christian - would it bother them if she spoke in tongues occasionally? -and Rukhsana appeared to be on the run from an abusive arranged marriage. Her hands shook throughout the meeting, her dark eyes unable to rest on one object or hold a gaze. She explained that she and her husband were having a ‘trial separation’. Ralph and Smith decided that a permanent separation from Rukh-sana’s sad but unpalatable situation would be best for them.

Simon had been sweet but at least twenty stone, his frame throwing the rest of the flat temporarily but of proportion, the sofa making a painful noise it had never made before as he gingerly lowered his bulk on to it.

Rachel had the sort of skin condition that made them want to Hoover the flat the minute she’d left, and John smelt of Pedigree Chum. They’d just about given up hope.

‘Who was that on the phone?’ Ralph switched on the television and spread-eagled himself on to the sofa, the remote control poised for action in his hand.

‘Someone about the flat,’ Smith replied from the kitchen, ‘a girl - she’s on her way over now. She sounded nice.’ He kicked the door of the dishwasher closed. ‘Her name’s Jem.’

Jem took the first turning off Battersea Rise, which brought her into Almanac Road, a small sweep of three-storey Edwardian houses, long and thin with basements — unusual for this part of South London.

As she walked down the road, peering nosily into uncurtained basement flats, she began to feel strangely like she

had been here before. There was something familiar about the proportions, the width of the pavement, the colour of the bricks and the spacing between the weedy saplings that lined the road.

Jem stopped outside number thirty-one, and the feeling of familiarity increased further. She suddenly felt safe, like a child coming home after a tiring day out, to a warm house and Saturday-afternoon television.

Jem glanced down into the basement flat and saw a young man, his back to the window, talking to someone out of view. It was then that she knew she had been here before. Maybe not this exact place, but somewhere very similar. In her dreams, since she was a teenager - a basement flat in a tall house in a terrace; a view through the window, at night, the room lit up; a man

on a sofa smoking a cigarette, whose face she couldn't see. Her destiny. Was this him? Jem rang the doorbell.

CHAPTER ONE

The girl standing in the doorway was tiny, about five foot two, black curly hair held on top of her head with pins and clips in some complicated but very feminine style that looked as if it should have sported ivy wreaths. She was post-coitally pretty, with cherry-red cheeks and a bitter-sweet mouth, the bottom lip drawn back very slightly under the top, and her eyes were bright and mustardy, framed by mascaraed lashes and faint but lively eyebrows. She should have been wearing wood-nymph muslins and lacy leather sandals but instead had on an equally beguiling soft flannel suit with fur at the collar and cuffs and a short skirt that would have looked obvious on a taller woman. The tip of her nose was winsomely pink.

Smith let Jem walk in front of him down the hall, watching her as she turned her head this way and that, examining the pictures on the walls, peering through half-open doors and patting table-tops as she went. She was definitely cute. She turned to Smith.

'This is lovely, really, really lovely.' She smiled widely and suddenly turned to face the wall, grabbing the top of the radiator with both hands and letting out a sigh of relief.

‘Sorry,’ she laughed, ‘my hands are freezing, like blocks of ice - feel.’ She made her small white hands into fists and placed one on each of Smith’s cheeks. ‘It’s so cold out there!’ Smith started and felt suddenly shy.

‘Shall we go to the kitchen? I’d love a cup of tea.’

‘It’s just through the living room/ offered Smith, attempting to overtake her.

‘Oh, yes. I know where the kitchen is. I saw it through the window. Outside.’ She laughed again. ‘Sorry, I’m really nosy. And I’ve seen so many horrible flats tonight I don’t think I could have faced coming in here if it hadn’t looked nice.’

They walked into the kitchen.

‘My flatmate’s around somewhere,’ said Smith, filling the kettle. ‘He’s probably in his room. He’s called Ralph. I’ll take you to meet him when the tea’s done.’

Jem was examining a rack of herbs and spices. The plastic lids of the jars were covered in a layer of greasy dust; all of them were full. ‘Do you and Ralph ever cook?’ she asked.

Smith laughed. ‘Erm, I think this speaks for itself.’ He opened the door of the fridge to reveal shelves laden with colourful packets proclaiming ‘Thai-style Green Curry’, ‘Creole Chicken with Cajun Rice’, ‘Chicken Tikka Masala’, and floppy see-through bags containing fresh pasta sauces and soups.

‘Oh, God - typical boys! That’s such an expensive way to eat!’ exclaimed Jem. ‘Cooking’s brilliant, you know — I’ll teach you. And Ralph, if you like.’ She used the name Ralph comfortably, as if she knew him. ‘I’m very good. I think. Well, so I’ve been told. I can cook a Thai curry. These ready-made things are dreadful for you — it’s all the salt they put in them to make them taste of something.’ She closed the fridge and wandered back into the living room.

‘Do you want to ask me some questions?’ she called, picking up a paperback from a shelf and examining the back cover.

‘Milk and sugar?’ Smith called back.

‘Have you got any honey?’

Smith futilely opened and closed a few cupboards. ‘No,’ he shouted. ‘Got some golden syrup, though.’

‘This is a gorgeous room, you know. No offence or anything, but it doesn’t look like two boys live here.’

‘Thank you.’ Smith was embarrassed, and slightly shocked at being referred to as a boy in his thirtieth year.

Jem quickly took note of the objects strewn around the top of the dark wooden coffee table inlaid with ornate brass work. She approved of a good messy coffee table — they held so many interesting clues to the day-to-day content and clutter of people’s lives. Smith and Ralph’s coffee table held a selection of remote controls, a satellite TV guide, an ashtray full of stubs, two packets of red Marlboro, a business card, a box of matches and a home-delivery pizza menu. Somewhere underneath it all she could make out a proper coffee-table art book, a set of car keys and, barely visible but unmistakable, a small piece of green cardboard torn from a packet of Rizlas. Jem smiled quietly at her discovery.

‘Let’s go and say hello to Ralph,’ Smith was lingering in the doorway, his face cocooned in wreaths of steam from his tea, ‘and then I’ll show you around.’

Ralph barely noticed Jem the first time he saw her. He was arguing with his girlfriend Claudia, sitting at his desk, the phone cradled under his chin as he carelessly pulled elastic bands into tight ligatures around his

wrists in an apparently subconscious attempt to cut off his blood supply and end the painful predictability of it all.

As Smith entered he grimaced and took the phone from under his chin, holding it a foot or two from his ear so that Smith could hear the tinny drone of the unhappy woman. He hit the speakerphone button:

‘I just feel like I’m the one doing all the work here, Ralph, d’you know what I’m talking about? No, of course you don’t. Who am I kidding? You can’t see anything beyond the remote control - as long as you’ve got a piece of technical equipment in your hand that will prevent you from doing something else,

something that might, just might involve you getting up off your arse and doing something...'

'Ralph,' whispered Smith, 'this is Jem.'

Jem twinkled at Ralph from the doorway.

Ralph saw a small, smiley girl, tendrils of hair framing her face.

'Are you listening to me, Ralph, or have you put me on that fucking speakerphone?'

Ralph smiled apologetically at Jem and mouthed a 'Nice to meet you' as he hit the speakerphone button again and began murmuring inaudibly into the phone.

Smith and Jem left the room, closing the door quietly behind them.

'Claudia can be very... demanding. They could go on like that for hours. Poor bastard.' Smith smiled smugly and took a slurp of tea.

You don't have a girlfriend, then, Smith?'

'Very perceptive,' he replied ungraciously. 'No, I don't.'

Not for the first time since Jem's arrival, he found himself feeling uncomfortable. He wanted to be friendly

and welcoming, to create a good impression, but try as he might, he just couldn't, and was coming across instead as frosty and impolite. He put his hand out to grasp the antique door-handle in front of him and pushed the door open.

'This would be your room.' He reached to the left for the light switch. 'It's quite small, as you can see, but it's got everything.'

The room was tiny and L-shaped. The walls were clad in caramel-coloured wood-panelling, and the room was lit centrally by a ceiling lamp housed in a brass and glass star-shaped shade. A single bed stood at the far end, covered with a vivacious Indian throw and several large cushions with tassels and fringes. A 1920s wardrobe with mirrored front panels stood in front of it, and at the other end of the room was a single sash window hung with densely patterned heavy curtains and a small chest of black-lacquerwork drawers.

Jem turned and grasped hold of Smith's hands. 'I absolutely love it. I love it. I knew I would. Please can I live here? Please!' Her face was glowing and childlike, her hands felt small and warmed by her mug of tea.

'Let me show you the rest of the flat first and then we can have a chat.' Smith could still feel where Jem's hands had covered his. 'I need to talk to Ralph as well - lots of other people have been to see the room. I'll need to consult him.' He could feel himself blushing and turned his back on Jem.

'OK,' she said lightly. She wasn't worried. She already knew that the room was hers.

CHAPTER TWO

Siobhan knew she should feel happy. I mean - ALR, All London Radio. That was something else, it really was.

When Karl had first told her, earlier on that evening, she had felt ecstatic — all his dreams come true. He was on the phone to his Irish mother and Russian father in Sligo now, telling them the news. She looked at him over the top of her book; his soft, handsome face was alive with an energy she hadn't seen for years as he explained to his no doubt bursting-at-the-seams-with-pfide mother that her one and only son, her precious, sweet Karl, had just been handed a peaktime slot on London's biggest radio station.

She couldn't quite imagine it: 'Good evening, London, and welcome to the Karl Kasparov Show.' Her Karl, not some faceless, naff DJ, but her Karl, having thousands of listeners, his own jingles, doing interviews. His name would be there in the radio listings: '3.30-6.30 p.m. -Karl Kasparov.' *Drive Time*, that's what they called it, Karl's slot. Karl was going to have a *Drive Time* radio show.

Siobhan imagined a classic 'Hot in the City' scenario, a traffic jam on a steaming summer's day, bumper-to-bumper gridlocked traffic and the sound of Karl's voice purring from car radios, 'It's hot out there — so keep cool by staying tuned to *Drive Time* ALR' before seguing into 'Up on the Roof.

A barely perceptible whimper jolted Siobhan from her train of thought. It was a quarter to eleven - they'd forgotten about Rosanne in all the excitement. She was now sitting stoically by

the living-room door, aware that tonight was not a normal night and trying, without irritating, to convey the message that she still had a bladder and it was getting late.

‘Oh, baby, did we forget about you?’ The sympathetic tone of Siobhan’s voice elicited a tentative wag from Rosanne’s tail, which increased with velocity and force as Siobhan headed towards the hook in the hall that bore her lead.

‘Karl, I’m taking Rosanne out for a pee. Come on, baby! Come on, we’re going out!’

Siobhan struggled into her winter coat, so much tighter around her upper arms and chest than it had been last year, and Rosanne panted delightedly at the door waiting for her mistress to join her.

Siobhan was glad to be out in the cold night air. The central heating, the excitement and the champagne had fuzzed up her mind. It was a beautiful October night and the tall, elderly houses of Almanac Road looked elegant beneath a jet-black sky brightly illuminated by a huge full moon.

Rosanne seemed to sense the fullness of the moon above, uncertainly sniffing the air around her, her black coat looking extra glossy beneath the bright white light. They walked to the end of the road, Siobhan thinking hard about her feelings. She’d got so used to she and Karl bumbling along in their unimpressive lifestyle. It had never mattered to her before that she hadn’t really worked since losing her job as a technician at a fashion college in Surrey - she’d made ends meet with the odd

wedding-dress commission and handmade cushions for an interior-design shop on Wandsworth Bridge Road. And Karl’s weekend deejaying at local pubs and functions, plus what he earned at the Sol y Sombra teaching Ceroc had been plenty to meet their paltry mortgage repayments and modest-lifestyle expenses.

Karl and Siobhan-a strictly small-time couple. That’s how Siobhan had always seen them, and she knew plenty of people who were jealous of their way of life, and their relationship. She couldn’t have wanted for any more really - they had a lovely flat which, they’d been lucky enough to buy for next to

nothing before Battersea had up and come, a beautiful dog, friends they'd known since university, a relationship full of laughter and ease that was, their friends informed them, the strongest they knew, an example to everyone else, a yardstick. Neither of them was going to suffer from executive burn-out. The idea that all this might change, would change, filled Siobhan with dread.

Suddenly it would matter that she was getting fat, Karl would notice that her life was going nowhere. He would get back from his *Drive Time* slot, hyped and driven, full of fame and crappy Top Ten pop songs and find Siobhan's bulk sprawled all over the sofa, glued to *Coronation Street*, her belly swollen from the enormous meal she'd eaten while he was out because she didn't like to eat in front of Karl any more, and what would he think?

Would he still drive the little black 1966 Embassy he'd shipped back from India the year after university? Would he still wear his old American Classics chinos with the split on the knee and the scuffed old Bass Weejun loafers he'd had since before she even knew

him? Would he still put on his funny Tibetan socks with the leather soles when he got in and make them both a cup of tea and watch documentaries on the sofa with Rosanne on his lap?

Would he still love her?

It was cold now — winter had stopped knocking tentatively at the door, had forced its way in and made itself at home. Siobhan looked up in time to see a wispy violet cloud pass over the moon and then disappear back into the blackness.

'Come on, baby, let's go back.'

They moved briskly up Almanac Road towards the light and warmth of number thirty-one. As Siobhan felt in her coat pocket for her front-door keys she heard voices and looked down to see a pretty dark-haired girl leaving the basement flat below theirs. There'd been visitors in and out of that flat all night. She wondered what was going on.

She undipped Rosanne's lead in the hall and the dog dashed into the living room and straight on to Karl's lap. Karl hugged

her and let her lick his face and Siobhan watched the scene from the hall while she tugged at her too-tight coat sleeves. She smiled deeply and warmly to herself and allowed the scene to etch itself firmly on the slate of her mind, allowed the joy of her current life to overcome her, because, she knew for sure, it was all about to change.

CHAPTER THREE

Ralph and Smith had been best friends for fifteen years. They had been enemies for four years before that, since day one at grammar school, Smith offended by Ralph's creative aura and vaguely effeminate manner and Ralph threatened by Smith's easily gained popularity and effortless academic success. They kept different circles of friends and, on the rare occasion that their paths crossed, they sniffed and snarled at each other like unfriendly dogs passing in the park, their friends keeping them at bay like impatient owners tugging on leads.

It took a girl to bring them together. She was a foreign-exchange student from Baltimore called Shirelle and she was staying with Smith and his family for two months. She arrived in London in May wearing flared jeans with turn-ups and a hairy turquoise woollen jumper with a cowl neck. Her hair was long and plain, like her face.

She spotted Ralph getting off the bus on her first morning at Croydon Grammar. His trousers were tighter than school rules allowed, his dark-blue blazer was held together at the back with a safety-pin and his hair was dirtily tousled, sticking up in meringue-like peaks sculpted with soap. He had a smudge of something black and sooty under each eye. Smith thought he looked like a right tosser. Shirelle fell in love.

Over the course of that term Shirelle became Skunk.

She shaved her hair and dyed it black with a peroxide streak running through the middle. She spent her allowance in Carnaby Street on fishnets and studded belts and leather skirts. She smoked and drank snakebites and followed Ralph around like a lovesick Rottweiler. She asked him over to the Smith residence with the invitation 'Tuck me,' an offer that, although

it scared him half witless, Ralph as a hormonal young man of sixteen felt he could not refuse.

Smith as a hormonal young man of sixteen was both fascinated and repulsed by these sessions and the fact that they were happening, audibly, under his own suburban roof. Any previously held notion of Ralph's dubious sexuality was well and truly rubbished by the noises that emanated from the Smiths' spare room. As time went by, his curiosity got the better of him and one afternoon, feigning interest in the phone book in the hall, he watched Ralph saunter down the stairs, tucking his T-shirt into his combat trousers in an awe-inspiringly macho way, smelling of something unfamiliar and exciting.

'So, what's going down, then, Ralphie-boy?' Smith enquired, in what he hoped sounded like a casually offhand, sneeringly condescending manner. 'How's it going with the skunk-woman?'

Ralph glanced ceilingwards. 'Fancy a walk?' he'd said, shoving his hands deep into his pockets.

And that was that. Shirelle went home at the end of term, despite her threats to stay and bear Ralph's children, bring them up in the squat they would share with the Sex Pistols and Siouxsie Sioux, take heroin and die of an overdose, and Ralph and Smith became friends.

Theirs had developed into a friendship based around the ability to comfortably spend hours in each other's company without the need to speak or move. Now, as it had been at school, they each maintained different circles of friends and took part in different activities outside the flat, but their time together there was a precious opportunity mutually to make no effort whatsoever, a form of behaviour that they found unacceptable to themselves and their friends in any other circumstance.

Obviously they weren't always silent. Sometimes they would discuss which channel to watch, occasionally they even bickered about it and conducted small tussles over the remote control when one felt the other lacked the judgement required

for captaincy of such an important tool. And sometimes they would talk about women.

Women were a pain in the arse, they were balls and chains, never pleased, always aggrieved. Smith and Ralph thought of themselves as nice blokes. They weren't bastards, they didn't have affairs or lie to women, or stand them up, or hit them, or expect them to perform menial tasks. They didn't ignore their women when they were with their mates or go out with the lads and refuse to see them; they didn't stick pictures of Melinda Messenger over their beds. They were *nice blokes*. Phoned when they said they'd phone, gave their girlfriends lifts, paid for things, didn't demand sex, even handed out the odd compliment. Ralph and Smith tried to treat women as equals, they really did, but women just kept proving to them that they weren't worthy of it — they were a strange, alien breed with a list of unreasonable expectations as long as the MI and a feast of paranoias and insecurities that Smith and Ralph

were expected to deal with, daily. And then of course there were the women who weren't like that. They were the ones you fell in love with almost immediately, told all your mates about, made fantastical plans for the future with and then felt surprised when three weeks later they dumped you in a pool of your own foolishness and went off with someone who *would* have affairs, lie to them, stand them up, hit them and expect them to perform menial tasks,

Ralph, blessed with an insatiable libido, couldn't do without the sex and still threw himself regularly into the fray, emerging every now and then broken and crippled, hobbling and limping, his over-enthusiastic genitalia still pointing proudly like a bayonet towards the next battle. But Smith had given up fighting this frightening nineties version of the battle of the sexes years ago and retired, bruised but intact, to his corner.

Smith was saving himself anyway, so he said. Saving himself for a woman about whom he knew nearly nothing, a woman with whom he'd never progressed beyond the occasional awkward exchange of smiles, waves and nods, a woman who, in his opinion, encapsulated in one blissful arrangement of cells, organs, pigment and genes, the absolute

epitome of female loveliness. For five years he'd imagined a day when their paths would cross. He'd bestow upon her a charming smile of teeth and self-confidence, engage her briefly in witty conversation, extend an invitation to dinner at the wonderful restaurant that had just opened up in St James, smile again at her acceptance, drape his overcoat over his shoulder and walk away with a well-paced swagger.

Instead, he'd spent five years grimacing gruesomely at her like a socially and intellectually inept toad,

sometimes raising a limp, sweaty hand to wave at her if he chanced upon her from a distance and occasionally adding yet more to his plight by tripping over obstacles, dropping fragile objects, missing steps and failing to find his door keys whenever he was within her sights. He was in love with a vision of blonde, honeyed gorgeous-ness, a tall, slender, toned slip of perfection that no other girl he'd encountered before or since had come close to matching in any way. He was in love with a girl called Cheri, a girl who lived two floors above in the flat at the top of the house, a girl who shared his address. Until he made her his, no other girl would do.

Smith's love for Cheri remained undiminished by her haughty arrogance, her sneering indifference to his attempts at friendliness. It remained unsullied by the frequency of middle-aged men visiting her flat, their Porsches and BM Ws double-parked on Almanac Road, by the thought of wives left at home while their husbands wooed his beloved with gifts of jewellery and perfume and dinner at all the best restaurants in London. Smith failed to see beyond her beauty; all he knew was her cool exterior, the layers of self-protective skin she wore to hide the nothingness inside.

While Smith waited on a fantasy that he was emotionally incapable of engineering into reality, Ralph filled his life with a succession of vacuous blondes with accommodating beds, and the two of them killed time... until what? Until they were too old to do anything about it? Until all the opportunities in life had gone, like unclaimed raffle prizes, to other people?

Smith knew that they needed a change. Things had been the same for too long. They were grinding each other down. He'd

put an ad in *Loot*, one in the *Standard*

and a card in the newsagent's window. And along had come Jem.

As far as Ralph was concerned, things hadn't changed too much in the week since Jem had moved in. She was out most nights, and when she was around she was barely noticeable. There were a few strange things in the bathroom, like cotton-wool balls and jumbo boxes of Tampax, and the fridge had suddenly become home to fresh vegetables, chicken breasts and skimmed milk. But apart from surface changes, it was still, to all intents and purposes, the same flat.

Except it felt different. The dynamics had changed. Ralph no longer felt comfortable walking around in nothing but his boxers; he became self-conscious about his toilet habits, which had always been protracted and unpleasant-smelling but which Smith had learned to live with a long time ago. And, more unexpectedly, Ralph was curious, very curious. Here was a stranger, in his home, a stranger about whom he knew no more than a first name, a strange woman at that, with all the exotic and delightful paraphernalia that surrounded women - knickers, bras, make-up, heels, roll-on deodorants in pink bottles, hairbrushes entangled with long, clean-smelling hairs, Pearl Drops, lacy things, silky things, fluffy things. He'd spent many hours extracting varying degrees of enjoyment from the women in his life, but he'd never, in all his thirty-odd years, lived with one before.

And now there was one in his flat. His curiosity was aflame and, really, he had only peeped into Jem's bedroom. He hadn't searched through her things or opened drawers or anything, just walked around a bit and

looked at stuff. He was sure there wasn't anything wrong with that. If there'd been anything she hadn't wanted anyone to see she'd have put it away somewhere, out of sight. And besides, she'd left the door open. Ralph didn't like to think of himself as a snoop and was feeling slightly guilty now about his little investigation, especially in the light of what he'd seen.

Ralph had intended to spend this week at the studio. He hadn't been for over three months now. He'd made that brochure-design job for the travel company last more than a fortnight when he could have finished it in a week and had spent the last ten days or so cocooned in his room working his way through all thirty-three levels of some computer game or other. He'd reached the end this morning and, after the rapturous programme of congratulations and flattery from the computer had died down, he'd sat back in his chair and realized with some sadness that he now, officially, had nothing to do.

He'd persuaded himself that at eleven-forty it was way too late to make it to the studio but that he would definitely go tomorrow. He'd thought about the possibility of calling Claudia at work and decided against it — he always called her at the wrong time: 'Not now, Ralph, I'm in the middle of something⁵'; 'Not now, Ralph - I'm on my way out'; 'Not now, Ralph — I've only just got in.' He imagined Claudia, in one of her silly shiny suits, busily walking in and out of the office all day, endlessly, like a film on a loop. It made him smile to himself.

The usual cloud of boredom descended upon him, and he decided to go for a short walk. As he strolled down Northcote Road, past market stalls of jewel-coloured autumn flowers and cheap plastic toys and joss sticks

and African beads he began to think about Jem. He really hadn't wanted another flatmate — he liked his lifestyle with Smith, an easy life, watching telly, getting stoned — but it was Smith's flat and so he'd gone along with it, and anyway, Jem seemed quite nice and he trusted Smith's judgement.

The first week had been a bit awkward. Smith and he weren't very good at making an effort with strangers, and he'd felt guilty ordering that home-delivery Indian without asking Jem if she wanted any and then embarrassed when he'd heard her slipping into the bathroom moments after he'd made that festering rodent-corpse smell in there. She'd offered to cook for them tonight, and although he appreciated the gesture he found himself rather selfishly resenting this disruption of his normal routine. Monday night was his staying-in night and he

liked it to be as socially undemanding as possible; when Smith was out he quite often switched on the answer-phone and ruthlessly screened his calls. But it was nice of Jem to offer and he would try to rise to the occasion.

To give his walk a purpose he went into his local overpriced ‘corner shop’, one of those ubiquitous upmarket chains which sell bags of imported tortilla chips for extortionate amounts of money but never stock anything you really want to eat, which sell only one kind of washing powder but at least twenty-two brands of Mexican chilli sauce. Ralph didn’t know why he frequented these places - they were so obviously designed to line the pockets of some youthful laughing-all-the-way-to-the-bank ex-City-boy types (Ere, Paul, let’s buy some retail space and flog the yuppies a load of wine and tortilla chips for three times the recommended retail price’) and they annoyed him intensely. He bought himself a packet

of Marlboro, although he had two packs at the flat, and walked back to Almanac Road.

Lunchtime television consisted of a selection of cookery programmes and Australian soaps, and Ralph found himself mindlessly absorbed in some frenetic shopping-channel programme, watching a camp guy with a tape measure around his neck feverishly extolling the myriad virtues of a horrible acrylic tunic with beading around the neck: ‘Not just one, not two, but three, *three* different types of beading. You’ve got the bugle beading here, the button beading around the applique and, look - this *beautiful* tear-drop beading on both sides!’

Ralph wondered what planet these presenters came from and what drugs the channel fed them to make them sound so sincerely and genuinely excited about the naff and uninspiring products they were being asked to pay homage to.

He switched off the television and felt silence engulf the room. He felt empty and useless. He had nothing to do. He picked up a mug of lukewarm tea he’d made earlier and a packet of Tuc biscuits and walked aimlessly into the hall. It was then that he found himself, almost subconsciously, pushing open the door to Jem’s little room.

It was strange to see the spare room full of someone's things. He'd only ever seen it empty before. It already had an unfamiliar smell. Jem's belongings lay semi-unpacked in boxes around the edges of the room - empty boxes had been flattened and folded and left near the door. The bed was unmade and there was a blue cotton dressing-gown draped across it with a white Chinese dragon embroidered on the back.

Ralph stepped further into the room to examine a pile of CDs balanced on the table next to Jem's bed. He was

impressed with her taste in music, like his, still stuck somewhere in 1979: the Jam, Madness, the Cure, Generation X, the Ramones — he might ask if he could borrow them. Next to the CDs was a framed photograph of Jem in a thick winter coat, her nose reddened by the cold, crouching to hug a handsome golden retriever. Ralph looked closely at the photograph, realizing that he couldn't really remember what Jem looked like - he hadn't paid her much attention — and that she was extremely pretty. Not particularly his type, though. He always went for blondes, blondes with long legs and designer clothes and attitude problems, blondes with names like Georgia, Natasha and, of course, Claudia, blondes who worked in PR or for art galleries or fashion houses, blondes who wished he was wealthier, trendier, tidier, smarter, earlier, later, cooler — someone else.

In contrast, Jem was tiny and quirkily pretty. She had good taste in music and she kept a picture of her dog by her bed. She was also nice and polite and gave the impression that she'd be a pleasure to be with. Not Ralph's type at all.

He bit into a biscuit and a large chunk fell to the floor. As he stooped to pick it up he noticed a pile of books under the table, worn and battered looking, with various years inscribed down their spines in gold blocking, or handwritten in pen and marker. They were diaries — and, by the look of them, not impersonal desk diaries but proper, from-the-heart, highly personal girls' diaries. They stretched from 1986 to 1995. He wondered what had happened to 1996, the current diary, and then he saw it just peeping out from under Jem's dressing-gown.

It was open but obscured by the gown; he could see the date - it was last Thursday's - and snatches of

handwriting, small and curly like Jem herself: '... beautiful flat... might be shy - I'm sure they're not ... this be my destiny — I'm so excited ... Smith could be him but seems a bit ... Ralph...' Ralph stopped abruptly. What the hell did he think he was doing snooping around in this poor girl's room looking at her fucking diary, of all things? This really was very, very sad indeed. He almost left at that point, but his interest had been stimulated to boiling-point.

His heart was racing as he pulled the dressing-gown out of the way and his jaw dropped as he read the entry in full. It seemed Jem thought she was here because of some dream or other, she was following her destiny, she was excited because she thought that either Smith or himself would be the man of her dreams — literally. Ralph was inclined to think that Jem was some sort of fruitcake, but as he read on he found himself warming to her dream, her destiny. Not only was he in the running, he had the advantage. Look, she'd written it; 'Smith seems a bit uptight, and he's not really my type to be honest. Ralph seems more likely — very lean and sexy and sort of dangerous looking' — Ralph's stomach tingled pleasantly as he absorbed the compliment - 'he seems like he'd be more fun to be with. The problem is, he's got a girlfriend.'

This was all true, thought Ralph — apart from the bit about Claudia being a problem. He *was* more fun to be with than Smith these days. That hadn't always been the way, but over the last few years, since his obsession with Cheri had taken over his life, Smith had lost some of his old sparkle and self-confidence.

There was no entry after that. Ralph put down the book and took a deep breath, resisting the urge to turn

back the page, to read more. He placed the diary on the bed at the same angle he'd found it, painstakingly rearranging the blue gown over it and hoping she hadn't left a hair draped across it, to trap sad, snooping diary-readers.

He sat on her crumpled bed now, so unlike Claudia's, which took ten minutes to make, with new bedsheets every day and

complicated throw and cushion arrangements that had to be just so, otherwise she'd complain. One of Jem's bras was folded into the sheets. It was black and plain and old looking. He picked it up and examined the label — little Jem was not so little: 34D. Where the hell had she been hiding those? Claudia had breasts that complemented her willowy stick-insect frame, small and pointy and incapable of forming a cleavage even when pushed firmly together from both sides. Ralph realized that he missed breasts, he missed that projection of soft voluminous womanliness that moved when it was touched and was always warm and welcoming. Other bits of women's bodies sometimes felt like they might bite or strangle or constrict, but never the breasts — they were friendly and relaxed.

Ralph was disturbed to find himself running the strap of Jem's bra across his top lip and smelling the thin strip of worn black elastic. He removed it quickly and placed it on his lap, turning his hand into a fist, which he inserted into the cup. It fitted easily, leaving plenty of room for a second fist. My God, he thought, Jem is what Claudia would describe as a 'clever dresser'. Whenever Ralph disagreed with Claudia's assessment of another woman as fat she would explain that he had been fooled by clever dressing — underneath that strategically placed scarf or sweater the woman was

really a vast rolling mound of fat, he just couldn't see it because he was a man and oblivious to the tricks that women played. Maybe she was right, he thought now, admiring the capacity of Jem's bra. He certainly hadn't noticed those before.

He placed the bra back into its crevice in the bed-sheets. He was beginning to feel a bit seedy and uncomfortable with himself and was relieved to note that he didn't have an erection.

Ralph was tempted to stay in Jem's room; he was enjoying its snugness and femininity. He wanted to see what she kept in the drawers, take the top off her deodorant and smell the ball, read all her diaries and find out what she was doing on specific days years ago, he wanted to climb into her bedclothes, under

her duvet and between her sheets, his head on her aquamarine-cased pillows, to smell her and feel the echo of her warmth.

Instead, he stood up slowly and ruffled the duvet back into shape, checked there were no traces of his visit, left the door ajar as he'd found it and stepped back into the hall. Tonight could be quite interesting.

As he sat back down at his desk, trying to think of something constructive to do which didn't involve leaving the flat, using the phone or expending too much energy, his thoughts kept returning to the tantalizing snippets he'd read in Jem's diary, and he felt an overwhelming wave of intrigue and curiosity. What was all this about dreams and destiny? What else had she written about them? And more to the point, what else had she written about *him*? He couldn't quite explain it, but for some reason Ralph suddenly had the feeling that life was about to become very complicated.

CHAPTER FOUR

It seemed to Siobhan that her body was just one big hair-sprouting machine. She'd expected to wrinkle as she aged, she'd expected her hair to lose its pigment, her skin to lose its tautness, but she hadn't been expecting the slow but insistent arrival of so much bloody body hair.

Starting from the bottom up, she had developed little lawns of mousy hair on the fleshy bits on her big toes. Then of course there were the legs, but she'd always had hair there — that was socially acceptable. Even supermodels had hairy legs, and there were aisles full of products in Boots that you could buy without shame or embarrassment.

It was what happened at the top of her legs that bothered Siobhan the most, the dense jungle of coarse hair that seemed more and more intent as the years went by to find its way out of her underwear and join the party taking place on her thighs and creep up her stomach in a thin arrow pointing to her belly button. The line looked particularly unpleasant in the winter, standing out starkly against the now-spongey white expanse of her stomach.

But it didn't stop there. She had noticed lately, among the pale soft down that slept between her breasts, a few renegade

hairs growing longer, darker and thicker than the rest. Why?
And nipple hair, spidery legs forcing

their way through the otherwise unblemished surface of her breasts to spoil the aesthetics and make her feel ugly. Hair on her upper lip, too, that made her self-conscious when people stood too close to her, and even the odd whisker growing quietly but determinedly from cheeks and chin.

The soul-destroying, time-consuming rituals to rid herself of so much unwanted hair were almost daily now. Bleach for her moustache, a razor for her legs and under her arms, rancid-smelling cream for her pubic hair, and tweezers for her toes, nipples, chin and eyebrows. Did men have even the vaguest idea how much work went into women keeping themselves smooth and childlike, into removing anything from their bodies that might even begin to be described as masculine? Would men themselves be prepared to do it if fashion and society had decreed that they, too, should be alabaster-smooth?

And how come in other countries it was acceptable? How come a million Italian women could walk shamelessly and proudly along beaches every year, a veritable bearskin of black hair cascading from their bikinis and lush pelts of foliage dangling from their armpits? How come in France they had a special and affectionate word to describe the female moustache, yet an English woman would be embarrassed to walk down the street with more than a quarter-millimetre of stubble on her legs in case she were branded a dyke?

How high would it be, if she were to pile up the last ten years' worth of hateful hair? It was all so thankless. Like housework. From the very second it was done it was getting worse again, closer to needing to be done again. Hair was so insidiously persistent and never

ending — it just grew and grew and grew, relentlessly. It never went on holiday or had a day off and it didn't care how fond you were of a particular part of your anatomy, it just decided to grow there anyway, like weeds on a smooth stone wall.

Siobhan had once tried to cultivate an interest in gardening, thinking herself the type, but it had quickly become clear to

her that it was just like housework and unwanted hair — frustrating and for ever. Hair, weeds and dust — Siobhan hated them.

She was doing something that she seemed to spend more and more of her time doing lately — hating her body. Not only was she getting hairier by the day but she was also getting fatter, and it was now no longer a case of having put on a few pounds and her clothes being a bit tight — she had reached a size that meant people who didn't know her might refer to her as the 'fat woman'. Most of her clothes now hung redundant in her wardrobe, while she lived in the same pair of leggings and a small selection of shapeless tunic tops and jumpers. If she bought anything new it would mean having to go to shops she'd never been to before and buying clothes in sizes that screamed to the world 'I am fat.'

Karl never said anything about it - and it remained unspoken. He still touched her and stroked her and hugged her, still held her hand in public and told her he loved her. He'd never really been a compliment man anyway. Siobhan wondered what he really thought. She certainly didn't undress in front of him now or walk around the flat naked, and their habit of taking baths together had petered out unnoticed and, again, unremarked upon. She could always ask him straight out

like other women would, 'Karl, do you think I've got fat?', but she knew that he wouldn't lie like other men would, he was the most honest man she'd ever known, and he would say, 'Yes, Shuv, you have,' and then where would the conversation go? What would happen next? It might emerge that he found her repulsive, that he hated her for letting herself go, for not loving him enough any more to care what she looked like.

The truth was that Karl didn't find her repulsive. He actually quite liked the shape of Siobhan's body now. She'd always been a bit out of proportion, with skinny legs, a too-wide back and a flat bottom, and now she was more balanced, her breasts looking less incongruous, her bottom more rounded and feminine. She felt nice, especially in the dark, firm and ripe and plump, her arms solid and corpulent, her thighs smooth and soft. It was almost as if the extra layers of fat had

given her body a new lease of life, put the bounce back into her thirty-six-year-old skin - she felt like a chubby young schoolgirl, and Karl had never slept with a chubby young schoolgirl, even when he was a chubby young schoolboy.

Siobhan still had the most beautiful hair he'd ever seen, thick swags of summer corn down to her waist, always shiny and clean and smelling of good things. So much of the early romance and attraction in their relationship had revolved around her magnificent hair. He would see it everywhere he went around campus, either swinging freely to her waist, catching the light even on a cloudy day, or tantalizingly folded and pinned up like lustrous puckered gold. That hair tormented his soul for six months. His heart would miss a beat and then pump uncontrollably whenever he saw it; it was

like a deafening siren signifying the faint possibility that he might have to walk past Siobhan and display his blush, his desire, his embarrassment. He fantasized about removing those tortoiseshell combs and clips, seeing her hair spread thickly like freshly churned butter over his pillowcase, or spilling over the back of the passenger seat of his 2CV. He wanted to wash it for her, comb and look after it for her, almost like it was a pet, an animate part of her — something living and breathing that encapsulated everything he wanted in a woman and everything that was wonderful about Siobhan.

Siobhan had been unaware of any of this. As far as she was concerned, Karl was the good-looking Student Union guy, the one with the Russian name and the Irish accent, the one she saw pinning posters up on noticeboards, the one who seemed to know everyone on campus, the one with the 2C V and the rockabilly quiff, and the one who had been quite conspicuously going out with Angel, a bleached-blonde, gamine-cropped, baby-faced wet dream of a girl from the first year, since for ever. Siobhan found him charming and attractive, loved his Irish accent, his sunny disposition, his well-formed bottom but, as far as she was concerned, there was a certain level of inevitability when a couple were as attractive and popular as Angel and Karl, and it was hard to imagine them enjoying anything less than a flawless, companionable and highly sexually charged relationship. She

imagined the two of them sometimes, legs entwined on sun-drenched pure-white sheets, biting and digging their fingernails into each other, or laughing together in a pub with friends, their chemistry overwhelming and infectious. She smiled at him from

time to time, and he smiled back, but that was as far as she imagined it would ever go.

Siobhan's hopes and her heart were hydraulically lifted one day by a conversation with a friend who was on the Student Union with Karl.

'She's a little cow,' he said, unprompted, of Angel.

Zing! Hope Alert!

'Really? I always presumed she'd be nice, you know, going out with Karl and everything. They seem like a perfect couple.'

'The man has the patience of a saint. I don't know how he puts up with her, I really don't. They row nonstop, and she gives him such a hard time. Karl's a great bloke, he could do much better than her, and between you and me, I don't think it's going to last much longer anyway. I reckon she's seeing someone else -but I didn't tell you that.' He tapped the side of his nose and winked at her.

Siobhan didn't need to hear anything else. The passing smiles turned into passing chats, which evolved into long, animated lunches in the park when Angel was in lectures. And, when Karl told her one night after they'd officially been going out together for six weeks that their mutual friend had been so sick of Angel and so tired of hearing Karl going on and on about Siobhan that he'd taken it upon himself to set the wheels of romance in forward motion, it had filled Siobhan with such a deep glow of warmth that she hadn't needed to wear her coat home.

Her hair had lived up to his expectations, and even up until a few months ago when they stopped sharing baths, he had shampooed it for her occasionally, gently and meticulously, marvelling at its quality and length

and the fact that it was in his hands and he was allowed to touch it whenever he wanted.

Some men were breast men, some were leg men and some were bottom men. Karl was a hair man. It was hair that turned his head and made mincemeat of his senses.

Cheri had lovely hair too - not impressive, imposing hair like Siobhan's, but it was silky and long and a pretty shade of vanilla. He'd noticed her hair before he'd noticed her, last summer; it shone with streaks of sunshine-bleached blonde. It hadn't been too long before he'd also noticed her long brown legs dangling from tiny summer dresses and short cotton skirts, her elegant shoulders, tanned and angular, and her finely featured face with those wonderful cheekbones and perfect teeth.

He admired Cheri's hair now, in an aesthetic, casual sort of way, over the top of his *Evening Standard*, as he sat behind a large window in a Covent Garden dance studio and watched her in a crop top and Lycra knickers high-kicking her way through the last five minutes of her Acid Jazz class.

While Siobhan sat naked on the side of the bath ruefully grabbing handfuls of wretched, hateful flesh, three miles across town Karl stood up, folded his paper, greeted Cheri with a kiss and a stroke of her firm, neat buttocks and took her out for lunch to her favourite Modern European restaurant.

CHAPTER FIVE

It was just starting to get dark as Jem walked from her office in Leicester Square to Gerrard Street to buy ingredients for the moving-in meal she had promised to cook for Smith and Ralph. She'd been living with them for just over a week now and she still knew absolutely nothing about them. She'd been out a lot and spent the rest of the time in her room, giving them their space, but now it was time to make friends.

On the day she'd moved in they had chivalrously although unenthusiastically helped her transport her boxed and bagged belongings from her dirty, French-mustard-coloured Austin Allegro to her room, the three of them processing quietly and industriously up and down the concrete steps like some .sort of modern day chain-gang. They had then left her to her own

devices for the remainder of the evening while she unpacked in the now somewhat cramped confines of her tiny room, popping their heads around the door every now and then, proffering tea and coffee and asking her politely how it was going.

Funny, this modern day thing of sharing homes with strangers, Jem had thought. Strangers had always lived together, of course - domestic staff and their employers, lodgers and their landlords — but not like today. Today people were expected to share an equal footing in their homes with strangers; there was no hierarchy. You

watched the same television in the same living room, you used the same toilet and bath, shared the fridge, cooked on the same cooker and had some sort of obligation to treat this new person in your home as a friend, not an employee, not a lodger. Jem had moved around a lot from flatshare to flatshare and always found the first few nights strange and lonely. She had felt Smith and Ralph's awkwardness as they tried to go about their normal business but she knew that they didn't feel as relaxed as they would usually as they watched the Australian Grand Prix or Topless Darts. Even though she wasn't in the room with them, the fact that there was a third person in their home had thrown the dynamics of their nightly routines slightly out of kilter.

She thought about them now as she crossed over Lisle Street and remembered with a thrill that one of these two awkward but seemingly likeable men might be her destiny. It sounded daft, she was well aware of that, but fate had always made itself very plain to Jem and she had learned to trust in it unquestioningly. The only cloudy issue that fate had left her to deal with this time (and it was a very cloudy issue indeed) was which of the two men it was. Since it wasn't about to hit her between the eyes, she'd spent the last week looking for signs.

She couldn't go on looks, although they were both good-looking men, in very different ways. Smith had the public-school, floppy-haired, well-structured sort of look that she would have swooned over when she was eighteen. He was tall and nicely but unathletically built, with soft brown eyes, handfuls of thick niinky hair and a fine nose with the most

perfect nostrils. But he was a bit ‘grown up’ for her tastes, a bit too mannered, a bit restrained, too much the gentleman. She got the

impression he’d be taken aback if she ordered a pint in the pub and that his idea of romance would involve long-stemmed roses and surprise trips to the theatre -yuck. She liked her men quite rough and ready, men who didn’t treat women like ‘ladies’.

Jem sorted through a box of shiny red and green chillies, long, thin and beautifully misshapen, feeling for firmness, while she contemplated her destiny. She placed the chosen ones into a clear plastic bag torn with some effort from one of those useless bag-dispensing contraptions and moved her pale hands to a box of baby aubergines, small and apply-green with waxy skin.

Jem found this sort of shopping therapeutic. A packet of M&S picked, peeled, topped and tailed, polished and prepacked vegetables just couldn’t compare. How much nicer to wade with your hands through boxes of colourful and-excitingly exotic produce, fresh from Thailand, China, India that morning, the scent of distant sunshine still clinging to their skins.

Ralph was probably more what she would have called ‘her type’. He had the lean, slightly undernourished look that she liked, emphasized by his shorn hair and too-large clothes. His face was sharp but the angles were well-defined and his round blue eyes were set inscrutably deep into his face, giving him a streetwise but somehow sweet look. And he had one of those wonderful lazy, lop-sided smiles that started on one side of his face before the other side caught up. Sexy. He had the traces of a South London accent, which she loved, and he would *definitely* not expect her to drink dry white wine when they went to the pub or be impressed by expensive meals for two in trendy restaurants.

She reached the butcher’s counter.

‘Hello, Jem!’ The butcher smiled widely as she approached. He was wrapping a large slab of pork belly for the elderly Chinese customer in front of her. ‘What’ll it be today?’ he

asked in a soft Mancunian accent. She'd always wanted to ask him how he'd ended up being the only English person working in a Chinatown supermarket.

'Hello, Pete.'

She surveyed the trays of ducks' feet and pigs' ears, the yards of shiny lilac intestines, the hunks of glistening white fat and rows of pink trotters.

'Til have a pound of chicken breast, please, with the skins off.'

'What are you cooking tonight, then?' he asked. He always wanted to know what she was cooking.

'Oh, just a Thai Green Curry.'

'Making your own paste, are you?'

'Of course,' she smiled. 'Don't I always?'

'Thin slices?'

'Yes, please.'

'Who's the lucky dinner-guest tonight then?' he asked, deftly slicing through the pink meat with a lethal-looking knife.

'New flatmates — I'm trying to make a good impression.'

Jem took the chicken and put it in her basket. Who knows where the chickens from which these breasts had been wrenched came from? There was no handy label explaining their origin, no soft white-paper duvet for the breasts to rest on as they travelled from supermarket shelf to the purchaser's fridge. They were anonymous, and Jem felt that bit more adventurous for choosing them from among the gory remnants which other supermarkets would never put on view.

The shop was crowded, full of Chinese locals buying food for supper, of souschefs from Chinatown restaurants picking up an extra sack of rice or two for the evening rush, of tourists just looking, and amateurs. Amateurs were people who liked the atmosphere but didn't know what to buy, and their baskets invariably held a couple of packets of twenty-five-pence instant noodles, a jar of oyster sauce and a can of something preposterous like Squid in Malaysian Curry Sauce that Jem

knew would end up in the bin because it stood to reason that squid in a can would be disgusting. Jem always felt a rather nasty sense of superiority as her basket went through the check-out in front of an amateur, feeling proud of her bunches of fragrant fresh coriander, packets of glossy green lime leaves, cans of creamy coconut milk, spindly sprays of lemongrass and hairy bunches of rose-pink shallots.

She looped her carrier bags over her wrists and headed for Shaftesbury Avenue. The sky was darkening to a deep plummy shade of black and the streets of Soho were assuming the night-time air of temptation and provocation that always excited her. She glimpsed the animated faces of couples over pints in pub windows, absorbed and stimulated even on a Monday night by the conversation and facial expressions of their obviously new-found love, and she felt lonely for a moment, until she remembered where she was going and the romantic potential that lay ahead.

Smith couldn't tell whether Jem was a wine girl or a beer girl so he picked up both. Maybe she didn't drink at all — he grabbed a bottle of Perrier. He was in the vintner's around the corner from his office in Liverpool

Street. 'Vintner's.' The City was just as pretentious as the West End in some ways, with its fake antiquity and overblown traditions. What was wrong with calling it an off-licence, for Christ's sake?

He took his purchases to the recently distressed mahogany counter and a traditional shopkeeper wearing a deep-green cotton apron and steel-framed glasses zapped them through the till with an olde-worlde barcode gun. Smith realized he was in a bad mood. He almost threw his card at the unfortunate vintner and bristled with unnecessary impatience as he rolled the bottles in tissue paper and put them into a bag. The copper bell on a spring which rang as he closed the door behind him irritated him.

He walked across Finsbury Circus noticing how cold it was and thinking how it had seemed like only days ago that he had sat here basking in his shirtsleeves watching old farts playing

bowls in his lunch hour. He was always much happier in the summer.

He wished that Jem wasn't cooking tonight. He really wasn't in the mood to be pleasant and interested and conversational, he just wanted to sit in front of the television and have a big fat spliff and a lager and not talk to anyone. He was aware that this was exactly why he had decided that a flatmate would be a good idea in the first place, but just not tonight, that's all. Tomorrow night would be fine. The presentation would be finished by then, James would be off his back and he would probably have bought a bottle of champagne and a bunch of flowers to celebrate, and Jem would have been impressed by how friendly he was, how amusing and how sincere in his appreciation of the great effort she had made to cook them this meal. Just not tonight.

Smith arranged his briefcase and bag in one hand to grab the escalator rail with his other as he descended into Liverpool Street station. He took large confident strides and fumed as someone in front of him, a tourist who obviously had absolutely no understanding of escalator etiquette on the Underground, came to a halt.

'Excuse me, please,' he muttered huffily. The tourist turned and shuffled into the space to the right good-naturedly, apologizing with a smile. Smith felt guilty for a second, thinking of the times he had been a tourist himself.

He sweated on the Circle line, feeling irritated by every other person in the carriage with him — they were too smelly, too noisy, too close, too tall, too fat, holding too much newspaper or just offensively unattractive. Smith had fantasies about embedding pickaxes into their skulls.

He wondered what he and Ralph and Jem were going to talk about that evening over supper. As he thought about it, it occurred to him how little he knew about Jem. He'd avoided talking to her whenever possible and didn't even know how old she was, whereabouts in London she worked, whether or not she had a boyfriend - for some reason he found himself hoping that she didn't — all he knew was that she had a name nearly as silly as his, she liked honey in her tea, she drove a

horrible Austin Allegro and she was really quite attractive. Not a Cheri, of course, not a magnificent specimen of well-toned, shiny, angelic goldenness like Cheri. But she was approachably pretty, small and sexy and sort of fluffy, like a proper girl. She had a sweet, unthreatening voice and she never wore trousers -

Smith respected that in a woman. But for some reason, he had no idea why, she made him feel uncomfortable.

The doors of the Tube train opened at Sloane Square and Smith tumbled out of the carriage gratefully, glad to breathe in the fresh, crisp night air. When he'd first bought the flat in Battersea, eight years ago, Smith had got a real kick out of alighting at Sloane Square. After all, the plebs waiting for friends and dates outside the station weren't to know that he didn't live in SW3, as he breezed past them swinging his briefcase confidently down the King's Road. He couldn't give a toss now what anyone thought. He was way past that sort of immature posing and knew that nobody waiting outside the station even noticed him, let alone gave a shit about where he lived.

The flower stand outside the station caught his attention - it looked brave and colourful against the now almost leafless, grey October backdrop of Sloane Square and he decided that he would buy some flowers for Jem after all. She was paying for dinner and he didn't suppose she had much money. He selected three fat posies of peonies, bright and unpretentious — he didn't want it to look like a come-on.

The act of buying the flowers seemed to trigger a calming chemical in his brain and he felt his mood improve as he boarded the bus, flashed his pass at the driver and took his usual seat at the back.

As the bus passed over Battersea Bridge and filled with the glow of the pomegranate sunset filtering through the birthday-cake lights of Albert Bridge, Smith felt a small rush of euphoria. He allowed himself a little smile, and began to look forward to the novelty of a home-cooked meal and a conversation with a pretty girl.

CHAPTER SIX

As usual, Siobhan had eaten by the time Karl got home after his Ceroc class. Siobhan had gone with him when he first started teaching. She would don one of her old fifties dresses bought from Kensington Market and fill it out with frothy petticoats, slide on some ruby-red lipstick and black eyeliner, put her hair up in a pony-tail, and the two of them would get into the black Embassy and drive down to the Sol y Sombra feeling like Natalie Wood and James Dean. But when they got Rosanne she felt guilty about leaving her on her own five nights a week and had gradually stopped going. And these days she wouldn't be able to fit into any of her old dresses anyway.

Now she would watch Karl as he slicked Black and White gel through his black curls and slid into his peg trousers and genuine Hawaiian shirt, looking, apart from a little less hair along his hair-line, exactly as he'd looked fifteen years ago. He was a brilliant dancer and an even better teacher; some of his ex-pupils had gone on to teach their own classes. He was always much in demand at weddings and parties because he made women look and feel as if they could dance.

'Has someone else moved in downstairs?' he asked, unlacing his worn but shiny brogues. 'There was a girl in the kitchen just now when I walked past, cooking.'

'Was she small and dark?'

'Tes.'

'I've seen her coming in and out all week. She must be a new flatmate or something.'

Karl wandered into the kitchen and put his arms around Siobhan's substantial waist and his chin on her shoulder. She reached back to ruffle his hair and realized, too late, that it was Ceroc night.

'Eugh, I've got Black and White all over my hands. Yuck!' She made a dash for the tap. Karl slapped her bottom gently.

As he left the room, the smile disappeared from his face. He sat down on the sofa, and put his head in his hands. He could hear Siobhan next door, singing softly as she washed her hands. Her voice was gentle and melodic. She sounded like a

little girl, an innocent little girl. He wanted to cry. He wished he was on his own so that he could sob and sob until his heart broke. He had been robbed, robbed of his baby. It had been taken away from him without his permission, without his knowledge.

Just one floor away, in the flat upstairs, his baby had been growing and breathing and sleeping in Cheri's womb, a mass of cells the size of a fingernail, with eyes and feet and thumbs, carrying in it the strands of his DNA, of his black curly hair and his bad temper in the mornings and his funny big toes, and she'd killed it without even thinking to mention it to him.

The fact that she'd ended their affair today, casually, over pan-fried scallops with lime juice and fresh coriander, meant nothing. *Cheri* meant nothing to him, except hair and sex and a dancing partner. But she'd killed his baby and she really didn't seem to care. He'd looked at her cold and untroubled face — she'd seemed more

concerned with the texture of her scallops than the murder she'd committed - and he'd hated her, really, really hated her.

'One in three pregnancies ends in miscarriage, you know, it's not such a big deal. It could have just died anyway and you'd never have known, neither of us would ever have known,' she'd explained wearily, as if she had to explain away an abortion to some distraught, cheated-out-of-fatherhood ex-lover every lunchtime. 'And what would you have said to Siobhan anyway? "Oh, darling, you know that girl who lives upstairs, that one you don't like, well, I've been fucking her and guess what? Marvellous news, she's pregnant." Yes, I'm sure dear, fat, barren Shuv would have been *very* pleased for you.' She'd arched her perfect eyebrows impatiently and turned to inform a passing waiter that her scallops were too tough, and would he mind bringing her a linguine with chilli and clams?

Karl had no idea what he would have said to Siobhan had circumstances been otherwise; practicalities were not prevalent in his helter-skelter thought processes — all he could think about was the fact that his chance had gone. His baby had been in a womb. Suppose he and Siobhan had been so desperate for

a child that they'd gone to a surrogate mother — it would still have been his sperm, another woman's egg, another woman's womb — what was the difference? He had about as much feeling for Cheri as a plastic syringe would have.

As he sat listening to Siobhan preparing his dinner in the next room, remembering the pain on her face when she'd been told at the age of twenty-one that she was infertile, that she'd never be able to have a baby,

he vowed he'd have his revenge. He wasn't sure how he'd do it, but when the opportunity arose, he would make Cheri feel bad, as bad as he felt now.

Smith hadn't known whether to laugh or cry all day. He'd had two hours' sleep, eight cans of lager and two tequilas the night before and now it was Tuesday and he only had another couple of hours to complete the presentation that his financial PR company was putting together for one of the largest banks in the country. The office was in a state of complete panic and James was being more painful than Smith could have ever thought possible. He was usually an unruffled, dignified sort of a chap, who prided himself on his elegance, but when the heat was on, the loose brush of silvery hair that usually covered his balding skull stood upright, his silk tie refused to sit in a neat vertical line and small wet patches appeared under the arms of his Jermyn Street shirt.

His face was florid now, and he was shouting at Diana to 'Open some fucking windows in here! It smells like a Bedouin fucking-tent.' Diana, who hated working and was waiting for her pink-faced jellybaby of a boyfriend to propose and allow her to live the life of leisure she felt she deserved, had reached breaking-point half an hour ago and was about to cry.

Smith moved back to his desk and looked at his screen. He'd written one line of the proposal so far, 'Quirk & Quirk is one of the City's longest established PR houses with a reputation for ...', and it sat on the screen now, reminding him vindictively of his hungover state, mocking him for being so irresponsible, daring him, challenging him to write another line without thinking about last night.

Smith felt his bowels begin to move. He picked up a copy of *PR Week*, and checking that James wasn't watching his every move, as he tended to do when he was in a panic, he walked towards the toilets.

Sitting in the shiny white cubicle staring blankly at the magazine on his lap, his reflections on the previous evening persisted. What a night, what a completely unexpected night. And what a mess. He put his face into his hands and smoothed back his thick hair with his palms, enjoying the feeling of the skin on his face stretching taut.

What was he supposed to do now? It was all going to be so horribly embarrassing. Smith just wasn't used to women coming on to him. In the days before Cheri, before he'd given up on women, it had always been up to him, he'd always made the running. Jem had really taken him by surprise last night, and he'd been too drunk to think about what he was doing. He felt guilty now, almost like he'd been unfaithful to Cheri. He'd saved himself for five years, five whole years, and now he'd blown it — just like that. It was all very flattering, the first time in years his ego had received a massage. And it had been enjoyable, *extremely* enjoyable. But he really shouldn't let it go any further. He hoped to God that Jem regretted it as much as he did. Maybe she would prefer to forget about it too. And if not? He'd have to tell her, tonight, tell her it was all a dreadful mistake. Then what? Shit. The atmosphere would be terrible. She'd move out and he'd have to find another flatmate. What was he supposed to say to her? What the hell were they going to do? And why the fuck hadn't he thought about this at the time?

He stared dismally at his reflection in the mirror above the sink. He looked appalling. He felt appalling. He had to write that proposal. He felt like storming into James's office, slamming his fists on the desk and saying, 'I'm sorry, James, but I have a life, and I don't give a shit about Quirk & Quirk's long-established reputation. Write it yourself, you manic old bastard — I'm going home.' But he wouldn't, of course. He took a deep breath and walked back into the claustrophobic mayhem of the office. James was frantically pressing buttons on the fax machine.

‘Diana, Diana, what the hell is the matter with this stupid machine?’ he was muttering, his upright hair making him look like some kind of ageing budgerigar.

‘Have you pressed Send, Mr Quirk?’ she asked with weary impatience.

‘Of course, I pressed Send. Look, can someone else please do this, I really don’t have the time.’

Diana made a face at James’s retreating back and headed towards the fax machine. She noticed that Smith was back.

‘Someone called for you while you were out, a girl. There’s a message on your desk.’ She raised her eyebrows.

Smith peeled the yellow note from his computer screen. ‘*Gem called - thanks for last night and fancy going for a drink tonight? Please call back.*’ His heart lurched in his chest, and he felt a hot flush rise up from his neck.

Oh, shit. Now what?

CHAPTER SEVEN

‘Morning, Stella.’ Jem was exhausted and hungover and could feel the bags beneath her eyes pulling at her eyelids.

‘Morning, Jem, you look well today. Is that a new lipstick you’re wearing? It suits you.’

Thanks, Stella.’

Ridiculous. Jem knew she looked like shit. Jem and Stella had been working together at the theatrical agency for over three years now, and every single morning without fail Stella would furnish Jem with a compliment and every single morning it would be one that she had never heard before. Taking account of holidays, Jem had calculated that five compliments a week equalled two hundred and forty compliments a year and a grand total of seven hundred and twenty compliments in all, all of them different.

‘How did it go last night?’ Stella enquired, in her usual ingratiating manner. She was hovering over Jem’s desk with that desperate look on her face, like she’d been waiting since six o’clock that morning for Jem to get into work so she could ask her just that question.

Stella was thirty-three years old, six foot two, and still a virgin. She had hair the colour of yellowing newspaper, the remains of a perm at the ends, which never seemed to grow or change. She wore the same pale-blue eyeliner every day, which only succeeded in making her round

eyes look even more damp and watery than they were. *As far as* Jem could tell she had no life whatsoever, and chewed gratefully on whatever scraps of Jem's not particularly exciting life she chose to throw her. 'How did your sister's eye test go?' she'd ask concernedly. 'How's your friend Lily getting on with her new boyfriend?' (She'd never met Lily.) 'What colour wallpaper did your mother choose in the end?' (She didn't know Jem's mother.) 'Oh, the duck-egg ... lovely.'

Jem wished she could say she was fond of Stella, that she had a soft spot for her, that she'd miss her if she wasn't around, but it wasn't true. She was a huge galumphing giant of a pain in the arse, and on a morning like this morning, with a thumping dehydrated headache and a lot on her mind, she found it took all the patience and civility she could muster to form even the curtest of replies.

'Oh, fine, fine. It went fine, thank you.' Jem smiled tightly and tried to look busy.

'Good,' trilled Stella, thrilled that Jem had had a Monday night good enough to be described as fine. 'Still enjoying the new flat?'

'Oh, yes, lovely - super. Very much, thank you.' Jem was running out of fake enthusiasm.

Stella's phone rang at that moment and Jem breathed a sigh of relief. She felt a small blush of coy embarrassment and excitement spread across her face and towards her chest as snapshot images of last night's events flashed unbidden through her mind. Smith had bought her peonies - he'd actually bought her peonies, her favourite flowers in the whole world. The minute he walked in and shyly handed them to her muttering, 'Just to say thanks for the meal,' she'd known without

the slightest doubt that it was *him*. She'd stood in the kitchen and looked at the two men last night, and it was

blindingly obvious in an instant. On one side was Smith looking handsomely careworn in a nice grey suit and a pale lilac shirt and tie, and on the other was Ralph wearing a foul baggy grey jumper that he appeared to wear every day and a most unbecoming pair of vaguely obscene-looking longjohns.

‘D’you need any help?’ Smith had asked, as Ralph wandered back into the living room and back on to the sofa to watch *EastEnders*. Smith - two; Ralph -nil.

Finally they sat down to eat. The entire flat was infused with the aroma of coconut, garlic and coriander and the almost heavenly scent of Thai fragrant rice. Ralph and Smith were in raptures.

‘This is the most delicious thing I have ever eaten in my whole life!’ declared Ralph.

‘Better than anything I’ve had in a restaurant,’ agreed Smith.

It had taken a few of cans of lager to lubricate the evening, after the seam of compliments on the quality of the food had run dry, and Jem had found herself doing most of the work to start with, asking the two men about themselves.

Smith worked in the City, she discovered, for a PR company dealing largely with financial institutions. He’d worked as a City dealer before that but had been in danger of burning himself out so had taken a fairly substantial cut in salary to change career. But, reading between the lines, he was still earning somewhere in the region of four times Jem’s modest salary. He’d lived in Almanac Road for eight years - he’d saved vast

amounts of money working in the City during the boom and living with his parents in Croydon after he left university and paid cash for the flat when Battersea was still relatively good value. Ralph had moved in shortly afterwards.

To her surprise she’d learned that Ralph was an artist. She had a cliched idea of what an artist looked like and it wasn’t Ralph. She’d been wondering what he did for a living and had noticed that he never seemed to leave the house. He hadn’t painted for a few months, he’d been doing sporadic freelance

graphic design on his Apple Mac, but it seemed that his income was chicken-feed, just enough to cover living expenses, beer, cigarettes and drugs and the odd cab. home. He seemed uncomfortable talking about his lack of direction and stalled career. He'd been the star of his year at the Royal College of Art, and his degree show had been met with much over-excitement from critics and buyers. He showed Jem a small book of press cuttings from the time, moody black-and-white photographs of 'the artist' accompanying glowing articles full of phrases like 'formidable talent', 'genius', 'exciting new star of his generation'. He'd had a few successful exhibitions, sold some paintings for what had felt at the time like extraordinary amounts of money and then everything had gone quiet. New 'exciting stars of their generation' had displaced him and for the last few years he'd been relegated to exhibiting his work in City wine bars and hotel foyers.

'I'd love to see some of your work,' Jem had said. 'Have you got any of it here?'

'Yeah, Ralph, I'd love to see some of your work too,' said Smith, turning to Jem. 'I've lived with this bloke for eight years and I've never seen anything he's done

at the studio. Not a Polaroid, nothing. Show her your degree-show book, Ralphie.'

Ralph grunted but loped off to find it.

He'd returned with a large hardback book which fell open easily to a double-page spread headed 'Ralph McLeary' and a picture entitled 'Dangerous Sands Shifting 1985.' Jem didn't understand or care much for modern art but the picture made an instantaneous impact, and she turned the page with interest, to 'Noxious Gases and Ultraviolet 1985' and a smaller picture entitled 'Violent Electrical Storms 1985'.

The paintings were abstract but rich in colour and although seemingly flat and one-dimensional, Jem felt surges of energy bursting from them.

'Ralph, these are great, really ...' She searched for a word that wouldn't sound ignorant, '... dramatic, energetic, scary

almost. And I don't usually like modern stuff. These are brilliant!'

'Thanks.' Ralph had looked pleased despite himself and closed the book. 'Anyway, you've had to ask enough questions tonight. Tell us about yourself.'

Jem always hated talking about herself, but she told them in as few words as possible about Smallhead Management, the theatrical agency where she'd worked for three years, how she'd recently been promoted from secretary to Junior Talent Manager and was learning the ropes from Jarvis Smallhead (they'd laughed at his name), the outrageously camp agency boss who had high hopes for her. She recounted the almost never-ending series of mini-dramas and crises she had to deal with every day involving a bizarre collection of aged luvies and prima donnas. She told them about the painful Stella and her obsession with Jem's life, about her eccen-

trie mother and her long-suffering father and her idyllic childhood growing up in a cottage in Devon. She explained that her name was short for Jemima and that before she moved into Almanac Road she'd been living with her sister Lulu in a vast, partially furnished flat off Queenstown Road. Lulu was moving her boyfriend in, and his three children from a previous marriage, and although she'd been welcome to stay, Jem had decided to move on.

They'd carried on chatting as Smith and Jem cleared the table (Smith - three; Ralph - nil), and the more Jem watched Smith the more she felt sure. He was definitely the quieter of the two, the more restrained. He sat straighter at the table, his table manners were more precise, his laugh more controlled than Ralph's, and there was something vulnerable about him that appealed to her, a certain sadness, a loneliness. Ralph was good fun and probably more similar to Jem in a lot of ways, but although Smith seemed more uptight, she felt a closeness to him.

Once she'd decided she knew it wouldn't take much to set the ball rolling, to lead Smith gently by the hand into a relationship. She just hadn't expected the ball to start rolling quite so soon, or quite so fast.

Ralph had got up from the table at about eleven, kissed Jem unsteadily on the hand, thanked her profusely for the meal, proclaimed it a milestone in his gastronomic life and gone to bed, leaving Jem and Smith alone.

Jem hadn't wasted any time. 'Do you believe in fate?' she'd asked, rolling a spliff on the pine surface of the kitchen table.

'What do you mean?'

'You know, everything happening for a reason, events and moments being preordained. Like me being here tonight. If I'd seen a double room I liked last week I wouldn't have come to see your room. I would be sitting in someone else's kitchen now, talking to someone completely different, and I wouldn't even know you and your lovely flat existed.' She paused briefly. 'Except, that's not quite true.' She stopped to search for a Tube ticket in her handbag to use for a roach. She wondered how much she could say to Smith.

Smith wondered what on earth she was going on about and wished he could focus on her a bit more clearly.

This is going to sound weird — do you promise you won't think I'm a nutcase?' she asked, tearing off a small piece of cardboard.

Smith reached for a bottle of tequila. 'Promise,' he said.

Well, ever since I was a teenager, I've had a recurring dream.'

'Ye-es,' Smith slid the shot glass in front of her. God, she really was cute.

'Just a really nice image of a tall house on a curved road with a basement and little trees outside. I'm walking down the road and I look into one of the flats and there's a man sitting on the sofa with his back to the window. He's smoking and talking to someone I can't see and he's smiling and happy and relaxed and I really, really want to go in. The flat looks warm and welcoming and I just have this very strong feeling I'm supposed to be living there - it doesn't feel right that I don't, that I have to walk past and never get to know the man inside, never be part of his life. And that's it, that's the dream. And

then, that night I came to see the flat, I just knew it was the same flat - I felt it. It was so familiar, so safe,

just the way it felt in the dream. And I looked down, just like in the dream, and I saw a man sitting on the sofa and talking to someone out of view.' She paused. 'Do you think I'm mad? Are you going to kick me out?' Jem laughed nervously.

Smith fought the smile that was twitching at the corners of his mouth. He didn't know where this weird conversation was going, but for some reason, he felt compelled to keep it going. He arranged his features into an expression of serious consideration. 'No, I don't think you're mad at all. I think that's really rather amazing.'

'But that's not all. I hope you don't think this is really heavy or anything ... Oh, I don't know whether to say this or not...'

Smith looked at her intently and rested his head on his hands. 'Please—go on. This is fascinating—I promise you.'

'Well, it's not just the flat. It's the man. I know in my dream that I'm supposed to be with the man on the sofa - he's my destiny. Do you realize what I'm saying?'

Smith had no idea what she was saying, but she was getting cuter and more attainable by the minute. All of a sudden he could imagine taking her face in his hands and kissing her sweet little red mouth, and then he thought about Cheri, imagined her upstairs now, while they spoke, elegantly tucked up between her ivory silk sheets (he'd never actually seen them, of course, but they had to be, didn't they?), her lithe, supple body encased in a tiny slip of satin and lace, her perfect head ever so slightly denting her pillow while she slept. He imagined her lace-clad chest rising gently up and down as she breathed, pictured her turning in her sleep,

stretching and writhing slightly, the slippery sheet sliding off her body for a second and revealing one long, brown perfectly formed leg. She would sigh as, she turned, a long, deep, sensual sigh, and then drift back into sleep ...

You do think I'm mad, don't you? Shit. I knew it. I knew I shouldn't have said anything.' Jem was staring at the floor and wringing her hands.

'What? No! No. God, I'm sorry — I was just thinking, that's all.' Smith smiled modestly and sincerely at her. He still wanted to kiss her, and all of a sudden it didn't seem like too much of a challenge. He lifted his shot glass and nodded towards hers.

'Cheers, then,' he said, watching her as they downed the repulsive liquid and grimaced.

Teek,' scowled Jem.

'Bleugh,' shuddered Smith.

They fell silent for a moment, looking into their glasses and glancing at each other every now and then, both waiting for something to happen.

'Smith,' said Jem eventually, 'I hope you don't think I'm being unbelievably forward, but - I've just had this overwhelming compulsion to hug you. What do you think?' She grinned nervously and put out her arms.

It had been a monumental hug, a coming-home hug. Jem had almost felt the energy flowing between them as she pushed her head into his chest and breathed him in deeply, his smell enveloping her in the same feeling of Tightness and safety and destiny as her dream, but better, because this was real.

Smith had gripped her tightly, unexpectedly enjoying the sensation of shared physicality; it had been so long, so bloody long since he'd had any kind of decent human

contact. He'd forgotten what it felt like to put your arms around another human being, without embarrassment, and share their warmth and their body. He'd always thought this moment would've happened to him and Cheri, but this was good, this was nice. Jem was nice. They had stood like that for what felt like hours, their arms around each other, Jem's head in Smith's chest, Smith's chin on her head, breathing deeply, sighing, allowing unspoken feelings to flow through them, a

silent communication between two people looking for entirely different things and finding them in exactly the same place.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Ralph could not believe it. He really could not believe it. It was beyond the pale, it defied belief, it was rude and.. .and.. .and.. .unbelievable. He could not believe it. The girl had only been here two minutes and already Smith was ... was ... fucking her. He was fucking her. He was fucking well fucking her. Unbelievable!

He could not understand how it had happened. One minute they'd all been sitting together having a nice chat and a laugh and breaking the ice very nicely, thank you, and they were all friends, all equals and then Ralph had taken himself off to bed and then - then what? What the hell had old Smithie said or done to that girl to get her into the sack so fucking quickly? Maybe she was some kind of nymphomaniac who moved from flat to flat shagging her flatmates - saved getting cabs home, he supposed. Jesus.

Ralph had lain in bed all morning with an aching full bladder, waiting for the other two to leave the flat so that he wouldn't have to bump into either one of them on his way to the bathroom. Smith was gone by eight o'clock and then Jem had got up and left at nine. He was standing over the bowl now, watching the colourless jet of piss escaping gratefully into the water below, and breathing a pleasurable sigh of relief.

Jem just didn't seem the type. A nice girl, a decent girl. He'd found her completely charming over dinner the

previous night and had been thinking how refreshing it was to meet a girl who was intelligent and funny and pretty, and drank lager from the can, and loved curry as much as he did, and who was a good talker as well as a good listener. He'd been delighted and flattered by her reaction when he'd shown her some of his paintings. He'd been overwhelmed by her culinary ability and her highly impressive capacity for searingly hot food. He'd been entranced by her stories about her family and the strange characters she worked with at the theatrical agency. He'd found her Italianate hand gestures and

scrunchy facial expressions beguiling and endearing. She wasn't like any of the girls he normally met. She was special.

So what was a lovely girl like Jem doing, leaping willy-nilly into bed with a prat like Smith? Ralph was intrigued. He was confused. And he was also a little jealous.

He headed for the kitchen and a pint glass of tap water, gulping greedily. It was a filthy day, just visible outside the kitchen window; the sky was uniform paper-flat white, and a fine drizzle was slowly moistening the bricks and concrete of South London, turning the crunchy leaves strewn messily around the streets into mulch. The combination of bad weather and bad hangover was rapidly making the journey through London to his draught-ridden, rat-infested studio in Cable Street seem unlikely.

Maybe all that stuff in her diary was rubbish and she'd wanted Smith from the first moment she saw him. Maybe something had happened between them that night when she'd come to see the flat and Ralph had been in his room. Maybe the air had been thick with

the scent of unbridled lust since Jem had moved in and Ralph just hadn't noticed, like some sad insensitive bastard. Maybe (Ralph hated to think it) maybe the dinner was only really intended for Smith, and they'd both been waiting all night for him to go to bed, giving each other looks across the table every time he'd opened his mouth to say something else, thinking Tuck off, Ralph, Fuck off, Ralph.' Ralph felt stupid.

For five years he'd had to listen to Smith droning on and on about that God-awful woman upstairs, that snotty, stuck-up bitch with the attitude problem from hell, who didn't have even the slightest awareness of Smith's existence. And now, the first time an eligible woman set foot in their flat and showed a little interest, he'd bedded her. Just like that. That really was the epitome of laziness.

The post landed on the doormat and Ralph padded down the hall. A cheque from the travel company—£540. Just enough to clear some of his overdraft so that he could start building it up again. Ralph could not remember the last time his account had been in credit. He put the cheque on the hall table - he'd make

a trip to the bank later in the day. He noticed that the door to Jem's room was ajar again. He remembered the tantalizing passage he'd read in her diary yesterday and, his resolve and sense of honour weakened yet more by curiosity, he pushed open the door and scanned the room for the book. Maybe there would be a clue in there, something to explain the extraordinary goings-on of last night.

The room was still in disarray. Jem's bed had been slept in, so she'd obviously managed to find her way out of Smith's bed at some point, the curtains were drawn and the weak light outside struggled through the thick

fabric, casting a pink glow over the room. Ralph reached for the light switch and the little glass star lit up. The diary sat with its predecessors under the table by the bed.

Ralph was caught off guard by his reflection in the wardrobe mirror - so, this is what he looked like, snooping in someone else's bedroom. He was wearing a pair of old grey longjohns and a baggy grey V-neck jumper, displaying a spray of dark chest hair and a silver chain he'd bought in Bangkok. His hair was short but dishevelled, receding into two gentle dips of baldness, which seemed to retreat at exactly the same rate of acceleration as the hairs on his chest, back and shoulders advanced. His blue eyes were looking a little dull this morning, as they always did when he'd been drinking. But, on the whole, not at all bad for a totally unfit, twenty-Marlboro-a-day, very nearly thirty-one-year-old man.

Ralph wasn't a vain man, just one who appreciated how lucky he was not to have to worry about being unattractive - life was difficult enough without being ugly as well. His image looked after itself; he didn't need to cultivate it. He never put on weight, and the muscles he'd developed during a summer spent labouring on a building site when he was twenty-two had somehow lasted him almost a decade. Losing his hair suited him, and hair care was just a matter of going to the same barber's he'd been frequenting since art school and asking for a number two. And girls always seemed to buy him clothes. Especially these PR fashion types who got discounts all over the place and half-price designer samples. The jumper he was wearing had been bought for him by Oriel, a beautiful but

tedious girl with an obsession with handbags and a small dog called

Valentino. He'd seen the same jumper in a shop a few weeks after they split up and had been shocked to see it sporting a price tag of £225. That hadn't stopped him wearing it at least five times a week without washing it; it was now peppered with small burns caused by hot rocks falling from spliffs, and smelt at close range like an ashtray full of curry which had been stuffed up someone's armpit for an hour during a heatwave.

Ralph turned away from the mirror. He wasn't used to studying himself— it wasn't unpleasant, just vaguely unsettling. He pushed open the dark wooden doors of the wardrobe.

The floor was lined with shoes, lots and lots of shoes, little tiny shoes. Some were flat and some had heels, but they all looked as if they had been worn; unlike the impulse buys that constituted the extravagant shoe collections of other girls, these were old friends.

Her clothes formed an eclectic kaleidoscope of rich browns and reds and greens, and floral prints on chiffon, velvet, suede and silk. They emitted a sweet odour, perfumed with subtle undertones of pubs, cooking oil, wood smoke and spicy food; an aromatic diary of her social life. Ralph pulled out a particularly pretty dress, ankle-length diaphanous georgette printed with small red roses, with thin straps and a stream of impossibly small buttons down the back. He could picture Jem in it, her black curls studded with flowers, her abundant bosom pushing upwards, running barefoot through the grounds of some imaginary grand house, a pink-cheeked Renaissance babe.

No no no no no *no* NO! Ralph stopped himself abruptly. He hadn't come in here to sniff Jem's clothes and form elaborate Mills and Boon-style fantasies about

her. He hadn't come in here to get a crush on her. Jem was not, was most definitely not, *not*, NOT, Ralph's *type*. No. Blonde, tall, whippet-chested, cool, arrogant, wine-drinking,

label-wearing, *Elle*-reading, ball-attending — that was Ralph's type.

Time to get down to business; time to find out what was going on here. Yesterday he'd been in the running, had been, in fact, ahead of the game; yesterday he'd been 'lean' and 'sexy' and 'more fun to be with'. Yesterday he had been the object of Jem's strange and mysterious dreams. Yesterday he'd been Jem's 'type'. One day later and he was a spare part.

All of a sudden he could see the future mapped out before him, and it wasn't pretty. Jem and Smith were going to become inseparable; he would have to spend hours listening to them having sex, sitting on his own in the armchair while they snuggled together on the sofa. They would decide to get married, and Smith would approach Ralph nervously after the engagement party to broach the subject of him moving out. He'd end up in a cardboard box (no one else would be as understanding about Ralph's sporadic rent-payment style), and he'd have one Tennents Super too many and be set on fire by hooligans while he lay unconscious in a doorway.

Why the hell had she gone for Smith? What had he, Ralph, done to put her off? Maybe it was all those smelly shits he'd done; she always seemed to walk into the toilet moments after he'd exited. Or it could be because he hadn't fussed around her, offering to help when she was cooking, like Smith had. She must have got a fair idea last night of how much money Smith earned - that was always attractive in a man. And Smith had bought her flowers as well, the smarmy bastard - that had to

be it. Girls liked flowers. God, if only he'd thought of that. Why Smith? Why not him? Why not him when she'd fancied him more to start with? What was wrong with him? Smith already had a flat and a great job and loads of money, he didn't need a girlfriend, too. And besides, he was in love with someone else. Ralph felt suddenly nauseous with rancid jealousy, rising to the surface of his soul like lumps of wet toilet paper in a blocked toilet bowl.

His pulse racing, his resolve and sense of honour now absent, Ralph sat down on Jem's bed and pulled the diary from

the top of the pile. He began to read from the beginning, from January 1996, when Jem had been somewhere else, non-existent, someone he was yet to meet. If Smith was going to go out with her and sleep with her, then *he* was going to get to know her.

Lunchtime came and went, and elsewhere people with jobs went out, shopped in Boots, ate sandwiches, bought the *Evening Standard*, walked around town in suits and shoes and coats. Ralph read.

By mid afternoon the people with jobs were on the phone, in meetings, making cups of coffee, flirting at the photocopier, immersed in the safety of office life. Ralph read on.

As the light died at five o'clock and the people with jobs rushed to meet deadlines, tidy their desks, switch off their computers and frank the mail, Ralph still read.

At six o'clock, or thereabouts, he closed the book, put it back under the table, ruffled the duvet, turned out the light and left the room. He sat at his desk, tapped a Marlboro out of its packet, lit it, smoked it and waited for Jem and Smith to get home.

CHAPTER NINE

'What's she doing here?' Siobhan asked, in a tone which she hoped sounded casual and light-hearted and didn't betray what she felt inside — insecure, jealous, nervous. She was just so bloody pretty and sort of fit looking, glowing with health and vitality; all the stuff that had waved goodbye to Siobhan years before. And she had such lovely hair.

It was Karl's leaving party at the Sol y Sombra, just a few drinks with his students, some of whom he'd been teaching for five years, to wish him luck in his glittering new career.

'She's one of my students, didn't I tell you?' Karl was drinking from a bottle of lager.

Definitely not. 'I don't think so. You might have, I don't remember.'

Cheri didn't really strike Siobhan as the Ceroc type, she seemed more aerobic, more of a sweating-at-the-gym sort of girl.

‘She’s very, very good actually. She was my partner for a while, after you stopped coming.’

‘Oh, really.’ A filthy flash of unaccustomed jealousy pierced her stomach. Brightly, brightly, keep smiling, Siobhan; don’t let him know you’re jealous.

‘You really don’t like her, do you?’ Karl asked unexpectedly.

‘Well, I mean, I don’t know her. She just doesn’t seem like a particularly nice girl, that’s all. Not really my¹ type. She doesn’t pass the Pub Test.’ Karl knew about Siobhan’s Pub Test; it was her way of ascertaining whether or not a girl was her type. She imagined being in a pub with the girl in question. If she could envisage sharing a couple of pints, a bag of crisps and some easy chat with her, she passed; if not, she was happily consigned to the not-my-sort-of girl pile.

‘Yeah, I don’t like her either.’

Brilliant! ‘Oh really, I thought you thought she was all right.’

‘No, you were right, Shuv. She’s a selfish cow. I didn’t even invite her tonight, one of the other girls did.’

‘So what don’t you like about her?’ Siobhan’s curiosity was aflame. She wasn’t used to Karl forming such forthright opinions about people, doing vindictive things like deliberately not inviting people to parties, calling people ‘selfish cows’.

‘I don’t know. I just agree with you, that’s all. There’s something about her I don’t like. I can’t put my finger on it.’ In fact, Karl was furious. He’d told the little bitch not to come tonight and she’d promised she wouldn’t.

‘Why would I want to come to some sad little drinks with all those sad little Ceroc people? Don’t worry. Bring your fat girlfriend — she’ll be safe, I promise you.’

And now here she was, dressed up to the nines in some skin-tight black cotton dress with a low-cut back, drinking lager from a glass and flirting with poor Joe Thomas, the permanently sweaty looking bank clerk with the Buddy Holly

glasses and too much Brylcreem, who looked as if he was about to die of entirely unconcealed excitement.

Karl couldn't remember who'd started this whole mess any more. Obviously he'd noticed Cheri—any man would notice Cheri. But then, life was full of women to be noticed; if you started doomed affairs with all of them you'd never get anywhere. Picking up women wasn't Karl's style. It must have been Cheri.

He'd bumped into her one day at the front door, struggling for her key. He'd just got back from a dance class, so he had on all his fifties gear, and she'd asked him if he'd been to a fancy-dress party. When he'd explained about Ceroc, she told him that she was a dancer, that she'd trained as a ballerina until she was twenty, that she loved rock 'n' roll, her father had taught her to jive as a child. So Karl had invited her along to the Sol y Sombra, and she'd come. In retrospect, knowing what sort of a girl she was, she'd probably been flirting like mad with him then, sending out frantic sexual signals that he - honestly — had been completely oblivious to.

It wasn't until the first time he danced with her that he felt anything beyond a purely aesthetic appreciation of her. She was quite simply the best dancing partner he'd ever had. Her classical training added beauty and grace to the most basic Ceroc moves and she felt like a hollow doll, light and effortless, feathery and feminine. Ceroc was a man-led dance, and she followed his moves almost telepathically, injecting just the right amount of energy and enthusiasm into her dancing, smiling all the time.

Karl had been blown away. So blown away, in fact, that he hadn't mentioned it to Siobhan when he got home that night — not because of guilt, but because he knew he would blush vivid red and Siobhan would ask him why, and then he'd blush even more vivid red, and it just wasn't worth sowing seeds of doubt in her mind

over nothing. So he hadn't said anything. He hadn't hidden it either, but Siobhan was obviously never looking out of the window when he and Cheri got back from class together, and

since there was no chance of Siobhan and Cheri forming any sort of neighbourly friendship, she had never known.

Which of course made it easier for Karl neatly to compartmentalize his life when the dancing partnership turned into something a little more carnal. Karl had been shocked rigid when Cheri had first kissed him. It was definitely a scenario that had been swirling pleasantly through his mind for a few weeks, but then, life is full of enjoyable imaginary scenarios, and it would be impossible to enact all of them.

‘Let me buy you a beer,’ she’d said one night. And then, when the beer was gone and it was time for them to go, ‘I really fancy another drink. Let me buy you a tequila.’ And then, when those were gone, ‘Let’s have another, go on.’ She’d had to persuade him, jolly him along, but he’d agreed in the end. After a third tequila they were laughing and relaxed, and Cheri had swivelled around towards him on her barstool, smooth brown legs conspicuously crossed, eyelids lowered, her body closing the gap between them and, before any embarrassment had a chance to creep in, she’d locked her eyes on his and kissed him. Gently at first, hoping that she wouldn’t have to do all the work, that he’d respond to the sensual brush of her lips and kiss her back. She’d looked at him again. ‘I love dancers,’ she’d said, her eyes moving from his lips back to his eyes and to his lips again. She’d grazed his lips, a little harder this time. ‘I especially love Irish dancers,’ she’d drawled, ‘with soft lips.’ He’d kissed her then, and Cheri felt a rush of triumph.

Their kisses had become longer and harder, and his tongue probed deeply into her mouth. He’d brought his chest up close to hers, gripped her back and emitted a small, slightly animal grunt. ‘Let’s go to the office,’ he’d groaned, searching his pockets for the key, and they’d stumbled into the small, stifling room, pungent with the smell of stale cigarette smoke and warm plastic at the end of a long, hot summer’s day.

Cheri had let her dress drop to the floor, a practised procedure, and smiled at the look on Karl’s face as he saw her for the first time, unwrapped, pert, smooth and naked. He’d been awkward, fumbling with his clothes, clearing a space,

never taking his eyes from her body. ‘God you’re beautiful,’ he’d said, rolling a condom on to his erect penis. It was all over in five minutes, hard, fast and uncomfortable. Karl was sweating profusely, his trousers still around his ankles, his quiff drooping and falling into his eyes. ‘Oh, Jeez,’ he kept saying as he came, ‘Oh, Jeez.’ And then he’d pulled up his trousers. ‘Shit, it’s hot in here,’ he’d said, and handed her her dress from where it lay on the floor. ‘I’m going to wash my hands.’

That should have been it really. They should have left it there. But, it seemed, as far as Cheri was concerned, it wasn’t over. It wasn’t over because, although she’d seduced him and aroused him and led him astray, he wasn’t grateful. And she wanted him to be grateful.

But he wasn’t. He never asked for more than Cheri offered him and took even that with an affronting lack of graciousness. She’d almost had to drag him up to her flat one weekend when he’d told her that Siobhan was away. She’d cleaned the flat from top to bottom, cooked a romantic meal, and Frank Sinatra, his favourite, wafted

alluringly from room to room. There were clean sheets, new underwear, flowers. But it hadn’t made any difference. It was longer and more comfortable and less sweaty, but it was still entirely perfunctory, and Karl had wolfed down his dinner afterwards and gone back to his flat to watch telly on his own.

For his part, Karl wasn’t sure why it had dragged on for so long. In a strange way which he couldn’t quite explain, he was scared of Cheri. Her emptiness and coldness frightened him, and he couldn’t help feeling that if he tried to extricate himself, he might pay dearly for it - Rosanne in a pot of boiling water sort of thing. She’d been so determined to have him, so determined to make him want her that he hadn’t dared go against her wishes. And if he was honest with himself, there’d been something strangely aphrodisiac about that intensity, about his fear — pathetically, it had turned him on.

He had truly believed that he would never, ever, in a month of forevers be unfaithful to Siobhan; it was more than unthinkable, it was ridiculous. And he certainly would never

have thought it possible that he'd end up having a torrid affair with a bimbo — which is all Cheri was, a blonde bimbo with legs up to here and lovely tits, who could dance like an angel.

He knew he was nothing special to Cheri, but then he didn't suppose that anyone would be anything special to Cheri. It was, had been, purely and simply, fucking as an extension of dancing, a natural conclusion in a way to a traditionally sexual art form. They danced so well together that it stood to reason they would fuck well together.

It had been much easier than Karl could have imagined, lying to Siobhan, facing her fresh from the Sol y

Sombra, coital sweat still drying on the back of his neck, the tang of rubber still perceptible in his boxer shorts. Funny how he didn't blush now, now that he actually had something to feel guilty about. He'd spent his entire life blushing at inopportune moments, his face reddening for no reason whatsoever, and now, he could walk into his flat, face his faithful and trusting girlfriend of fifteen years, his dick smeared with the vaginal secretions of the blonde bimbo from upstairs, and remain perfectly alabaster white. Ironic.

It hadn't occurred to him that girls like Cheri got pregnant. She was just so utterly soulless, so cold, so vacant and devoid of emotion, so different to how he expected a real woman to be that he hadn't thought for a moment that she even possessed a womb. Cheri was a dancer, a looker, not a mother. The thought of a baby suckling at those perfect rose-coloured nipples was ludicrous, the idea of Cheri pushing a pram, of Cheri changing a nappy, was laughable.

Siobhan was what Karl imagined a mother to be like. Siobhan was real, she was alive, she had a heart so big she could have mothered the entire country and still had room for the rest of the world. Karl had never been loved by anyone the way he'd been loved by Siobhan, such clean, easy, honest love, not the possessive, clingy insecure love so many people mistook for the real thing. She had never tried to change him, to alter him in any way. She loved him just the way he was, and Karl didn't think you could ask for much more than that.

Except, for some reason, passionate sex with unsuitable, unpleasant women.

Karl was feeling incredibly uncomfortable now, with Cheri and Siobhan in the same room. And Cheri had a

look about her, like she was here for a reason, had a hidden agenda. She turned away from Joe Thomas for a moment and caught Karl's eye - she smiled widely at him and, to Joe's obvious disappointment, started to make her way over towards Karl and Siobhan.

'Hi!' she beamed, 'Hi! It's Siobhan, isn't it? I haven't seen you around for ages. Haven't you been getting out much lately?' she held out her tanned hand for Siobhan to shake. Karl felt sick as the two women's flesh touched. 'I'm going to miss your boyfriend so much.'

'Oh, really?' Siobhan replied amiably.

'Yes, Tuesday nights will never be the same again,' she said, looking at Karl.

Karl found himself almost glued to the spot, his bottle of lager frozen half-way between his mouth and the table, watching the scene unfold before his eyes.

'You must be so proud. When do you go on the air, Karl?'

He collected himself, conscious of a small stream of sweat wriggling down his temples. 'Erm, Monday week, isn't it, Shuv?' he said, handing the conversation back to the women.

'Yes, that's right. He's at the station all next week, though, to learn the ropes, you know, learning how to put those jingle cartridges in the jingle machine, all that technical stuff,' Siobhan replied with a little laugh.

'Well, Karl, good luck and everything. I'd have to have stopped coming to the lessons anyway soon. Look' - she held out her left hand, palm down—I'm getting married.'

'Oh, what a beautiful ring.' Siobhan held Cheri's fingertips gently in hers while she examined it, turning it to catch the light.

'Yes, it belonged to my fiance's mother. She was one of the most beautiful women you've ever seen.'

Your fiance - is that the tall guy with the blond hair?' Siobhan asked.

'Oh, no, that's Martin. Oh, God, I wouldn't marry him. No, it's Giles. I've known him since I was nineteen. He's very wealthy, very important in the City. He's got a house in Wiltshire and one in Australia and a flat in Docklands.'

'Where will you live? Are you going to move out of Almanac Road?'

'No, I think I'll keep it as *a pied-d-terre*.' She sounded uncomfortable using the expression. 'You've got to have a bit of space, haven't you?' She tossed her hair over her shoulder and laughed. 'Anyway, you two, I hope you don't mind but I'm leaving now. I've got a big day tomorrow looking at dresses, and I've got to find a venue for the reception.'

Karl and Siobhan both murmured their lack of disappointment.

'Karl, my coat's in the office. Would you mind opening it up for me?' Cheri placed her hand on his bare arm and he jumped slightly, the first time he'd moved since Cheri had approached them.

'Erm, why don't I just give you the key?' he said, fumbling in his pockets.

'Oh, you know how awkward that lock is - I can never get the hang of it. Do you mind?' She was wearing a sickly smile, one of her eyebrows raised slightly higher than the other.

Karl gripped Siobhan's hand. 'I won't be a second. Will you be all right?'

'Yeah, sure,' she replied weakly, wondering why she was feeling so uncomfortable about Cheri and Karl going to the office together.

He returned a few minutes later, looking red faced and flustered. 'Do you mind if we go?'

Siobhan was secretly relieved. 'No, of course not. What's the matter?'

'Nothing. I've just had enough, that's all,' he said distractedly, surreptitiously trying to wipe away the now solid

stream of sweat rolling down the sides of his face.

He was so angry he could hardly breathe. That little bitch, casually moving from man to man, taking things as she went, holidays in Antigua, engagement rings, flats, babies, honesty, decency. What was she going to do to this poor Giles character?

Everyone seemed to let her get away with it, just carried on giving her things and giving her things and never expecting anything in return. Well, he was different. He expected things. He wasn't going to let her walk away just like that, into some cosy life with a rich man who'd give her anything she wanted for the rest of her life. Especially when she'd come here tonight to show him she was in control, to flaunt herself at him, to prove to him that she could fuck him, finish with him, abort his baby and still get a decent man to marry her.

That was why he'd done that to her in the office just now, forced his hand down the front of her dress, squeezed those perfect breasts hard with his sweaty fingers until she'd yelped with pain and then kissed her hard, ignoring the clash of his teeth against hers, sucking hard on her tongue and grabbing her crotch with the other hand, kneading the hot flesh inside her knickers while she struggled against him. He'd thrown

her coat at her then and held the door open. He wasn't scared of her any more.

'Go home, you slut,' he'd said. 'If you ever come anywhere near Siobhan again .. .' He was shaking, and the anger inside him filled out the whole of his six-foot frame.

She was a whore, a slut - it didn't matter whose engagement ring she was wearing — and he wanted her to feel it, wanted her to leave the Sol y Sombra cheap and dirty, not the righteous, virtuous wife-to-be she'd convinced herself she was tonight. She'd looked frightened when she left, clutching her coat, her lipstick smudged around her mouth, her dress dishevelled. He'd ruined it for her, her little wedding fantasy. Good.

'Shuv,' he said later on when they'd got home and he'd regained his composure, 'let's have a baby.' He hadn't planned

to say it, it just came out. But the moment he said it he realized it was right. It was what he wanted, more than anything.

‘Oh, Karl, you know ...’ Siobhan began sadly.

‘Yes, yes, I know. It’s going to be difficult, it’s going to be hard. Especially for you. But let’s try. Properly. We’ll be able to afford it now - you know, different treatments and stuff. Shuv, please. I really want us to have a baby.’

He was on his knees now, holding Siobhan’s hand. ‘Please ...’ He laid his head on her lap.

Siobhan was still feeling unsettled by the incident in the club, and this was the last thing she’d expected. She thought they’d written it off years ago, after the doctor had told her that the infection in her ovaries had made her infertile. That’s why they’d got Rosanne. She hadn’t thought the subject would arise again; it had been philosophically dealt with and it was closed.

‘But what if it doesn’t work, you know? It could tak years and years, and I’m thirty-six now. Maybe I’m too old — they don’t like dealing with older mothers, more risks, it would take up all our time. I’ve seen the docu mentaries — it might tear us apart, and you and I are more important to me than a baby. I couldn’t bear it, all the disappointments and the waiting...’

‘Please, Shuv, please.’

Siobhan looked down at the mop of black glossy curls on her lap, the solid neck and the curve of his wide shoulders, the bright design of his Hawaiian shirt. His legs were bent up under him, his whole being prostrate and vulnerable. God, she loved him. All she wanted in the whole world was for Karl to be happy. That was all she’d ever wanted, from the day she’d met him.

‘OK-we’ll see.’

Karl grasped her tightly and buried his head further into her warm flesh. ‘Thank you, thank you, thank you,’ she heard him breathe. ‘Thank you.’

She stroked his hair, ignoring the slick gel, and felt quietly scared.

CHAPTER TEN

Ralph should have gone out, he realized that now. He shouldn't have sat in on his own all night. Claudia had invited him out to some press party for the launch of a new perfume her agency was handling. It would have been a nightmare, but there would have been free food and booze and lots of PR babes to admire and he could have just got totally pissed and spent the night at Claudia's and let the two of them have the flat to themselves. But instead he'd decided to be selfish and interfering and hang around to see what happened next with the red-hot lovers. He'd been expecting to hear the key in the lock all night and was positioned ready for the entrance of either one of them, feet up on the coffee table, spliff on the go, lager in one hand, remote control in the other.

At about nine o'clock he'd got bored of maintaining this pose even though it was a fairly natural one, and had decided that a reading-the-paper-in-the-kitchen pose would be more suitable. By ten o'clock he'd read the obituaries and the gardening column, had tried and failed to get even one word on the cryptic crossword and had thoroughly depressed himself by reading the executive job pages. Was he ever, ever, going to be in a position to earn £120,000 p.a. *plus* car *plus* healthcare *plus* bonus? No, he wasn't, and the thought made him miserable.

By half-past ten he had concluded resentfully that Smith and Jem must be together somewhere and he'd made toast and experimented with a lying-on-the-sofa-making-a-phone-call-and-eating-toast pose but couldn't think of anyone he wanted to speak to.

By the time Jem and Smith finally got home he was back in his original sofa, spliff, beer and telly pose. They were glowing horribly and the noise of their playful chatter in the hall had preceded them upsettingly. ,

They stood in the doorway, all teeth and smiles and breathless hilarity.

'All right, mate. Had a heavy night?' Smith enquired sarcastically. Sarcasm was not something Ralph was in the mood for.

‘Yeah, well, I was going to go to one of Claudia’s poncey press things but I couldn’t face it. I didn’t fancy another heavy night after last night, so I thought I’d have a quiet one. Where’ve you two been, then?’ He was trying to be pleasant. He really didn’t want to know where they’d been, he didn’t give a shit where they’d been.

‘Just for a drink with a couple of Jem’s friends and out for a meal.’ Smith placed his hand on Jem’s shoulder as he spoke; Ralph felt dejected.

You missed a great programme on Discovery,’ he countered, ‘about killer sharks. They cut this one shark open on the beach and found the partially consumed remains of four men inside it, including their oxygen tanks.’

‘Aw, fuck, what a way to go,’ Smith said. Ralph could tell that he was feigning interest; he was looking at Jem and playing with her hair.

‘Does anyone need to use the bathroom? I’m going to get ready for bed,’ she said, taking Smith’s hand from

her hair and holding it at her side. Ralph watched her gently.

I know about you, he wanted to say. I’ve been inside your head all day long and I know everything. I know every thought you’ve had for the last ten months, every place you’ve been, every meal you’ve eaten, I know more than Smith. I know you haven’t had a single date all year, that you’ve been starved of sex but resisted the temptation to go to bed with your friend Paul.

I know you eat curry at least twice a week.

I know that you’re not as confident as you make out and that you hate yourself sometimes. I know you worry what people think of you, that you’re sensitive, that you can be paranoid sometimes, that when you’re being chirpy you think you’re getting on people’s nerves.

I know that you haven’t spoken to your mother for two years and how unhappy that makes you.

I know you get terrible PMT. I know your periods are as regular as clockwork (thirty-one-day cycle, first thing in the

morning) and that you worry obsessively about your bowel movements and that's why you eat two pounds of All-Bran every morning.

I know you had chronic piles in June.

I know you think you're two-faced because you think dreadful things about people you're nice to in the flesh.

I know you chose Smith because he bought you your favourite flowers. I know about your dream 'and I can see why you thought that Smith was the one. I should have made more of an effort, I should have put some decent clothes on and offered to help, I shouldn't have been so offhand and I shouldn't have gone to bed. And I know you're wrong, Jem - it's not Smith, that was just a coincidence: buying flowers is a cheerful thing to do.

It was me sitting on the sofa when you looked through the window and it's me you should be with.

But how could he say it, when it would mean admitting" that he was a sneak of the lowest sort, the kind of person who reads other people's diaries? He looked at Jem now and realized that she was a different person to the stranger he heard leave the house that morning. He'd been inside her head all day, inside her thoughts. He knew more about her than Smith did, Smith who'd spent the evening with her and met her friends and had sex with her last night. He knew her secrets and insecurities. He desperately wanted to be close to her.

'Na, na, go ahead. I'm going to be up for a while/ he replied.

'You go first,' Smith said, pulling Jem back towards him with both arms around her waist.

'OK. Night night, Ralph, see you tomorrow.'

'Don't I get a kiss?' he said, getting up from the sofa. He suddenly wanted to touch her, too.

'Why not?' Jem smiled. 'Night night, Ralph,' she said again and gave him a peck on the cheek.

'Sleep tight, Jemima.'

‘So, what do you think, then?’ Smith whispered excitedly, as the door closed behind her.

‘About what?’ muttered Ralph. He really didn’t want to discuss Smith’s revolting good luck with him.

‘Jem, of course. What do you think of Jem? Of me and Jem? Oh, come on - you must have worked out what’s going on.’

‘Oh, right, very nice. Yes, very nice.’ Then, seeing from the look on Smith’s face that something further was required, ‘Lovely hair, very pretty, very nice. I’m very pleased for you, Smithie, really I am.’

Glancing at Smith, he could sense that this line of new-girlfriend flattery still wasn’t sufficient.

‘I’m not talking about what she looks like, I’m not asking you to fancy the girl, I just want to know what you think of her — of us.’

‘Look, what the fuck do you want me to say? The girl’s only been here five minutes. She’s very nice — I like her. I just hope you know what you’re doing, you know, after the last few girls. You’ve got a bit of a track record for rushing things ... remember Greta? You asked her to marry you after two weeks and then couldn’t understand it when she ran a million miles in the opposite direction. And then that fuck-awful Dawn girl, the one you told you loved on the first night you met her and then she turned up the next day with all her stuff, expecting to move in. And I had to get rid of her for you. And that Polish girl you took home to meet your parents after less than a week, who made off with their Camcorder and your dad’s laptop to support her boyfriend’s crack addiction. And ...’

‘OK, OK,’ Smith conceded, ‘I know what you’re saying, but this is different. Jem’s different. I feel different. That’s what’s so great. I’m not going to fall in love with her, it’s all under control! I was going to tell her tonight, tell her that I didn’t want to take this any further, tell her about Cheri and everything. And then I thought, why? Why the hell shouldn’t I have a bit of fun for a change, a bit of sex? I forgot how much I enjoyed it and I think I deserve it, don’t you? Jem’s a really

lovely girl, I really like her. But for once, I've got the upper hand, I'm in control. I'm older and wiser and I won't make the same mistakes again. It's just a bit of fun. Really,' he stressed, noticing the look of scepticism on Ralph's face.

'So you haven't told her about Cheri - about you deeply unhealthy five-year obsession with an unattainable woman/

'Of course I haven't! You've got to be kidding, haven't you? I'm not going to mess it up before it's even started. She thinks I'm great, she thinks I'm the man of her dreams - really! She told me last night. She thinks -now get this - she thinks that this flat has appeared in her dreams and that I'm her destiny. Isn't that hysterical! Anyway, Cheri's a different thing entirely. Cheri's a dream-woman. I've waited long enough. It's time to get on with my life. And maybe if she sees me getting on with my life, you know, without her, with a pretty girlfriend who worships the ground I walk on, she'll see me in a different light, come round a bit. It might make me more attractive to her.' Smith's face brightened at the thought.

'But you will tell Jem - at some point - won't you? I think she has a right to know what sort of a prat you really are.'

'Yeah, yeah, and I suppose you've told Claudia all about your colourful past, have you?' said Smith, knowing full well that Ralph hadn't.

'Yeah, but that's different, I don't love Claudia. She doesn't need to know.'

'Whoa! Who said anything about love?' Smith laughed, 'I think you're rushing things a bit here! That's what's so fantastic — I actually think, for the first time in my life, that I've met a woman who's more into me than I'm into her. D'you have any idea how great that feels? And she lives here, which means I don't have to worry about all that phone-call and date hell - I've got her on tap. This, Ralph my old mate, is what I would call a result!'

Ralph swallowed the bile-like sensation of distaste that rose in his gut as he listened to Smith. He pulled a cigarette from the packet in front of him and tried to bring the conversation to a halt. 'Well, can you keep it down tonight, please? I've got to

get up early tomorrow morning and I don't want to have to put up with you two caterwauling all night.'

'Why not? I've had to put up with Claudia the Queen of Grief for the last six months. And I can assure you that Jem is as quiet as a kitten compared to that bloody banshee. You know, Ralphie, there are decent women out there. You don't have to go out with a nightmare like Claudia.'

'Look, I don't want to piss on your only-just-ignited fireworks here, but all girls seem great when you first start going out with them. Claudia seemed great: "Hey, I don't want commitment, I don't want to be tied down, I just want to have fun, I just want you to have fun, of course I don't mind if you go out with your ex-girlfriend tonight, of course I don't mind if you cancel dinner, I'm a grown-up woman, I'm cool." And now look at her. Just watch it, Smith - women, they're all the same, and don't you forget it.'

They heard the light in the bathroom being switched off, and the door being shut. Smith got to his feet and stretched.

'Yeah, yeah. Just you wait. Once you get to know Jem, you'll know what I mean - she's just not like that. You'll love her too.'

'Nah, Smithie - not my type,' Ralph said, forcing a grin. 'And anyway, I thought we weren't allowed to talk about love.'

As the door shut behind him, and Ralph found himself as he had been all night - alone - he felt a great sense of loss. Things were never going to be the same again. For years life had unfolded nicely, predictably, easily. Now everything was in jeopardy — his home life, his relationship with Smith, his finances, his security, his routines and habits. And, he realized suddenly, more than anything, his heart.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

'Look, I like the music, I'm not saying that I don't like it. I think it's great music, classic stuff. But I'm fifty-three, I'm a balding fifty-three-year-old executive with three kids, a house in the country, a Land Rover and acid indigestion, I'm

supposed to like it. Hmm, hmm... d'you see what I'm getting at?'

Jeff, programming director at ALR and Karl's new boss, looked at him across his huge status-symbol desk with his hands held palms up and his face wearing an expression that said 'There's a queue of people outside my door waiting to talk to me about budgets and scheduling and I'd really rather just bawl you out and get you out of my office, but because you're a new boy I'm going to have to be pleasant about this.'

'Hmm, hmm ... d'you see what I'm saying, Karl? Hmm, hmm.'

Karl wished he'd stop doing that 'hmm, hmm' thing.

'Kids just don't want to listen to Al Green or Jerry Lee Lewis — I do, oh yeah, yeah, I do — but they don't. D'you understand? Hmm, hmm ...'

Karl was beginning to feel like the only guest at a party who hadn't been told that it wasn't fancy dress. He'd been brought in to ALR to play a wide range of music, from Top Ten to Tom Jones. That was what had appealed to Jeff when he'd been a guest at a wedding Karl was Deejaying at and that was why he'd got the

job, over the heads of all those other D Js struggling for years in hospital radio and small-time local radio stations in Nuneaton and Truro. He was knowledgeable, not just poppy and happy and chirpy. They'd wanted someone their listeners could respect, someone with impeccable taste in music. They'd wanted him to build some sort of reputation — if it's on the Karl Kasparov show then it must be good.

Drive Time was captive-audience time, listeners trapped in cars. People did other things during the breakfast show, they brushed their teeth, they fed the kids, they made love. Daytime radio was for working to, background noise; as long as the D J churned out a lot of pop and fun nobody was going to turn the dial.

Drive Time was different, a time for unwinding at the end of a hard day, a time to be selective and demanding and to turn

that dial if the D J was getting on your nerves or the music was repetitive.

Karl, with his deep, lilting Irish accent, his unabrasive sense of humour and his intelligent taste in music was exactly what they were looking for.

And now, after less than two months, they were telling him that they were wrong, that they were losing listeners. The critics loved him, but his audience was ‘turning the dial’ in its thousands.

Thone-ins, celebrities, characters, comedy, chat, that’s what you need, Karl, and more Top Ten, hmm, hmm.’ He picked up his phone and dialled. ‘Rick, you got a second, mate? I’m here with Karl, you know, discussing the show, hmm, hmm. We need your expertise here mate, some Rick-style advice. Could you come and see us? Yeah, yeah now, that’s right, great, OK great...’

‘Rick - you know Rick, don’t you - he’s the producer, you know, on Jules’s show? Yeah, right, anyway, he’s got some great ideas, he’s a great bloke full of energy, and funny? - God, he’s funny - I want you to spend some time with Rick, you know, talk talk talk. I’m talking about your free time here, Karl, I’m talking about...’

He stopped and began to search in the top drawer of his vast cyclamen melamine-topped desk with one hand outstretched as if ready to pull Karl back by the lapels were he to attempt to escape. His other hand surfaced with a large bunch of keys. He looked at Karl triumphantly.

I’m talking about Glencoe. I’ve got a place up there, an old Presbyterian chapel, converted, miles away from anywhere, it’s *ab-so-lute-ly* be-yew-tiful, right on the banks of the loch. At this time of year the sun sets right over it - it’s stunning, Karl, really, really stunning — makes you feel kind of small and pointless, that sort of landscape. Puts everything into perspective ...’ He fell into a thoughtful silence and then suddenly slammed his hands down hard on the desk. Karl jumped slightly in his seat. ‘And I want *you*,’ he pointed at Karl, ‘and my mate Rick to get yourselves up there this weekend, with your partners of course, and really have a mess-

around, you know, hmm, hmm, get pissed, get off your faces if you want, you know, really unwind and relax, get to know each other and start throwing some ideas about — anything that makes you laugh, anything that makes your girls laugh. You got kids, Karl?’

Karl shook his head numbly.

‘Good. Anyway, I’ll get Sue to give you directions and stuff and money for booze and anything else you want ... yeah, that’s a good idea ... yeah, take some drugs with you, I want you to come back with some really zany

ideas, something for the kids, hmm, hmm. And take some watchables up - you know, Jack Dee, Lee Evans - I’ll get Sue to sort that out for you. Don’t worry about it, I’ll get Sue to sort everything..., ah, Rick.’ Jeff stood up. ‘Rick, my favourite producer. Karl, mate, this is Rick de Largy.’

Karl turned around in his chair.

‘Good to meet you — I love your show.’ The man standing in the doorway smiled and held out his hand. He was ridiculously good looking, not in a flash way but quietly and horribly handsome. Karl could suddenly imagine how women felt in the presence of greater beauty. With all this talk of ‘zany’ and ‘kids’ and ‘chat’ Karl had imagined that this Rick character would be naff and toothy and unpleasantly sweated, with too much hair and a fake tan. Even his name had sounded tasteless and gaudy. But the man standing in front of him was elegantly dressed in a white cotton shirt, well-cut jeans and what looked like handmade shoes, his gentle-featured face framed by understated wire-framed glasses and his hair a soft champagne blond, short at the back and sides and thick and effortlessly unkempt on the top. He looked about the same age as Karl but much healthier. His skin actually glowed -Karl had thought that only women’s skin glowed.

You two,’ said Jeff leaning forward into his desk, ‘are going to be great, great friends - just you wait.’ He beamed like a proud father. ‘Now, what about a bit of lunch then, boys, hmm, hmm?’ He laughed and shook both men’s hands. ‘Let’s go and talk about how Rick here is going to make you the funniest man on *Drive Time*:

Funny? *Funny?* Karl felt his heart drop. He'd never felt less funny in his life. His home life was falling apart. Things just hadn't been the same since that night at the Sol y Sombra and afterwards, when Karl had begged Siobhan to have a baby. The atmosphere of warmth and love in their little flat had died and Karl didn't know why. It should have grown from that night - Cheri was out of his life, he and Siobhan were making plans for the future, he was just about to embark on a fantastic new career, everything should seem new and fresh.

He'd lain in bed on the night of his leaving party and watched Siobhan sitting on the edge of the bed swiftly removing garments, pulling her top over her head, her hair spilling over her smooth white back, and he'd felt a strong rush of love and arousal, not just a need to ejaculate but a need to probe every area of her body, to explore her like he used to when they were younger. He stroked her hair and wound it around his hand into a thick coil that gleamed in the muted lamplight and brushed it against his face - it felt like satin and the lustrous silkiness aroused him further. He placed his arm around her waist, feeling it melt into the pliant rolls of flesh, and reached his hand upwards until it found her breast. He'd groaned then and buried his face into her back and breathed in the scent of her skin deeply, gently massaging her breast, feeling her nipple suddenly bloom under his fingertips, a small warm bullet of flesh.

For years their sexual routine had been fun and frolicsome, rollicking romps, good clean fun. Tonight he wanted more. Every bone and muscle in his body had quivered with desire as he gently pulled Siobhan around and lay on top of her. He pulled her hair from around her shoulders and arranged it carefully into an abundant fan

over the pillow — she looked like a Titian archangel. He kissed her hair, her forehead, her plump white cheeks, her eyelids, her ear lobes, her neck — oh God, he wanted to feel every part of her with his lips, his tongue, his fingers. He groaned again and slid his face between her breasts, the tip of his nose feeling the moist pool of sweat that lay between them, damp and hot and pungent. He licked at it, enjoying the taste

of the sweat on his tongue while his hands pushed her breasts gently together - 'oh God oh God' - he could come now, he really could. His erection was bursting, ripe and angry and pressed hard into Siobhan's groin — he rubbed it up and down against the coarse hair, the abrasion spreading feelings of desire from the shaft of his penis to the tips of his fingers. He felt Siobhan wriggling slightly under him and stroked her face, wanting the love he was feeling for her to spill from his fingertips into her head, so that she'd know without him breaking the spellbinding silence that was fuelling his desire.

'Karl... Karl... please, please.' Siobhan's voice had sounded like a distant echo, her hands gently pressed down on his shoulders. His tongue continued to forage, his hands grasped her flesh harder and harder ...

'Karl, stop it, please... I... I... don't want to.' Karl took Siobhan's nipple into his mouth and sucked hard on it, running his tongue around the hard warm flesh ...

'Karl, STOP IT, STOP IT, STOP IT! Get off me!' She pushed hard down on to his shoulders and tried to roll him away.

'WHAT?' screamed Karl. What the fuck is wrong?' He was on his side of the bed now, his hair wild and on end. He turned to look at Siobhan, who had pulled the duvet up over her body and still lay in the same position. She

was crying, silently, huge effortless tears flowing down the sides of her face and on to the pillowcase, a completely blank expression on her reddening face.

'I don't want to, Karl, I just don't want to ...'

You don't want to what? What don't you want to do, Siobhan? Tell me, for fuck's sake.'

'I... I... I don't know.' She wiped away the teeming tears with the back of her hand to make room for the endless flow.

'You don't want me to make love to you - is that it? You don't want me to love you, to love your body - what, Siobhan? What?' Karl demanded.

Siobhan sniffed but the tears kept coming. I don't know Karl. I don't know ... I'm so sorry, I just can't. I'm sorry ...'

‘Well if it’s all the same with you, I’m going to have a wank,’ he snapped, striding through the bedroom towards the bathroom and slamming the door behind him.

Siobhan had watched his angry naked body, still hi good shape, defined back muscles, firm round buttocks, his scrotum just visible as the light from the hallway silhouetted him briefly. It was a body she was so familiar with, had loved for so many years, enjoyed for so many years, and as she watched it walk out of the room, away from her, she cried and cried and cried.

She didn’t know what the matter was, or how good her intuition was. But it was something to do with the party at the Sol y Sombra, something to do with that girl, the blonde from upstairs, the one who was getting married. She made Siobhan feel ugly, she made her feel insecure, and for some reason she made Siobhan feel

sad and scared, as if something until now immutable had changed for ever.

She wanted to tell Karl, but she couldn’t. How could she explain that she’d rejected him because she thought he wished he was doing those things to Cheri? That she’d lain there while he caressed her and licked her and loved her, and all she could think was that he was fantasizing about that girl, fantasizing that Siobhan’s fat unkempt flesh was Cheri’s taut brown flesh, that her densely haired, pungent genitals were Cheri’s neat soft mound, that the woman underneath him was young and firm and beautiful?

She’d seen the way he looked at Cheri, how he’d blushed, the way he used to blush on campus all those years ago. And what had happened in the office, why had he looked so flustered when he got back? There was no doubt in Siobhan’s mind that Karl fancied Cheri, that he wanted her. It all tied in with the glamour of his new job. How could a top D J possibly be satisfied with a fat, lazy, hairy woman? He wanted more now, even the way they had sex wasn’t good enough for him now — he wanted steamy Hollywood sex, passion and heavy breathing and grasping flesh, not the usual routine of fun and laughter.

He was probably thinking about Cheri now as he sat on the toilet and vented his frustration, probably enjoying it more than he would writhing around on top of Siobhan's vast, wobbling body pretending she was someone else.

He obviously didn't see her as a woman any more. It all made sense. That was why he suddenly wanted her to have a baby after all these years, so she would become a mother, a vessel, not his lover. Young fresh girls were

for fucking; fat ugly women were for staying at home and having babies and getting even fatter. Their breasts were for suckling, for hard greedy babies' mouths to drain of their suppleness and femininity and leave dry and pendulous and ugly, hanging like strips of biltong. And while she nursed his child he would be fucking one of those awestruck girls who congregated outside the ALR building, wanting a piece of DJ.

The door opened quietly and Karl tiptoed in. 'Shuv, I've brought you someone.'

A weight fell on to the bed and a wet tongue stroked Siobhan's cheek. The aroma of dog wafted in the air. Siobhan hugged Rosanne to her and cried until the tears stopped coming. Karl put a hand on her shoulder.

'Shuv, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to storm out like that. I didn't mean to shout. I was just so ... so ... I just wanted to make love to you so badly tonight.' He stroked her hair. 'Please, Shuv, talk to me, tell me what's on your mind.'

Siobhan just shook her head sadly, put the dog at the foot of the bed and turned on her side away from Karl.

'I love you,' he whispered in her ear, 'I need you.'

He turned over then, the other way, and a heavy wall of silence divided the room, a dense knot of unresolved unhappiness and uncommunicated thoughts hung in the air.

They hadn't made love since. They hadn't really talked either. They'd gone about their lives in an apparently normal fashion. Siobhan had given him a hero's welcome when he returned after the transmission of his first show, and he'd given her flowers. They'd been out to buy a new sofa together and bid an emotional farewell to the old one when they left it at the tip. But things

just weren't the same, there was a distance between them that would have taken a million yards of rope to bridge, an intolerable distance that they were both too afraid to cross, because below was infinite darkness, impossible depth.

The baby had been forgotten about; it hadn't been mentioned since that night.

Things were not good and now they were getting worse.

No, Karl had never felt less funny in his life.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Jem had always found that men seemed to fall in love very quickly. The full-blown declaration of love usually came within the first week, sometimes sooner. When she was younger she'd been so shocked by these revelations that she would clumsily repeat this much-abused statement in reply, not knowing how else to bring the embarrassing moment to a close. And then, of course, after it had been said once it had to be repeated like a mantra every time it was offered to her like a desperate gift from the love-afflicted soul. She soon learned when the 'I Love You' moment was imminent and discovered that when it was countered by a firm but affectionate 'Don't be silly, of course you don't', it rendered the afflicted one even more desperately in love and devoted.

Which is why, even though she'd been going out with Smith for nearly two months now, she wasn't in the least worried that he still hadn't said it, that he still hadn't told her he loved her. He didn't have to. Jem knew he loved her, without a word leaving his lips. As far as she was concerned it was yet another sign that Smith was the One. It was all so easy, so effortless. Smith was so undemanding, he didn't put any pressure on her.

Jem found it refreshing that he didn't plague her with romantic gestures and overblown declarations and gifts and pukey tokens and acts of love. He didn't go on about

how beautiful she was, or how she was the most amazing woman he'd ever met, or how she was so sexy and so wonderful and *so* special. She'd had enough of all that to last her a lifetime and she knew that such devotion usually came with a price tag attached - the jealousy and possessiveness of an insecure man.

Jem was aware that other women might find her attitude hard to understand. She realized that many women spent the majority of their lives dreaming of a man who would finally notice the dazzling flecks of amber in their eyes, the fine golden hair on the back of their necks, the porcelain smoothness of their skin, a man who would stroke, caress and soothe, utter words of adoration and talk endlessly of the years to come and the joys of commitment, a man who would place them carefully and reverently upon a diamond-encrusted pedestal, throw rose petals at their feet and hand-feed them morsels of their favourite food, all the while unable to unglue their eyes from them for fear of missing just one second of their incomparable beauty.

Not Jem. All that stuff turned her stomach and made her want to vomit.

She'd loved it the first time it had happened, of course she had, especially coming as it had at the tail-end of a hideously awkward adolescence just as she'd finally convinced herself that she was to remain unloved and unpenetrated for ever.

His name was Nick and he was a comfortable-looking bloke with a strong jaw and the sweetest smile imaginable. He'd just come through an equally awkward adolescence and at the ripe old age of nineteen was just about to resign himself to a lifetime of virginity when Jem came along.

It was a classic summer romance, full of picnics and trips to the cinema, drunken nights in beer gardens and hours of fumbling in the front seat of his mother's car, where Jem had found herself, after years of trying to keep other boys' hands out of her knickers, frankly, quite desperate to get hers into his.

They finally dispensed with their long-standing virginities that summer, the day after Jem's eighteenth birthday and, in comparison to stories Jem had heard subsequently from her female friends, it was a truly magical event that had lived up to both their expectations. They were madly, madly in love with each other.

So everything was perfect and Jem was happy.

Until one night, a few weeks later. She'd been well into her third pint and enjoying a raucous conversation with a raucous friend at a raucous girls' night out — when in walked Nick. He'd ambled self-consciously into the bar, scanning the room for his precious Jem, his face opening up like a blossoming flower when he spotted her, his pace quickening as he approached, his arms outstretched to pull her into a desperate embrace.

'I was missing you,' he said, 'my mates were boring me. I just wanted to be with you,' and he'd gripped her to him, burying his face in her hair and Jem had *tried* to smile, *tried* to reciprocate the depth of feeling, the strength of passion, but failed miserably, feeling instead completely suffocated, trapped and compromised. Nick felt like someone different after that night. They were no longer equals. The scales had been tipped. And try as she might, Jem just couldn't revive the warm, solid, easy love she'd felt for him before.

At the end of that summer, she went to university in

London and he went to university in Newcastle, and although things were OK at first, their weekend meetings gradually became more and more stressful. Nick would spend hours interrogating Jem about her newfound male friends in London, about her every movement and action, and quiz her about every boy she'd kissed before they met. Then he started to cry with alarming frequency, huge, wailing, snotty, unstoppable tears. 'I only went to Newcastle to prove to myself that I could live without you — and I can't! I can't live without you, Jem!' When he'd started talking about transferring to a London university, Jem decided it was time. Enough was enough.

It was one of the hardest things she'd ever done and he reacted badly when she phoned him, blowing his grant on a flight from Newcastle to London because the train would have taken too long, and searching London's student community, house to house, for her. He'd finally found her, trying to hide from him in Lincoln's Inn Fields. They spent three traumatic hours going over and over the details of their relationship, Nick begging and pleading for another chance, until the sun started to sink and the vagrants began to set up their makeshift homes, and Nick finally gave up and went home.

Jason hadn't believed Jem loved him, either and demanded her attention, her love and her reassurance constantly, for ten months, disappearing into huge black sulks for days on end when he felt that she had wronged him in some way. Danny had insisted that she stop seeing her friends — he couldn't understand why she should possibly need friends, now that they'd found each other. Clem wanted to marry her after six weeks and then fell into a deep depression when she said no, claim-

ing that he no longer wanted to see her because 'it just hurt too fucking much.'

And then, finally, there was Freddie, a fantastically charismatic, hysterically funny and deeply sexy saxophonist, who Jem had been all set to fall miserably in love with. He was totally removed from all the 'nice' boys she'd loved before and she was more than ready to experience the other side of the coin, to hand him her heart on a plate. But he beat her to it. Within weeks he'd had his long tousled locks cut short, swapped his jeans and waistcoat for a pair of chinos and a check shirt and was talking seriously about selling his sax and getting a job in sales so that they could get a mortgage and maybe think about starting a family.

Jem had been amazed. Wasn't that the way girls were supposed to behave? Wasn't it women who wanted commitment, security, babies, and men who just wanted to get drunk with their mates, have fun and play the field for as long as possible? Not in her experience. As far as Jem could tell, men were the ones with a strong need for commitment and security. How else could you explain the fact that at least nine

times out often it was the man who proposed marriage? They can't *all* have been arm-wrestled into it.

Another thing Jem had learned about men was that they were threatened by a woman who *didn't* crave commitment and security, who wasn't straining at the leash to walk up the aisle, who didn't stop and drool at the windows of every jewellery shop she passed or turn to melted butter at the sight of every passing pink-cheeked cherub in a pushchair. As much as men might moan and whinge about these traditionally female traits, at least they knew what they were dealing with — 'the nag',

'the ball and chain', 'the indoors'. It had all been tried and tested by their father and their father's father and his father before them; women like that were a known quantity. It gave joyous meaning to nights at the pub or out with the lads - you deserved it after all you'd had to put up with from the demanding old harridan all week. It was part of life's rich tapestry and eventually; a couple of years down the line, the man would pretend to be strong-armed up the aisle, just to keep the tradition going, even though it was really what he wanted, too. I

But these days - well. These days all the rules were broken and for some reason a lads night out isn't quite so enjoyable when you're worrying about what your free-spirited girlfriend is up to with her mates, and it takes the edge off rolling home pissed at one in the morning when she rolls in at two in the morning, completely slaughtered and having had a much better night than you. Where's the fun in being a bloke if you can't dangle the carrot of commitment in front of your girlfriend for years on end? And if she doesn't want commitment, the ring, the babies, then what the hell does she want? So Jem had found that most men, when confronted with a girl who just wanted to have fun, became confused and for some reason took over the role of the traditional woman, going to extraordinary lengths to try to tie their girlfriend down, break her spirit and control her.

But not Smith. Smith was perfect. He was happy for Jem to do her own thing, in her own way. He was generous and kind and easygoing and so affectionate. Jem had never known such

an affectionate man. He never left her alone, was always dropping kisses on the top of her head, squeezing her hands, stroking her neck

and grasping her to him in rib-crunching bear-hugs. Jem knew why. He'd confided to her on their first date that he'd been celibate for five years. Five years! He hadn't had any physical contact with a woman for five years. It was another sign. It had to be more than a coincidence, his celibacy. He must have been waiting for her, waiting for Jem. And she was more than happy for him to make up for lost time with her.

He smelt nice, he looked nice, he dressed beautifully and he felt gorgeous. He didn't hassle her with his emotions and insecurities, he gave her space, he gave her time. She really liked all his friends. He really liked all her friends. And the fact that he was rich enough to pay for meals out and cabs home without Jem feeling guilty was just the cherry on top of it all.

OK, so it wasn't love's young dream. OK, so they'd bypassed all the usual courting rituals - the long, animated talks over late-night drinks, the endless hours spent in bed inspecting each other's moles and scars and belly buttons, the hour-long phonecalls you never wanted to end and pizzas in the park on freezing winter afternoons. And maybe they didn't really have all that much in common - she'd been right about the dry white wine and the fancy restaurants. But they were so easy in each other's company. Even now, at this early stage in their relationship, they were able to sit comfortably in silence, in public. It didn't matter when they ran out of things to say. There was no embarrassment. And Smith wasn't the most adventurous and spontaneous of people. But that didn't matter to Jem. She'd had her share of romance, and she didn't want any more.

She really didn't mind that Smith had forgotten both their one-month anniversary and their two-month

anniversary. She found it refreshing. And she didn't mind that he never paid her compliments or noticed when she changed her hair or wore a new dress. She certainly didn't mind his lack of discomfort about her nights *a deux* with her

close friend Paul or his complete lack of jealousy about her ex-boyfriends and old loves. She was happy that he spent so much time at work and didn't put any part of his life on hold to make room for her. She didn't want any of that. She didn't want the attention, the demands, the neediness. She'd been under the magnifying glass, the spotlight of insecure love for long enough. And now, she just wanted Smith.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Ralph had given up reading Jem's diary over the last two months. Well, the current diary, anyway. It was just full of Smith this, Smith that and Smith the bloody other. It was like Ralph had ceased to exist the moment Jem had slept with Smith. He had been hoping for some doubts to creep into her entries, some reference to the fact that Smith wasn't quite right for her, wasn't good enough, that she'd made her decision too soon. But it hadn't come. She was utterly blind to it, she was 'in love' with Smith and her diary was a constant, gurgling, gushing, vomit-inducing account of how perfect he was and how wonderful they were and how great the sex was.

But Ralph hadn't given up the long periods of time spent just sitting in her room. He liked it in there. It smelt good and he felt safe and warm with all Jem's feminine artefacts, it was second-best to her actually being there herself. He felt close to her when he was in her room.

He was sitting on her bed now, thumbing through her old *A-Z*, taking note of all the little roads that had been circled and wondering what they'd been circled for. Parties? Job interviews? Flatshares?

It was two o'clock in the afternoon. Claudia was away. All his mates were staying in with their girlfriends. A Friday night in. Ralph had felt unloved and depressed so he'd headed straight for Jem's room.

He put the *A-Z* back in her top drawer and his eye fell again upon the pile of old diaries under her table. He'd managed to resist the temptation of looking at them so far - it made him feel more disciplined, less unethical, marginally better about himself and his underhand behaviour. He looked at them and looked away again. No - he mustn't. He looked again. Fuck it

he thought, and reached for the bottom diary, an old accounting book covered in, UCL stickers and smiley faces. Written on the cover was '1986'. He pulled back the front cover, the old, brittle paper crackling slightly as he turned over the first page. He started reading.

Six hours later, he stopped. A whole day had gone by and Ralph had learned an awful lot more about Jem, He'd learned about her adolescence, how much she'd hated her frizzy hair and her anaemic complexion and the fact that she was so short; how while other girls were losing their virginity and getting pregnant and coming into school with florid lovebites adorning their necks, Jem was busy crossing streets to avoid having to walk past anyone remotely resembling a teenage boy. She'd been painfully shy and painfully unconfident, crying into her pillow every night because she was so ugly and no man would ever want her. She'd been fifteen before she'd had her first kiss and then it had been so unpleasant and shared with such an ugly specimen of male youth that she'd rubbed at her mouth with the back of her hand for a good ten minutes after it was over, shuddering at the memory.

She'd then gone out, briefly, with a succession of ugly youths, desperately trying to cling on to her honour and her virginity, before Justin Jones had asked her out. Justin Jones had, apparently, been the school heart-

throb, a dark-haired dish with the pick of the school's girls at his feet.

'Why me?' she'd asked, referring obliquely to the contrast between herself and the more overtly attractive female students who would queue up daily just to stand in Justin's wake. 'I dunno,' he'd said, half-smiling, 'it's not the way you look, it's just something about you. I just really fancy you.' Justin Jones had unwittingly instilled in Jem with that one, long-ago, offhand comment a confidence that any amount of fawning compliments from lovesick suitors could not have achieved. He had paid *her personality* a compliment. He'd flattered her *spirit*, and Jem knew she didn't have to be anyone else but herself. She was an attractive person and anyone who couldn't see that was not worth knowing.

Since then, it seemed, Jem had had a whole string of relationships with nice blokes who'd made complete pains of themselves, smothering her with love and making unreasonable demands of her. Until Smith.

At last Ralph was beginning to understand what Jem saw in Smith, why she was so in love with him. Smith didn't call on her emotionally, he didn't restrict her or control her.

How ironic that she should have fallen in love with him because he didn't give a shit about her. How ironic that she thought he was so different from the other boys when, in reality, he was exactly the same, and the only reason he wasn't showering her with gifts and adoration and proposals of marriage was because he was in love with another woman. How ironic ...

Ralph took a beer out of the fridge and flopped on to the sofa, searching through the rubble on the coffee table for the remote control. He'd just missed *The*

Simpsons and now *Real TV* was on Sky, a series of totally unamusing real-life videos of people nearly drowning under white-water rafts and being rescued from burning buildings.

Smith was out tonight, at a press do. It was possible that he and Jem might be alone tonight. Maybe, instead of shuffling around trying to find reasons not to talk to her like he usually did, he should use it as an opportunity to get her to open up. Find out even more about her. He already knew more about her than he'd known about even his longest-standing girlfriends. He knew all her insecurities, her romantic history and her needs and desires. Now he wanted to get to know her better than anyone had ever known her before.

He heard female voices outside and shifted round on the sofa to peep through the open curtains. It was Jem, laden down with shopping as ever - he'd never met a girl who spent so much time in supermarkets — and she was talking to that blonde tart from upstairs. He strained his ears trying to catch what they were saying, but it was muffled. He smiled at the irony of Smith's girlfriend so easily and quickly engaging herself in a situation which Smith himself had been dreaming of, ineffectually, for the last five years. He stood up to check

his reflection in the mirror, ruffled his shorn hair and sat down again.

Eventually he heard the front door open, and seconds later Jem burst into the room - Jem always burst into rooms, such was the force of her enthusiasm - all parcelled up in a big black coat and a deep-purple furry stole.

‘I’ve just had a really nice chat with that girl from upstairs. She’s very friendly, isn’t she?’

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Ralph had always found Cheri to be absolutely the opposite, but maybe Jem was a better judge of character than he was.

‘She’s a dancer, you know. She trained to be a ballerina until she grew too tall. It explains why she’s so elegant, she holds herself very well.’

Ralph just thought she was a stuck-up bitch with too much attitude even for him.

‘What are you doing tonight, Ralph?’

He shrugged and scratched his head, ‘Um, fuck all actually. Pretty sad for a Friday night.’

‘Excellent. Look, I’ve been blown out by my friends so I thought I’d just cook a curry, drink a load of lager, have a bit to smoke and then go to bed early. D’you fancy joining me? Well, apart from the going to bed early bit, of course.’ She giggled adorably.

Ralph couldn’t think of anything else he’d rather do tonight, he tried to hide his excitement: That sounds absolutely perfect - Fd love to. I can’t promise to be much help in the kitchen, but I’ll skin up.’

‘Done.’

It was all Ralph could do to stop himself punching the air as Jem left the room.

‘Right, I’ve decided,’ Jem was back, barefoot in thick black stockings and a short dark-green jersey dress with capped sleeves and a flirty skirt, ‘Have you ever seen that programme *Can’t Cook Won’t Cook?*’

Ralph looked blank.

‘Oh, come on, you must have, you’re at home all day. It’s for people like you’ - she pointed at him - ‘people who write off cooking without even trying it. This chef guy gets two pathetic people to cook a dish by watching what he does — well, anyway, it’s crap but that’s not the

point. I think every bachelor should know how to cook at least one dish, and since you like curry so much I thought I’d teach you.. Come on, get up.’ She held out her hand for him and he smiled and followed her into the kitchen, enjoying the feeling of her tiny little hand on his.

‘I thought we said that I’d skin up and you’d cook.’

Yes, well, I’ve changed my mind. OK, as you know, there are many, many different kinds of curry. Tonight I’m making a chicken jal frezi - actually, you can make a spliff while I’m doing the talk bit - yes, tonight I’m making a chicken jal frezi, it’s very, very easy. You can pretty much do it to your own taste — I like mine quite green and stinking hot! So, I’ve got the chicken breasts, we can chop those later, and a really big bunch of coriander, lots of these monster-hot little green chillies — the big ones are crap, don’t bother with them. Keeping up so far?’

‘Oh, yes, so far so simple.’ Ralph was sitting at the table crumbling grass into a translucent paper balanced on an upside-down box of Shreddies. He was entranced: why had none of his girlfriends ever taught him to cook before?

You can get ready-made pastes but it’s better to make your own — you can put what you want in really. OK, I’m going to put in loads of this coriander, some fresh fenugreek leaves and some ground fenugreek — smell that’ — she held the plastic packet under Ralph’s nose - ‘that’s what your armpits smell of the day after a curry...’

Soon enough Ralph was chopping up pieces of chicken and slicing onions and mincing garlic. He must have eaten a million curries in his life but he’d never heard

of half the things that went into one. Ghee? Cumin? Curry leaves? He was amazed to find that he was thoroughly

enjoying himself, even suggesting additions and asking for more jobs to do, and he was feeling wonderfully relaxed with Jem, for the first time since he'd found out about her and Smith. They were chatting and laughing together like old friends, singing along to the Pogues and dancing around the kitchen.

They laid the table together, and Ralph was ecstatic to be served with a plate of curry and rice that he'd helped to cook. And even more ecstatic when he tasted it - it was delicious.

'Ralph,' Jem began as they ate, 'can I ask you a question?'

Oh, Lord, one of life's most worrying openers.

'How do you feel about me and Smith — be honest?'

Oh, gawd. What was he supposed to say? '/want you / want you / want you, that's how I feel about you and Smith.' That would have been honest. Smith doesn't know you like I know you; you don't know Smith like I know Smith; it's all wrong and I'm as jealous as hell.

'I'm very happy for you both,' he said. How about that for honesty.

'So you don't feel excluded or, or left out or anything? It's just that you and Smith have lived alone together for so long, maybe you feel I'm crowding you, pushing you out?'

'Ooh, no, not at all, it's nice having you around.' Well, that was true at least.

'You would tell me if it was a problem, wouldn't you? I'd hate you to feel uncomfortable in your own home.'

'I promise you, it's not a problem, it's been so long since Smith was even interested in a woman, it's a relief

in a way.' Pinocchio, eat your heart out. Tm glad to see him happy. I've never seen him this happy before, you're very good for him.' But you'd be even better for me. j

'Oh, good, that's a weight off my mind. So why aren't you seeing Claudia tonight?'

Claudia, Claudia? That was a conversational quantum leap. Ralph had to think hard to remember exactly who Claudia was, let alone why he wasn't seeing her.

‘Oh, yes, yeah, she’s gone to Paris for the weekend, something to do with work - fashion shows or something.’

‘Ooh, very glamorous. I’ve not met Claudia yet, what’s she like?’

‘What, honestly?’

‘Yes, we’re being honest, aren’t we?’ She tore off a piece of kitchen roll and blew her nose, which was running from the heat of the curry.

Well, she’s very attractive, very tall and slim. And she can be quite sweet sometimes. But mainly she’s a real pain. Everything I do is wrong. If I phone her it’s inconvenient, if I don’t I’m a bastard. If I invite her out with my mates she complains that she doesn’t like them, if I go out without her she complains that I’m leaving her out. She tells me I’m scruffy and should make more of an effort, and then when I buy something new she says, “Oh, you can afford to buy new clothes but you can’t afford to take me out for dinner.” I can’t do anything right.’

‘Do you love her?’

‘No.’

‘Do you like her?’

‘Sometimes.’

‘So why are you going out with her?’

‘For the sex, I suppose.’

Well, that’s honest, I guess. Wouldn’t you like to be with someone you were in love with?’

Ralph reached for the kitchen roll - the heat was getting to him too. ‘I have to admit, just lately I’ve wanted something more. I’ve been too scared for a long time, you know - the emotional investment, the insecurity, the vulnerability.’

‘You’ve been hurt in the past?’

‘Well, not hurt as such, just too involved, drained almost - it took over my life and I haven’t wanted to risk getting entangled like that again. But now, I don’t know, I think I might be ready for something real - the love thang.’ He

laughed nervously. He couldn't believe he was talking like this, he hadn't talked to anyone about real feelings for so long.

'Just haven't met the right girl yet?'

Oh, Jem, if only you knew.

'Yeah, something like that.' Time to redirect the conversation: 'So, you and Smith - is it a love thang?'

Jem smiled. 'Oh, yes, definitely. Very, very much so. Smith is everything I ever wanted, he really is. He's perfect.'

No, Jem, he's not. He's a prat and he doesn't deserve you.

'Yeah, he's a great bloke.' Ralph wanted to say something bad about Smith, put him down, but that was really small-minded and mean. He wanted to tell Jem about Smith's disastrous romantic history, that would take the shine off her rose-tinted glasses. He wanted to tell her that Smith thought her ideas about dreams and destiny were ludicrous but a good way to get into her knickers. He wanted to tell her that Smith would drop

her like a hot potato if Cheri was so much as to glance in his direction. There was so much he wanted to say but he couldn't possibly say any of it. Jem saved him from his thoughts.

'How come you don't paint any more?'

Well, they really were getting to the nitty-gritty tonight.

Thew — that's a big question. I wouldn't say that I don't paint any more, more that I don't paint at the moment. I've tried, but the inspiration just isn't there. Maybe I've got too complacent. I was very unhappy when I was younger, very introspective - it was easy to paint then.'

'You've cut yourself off, haven't you? Cut yourself off from feeling things. I bet if you were to meet someone and fall in love it would all come back, all those emotions would be unlocked and you'd be straight down to the studio. It wouldn't feel like a chore, like an effort. Yes, that's Dr Jem's remedy. Get yourself a decent woman and fall in love.'

Irony was just so painful sometimes.

Ralph's eyes were starting to stream now, the chilli heat was on slow-release and his mouth was burning, his lips were swollen, his nose was running and his mind was in overdrive, full of things he wanted to say but couldn't.

'Not finding this too hot, are you, Ralph? All that talk about how you've never had a curry that defeated you?' Jem teased.

'Absolutely not.' Another lie, but there was no way he was going to admit that to this girl! 'Just how I like it. You look like you're suffering yourself, Miss I'm-So-Hard.'

'Humph - no way! This is mild compared to my usual curries, I was being kind for your sake.'

'Oh, I see, you think you're a bit of a chilli queen, do you?'

'I don't think it, I *know* it. Fve never met anyone who can eat food as hot as I can.'

'Well, I think you've just met your match.' Ralph was well and truly fired up with competitive enthusiasm now. He leapt up from the table and took a handful of raw chillies from the bag on the counter.

'OK, one chilli each, whole, no nibbling. Let's separate the men from the mice.'

'No problem. Go on, let me have it.'

Oh, the pain, the sweet searing pain as the astringent oils from the chillies slowly released themselves over their tongues, first a crack as the shiny green skin broke under teeth, then a hint of flavour followed by an exhilarating burst of fire ineffectually doused by a sudden flow of saliva.

You can't swallow it, you've got to chew the whole thing and display it on your tongue,' said Ralph.

Fingers of fire licked at the back of their throats, their brains sending frantic signals to all areas of the body. Jem and Ralph chewed feverishly, rapidly inhaling and exhaling through puckered lips like antenatal mothers and waving their hands in front of their mouths in a futile attempt to calm the flames.

'Oh, fuck- fuck fuck fuck - it's burning a hole through my tongue!'

‘It’s burning a hole into the back of my throat!’

Heart racing, sweat flowing, Ralph beat his fists off the tabletop, his eyes bulging slightly out of his head and tears rolling down his cheeks.

‘OK, OK, time to show, time to show - Fve got to swallow this thing before it kills me,’ Jem shouted, her cheeks pinker than ever. Tongue out, please.’

Ralph and Jem stuck out their tongues, displaying small beds of green mush, and swallowed.

‘Water, water!!!’ yelled Ralph.

‘No, water makes it worse. Lager!’

They gulped greedily but the liquid made no difference.

‘Oh, God, I think I’m going to die! Rice, eat some plain rice!’

They both made a dash to the cooker and picked up handfuls of rice with their fingers, stuffing it into their mouths.

‘Ice! *Is* there any ice in the freezer?!’ cried Jem.

Ralph pulled open the door to the freezer and frantically searched through its contents. ‘Got some, got some!’ He turned the ice tray upside-down and bashed it hard against the work surface, ice cubes flying out in all directions, on to the floor and into the sink. They each picked one up and stuffed them into their mouths, sucking hard to extract every last drop of icy coolness.

‘Oh, Jesus,’ cried Ralph, ‘Jesus Christ!’ The flames were finally beginning to subside but his whole body was still in a state of sublime shock, endorphins flowing through him like some sort of wonderful drug.

‘My God!’ Jem was sliding the ice cube around her swollen lips. That was unbelievable! That was like sex!’

Their heads were spinning and their pulses racing. Both of them were laughing uncontrollably at nothing.

‘That was *better* than sex,’ replied Ralph.

Slowly they sat down again at the table.

‘So, who won?’ asked Jem.

‘I think we can call that a draw!’

‘Oh, no, I don’t think so. Someone’s got to win. Best of three!’

By the time Smith got home the flat was filled with an air of barely contained hysteria. He followed the sound of insane laughter into the kitchen and found Ralph and Jem with their heads in the freezer.

‘What the hell are you two doing?’ he asked, putting his briefcase down on the table amid the sea of empty lager cans, dirty plates and melting ice cubes.

They spun around guiltily, mouths full of ice, cheeks aflame, eyes streaming.

‘Chilli Challenge,’ replied Ralph through his ice cube, desperately fanning his mouth, ‘five each - raw ones -it’s a draw.’

‘What! You’re both fucking mad/’ said Smith, shaking his head slowly. He caught Jem’s eye. ‘Look at you, you look like a lunatic. You look deranged!’

Ralph didn’t think Jem looked deranged, he thought she looked absolutely stunning. Her hair was down now, long black curls framing her brilliant red face, glowing with heat and exhilaration as she hugged Smith. She was hugging Smith. It hurt Ralph to see how quickly she was drawn away from the special cocoon of madness they had woven for themselves tonight and into the arms of Smith, like she was a child he’d been baby-sitting all night whose beloved parent had returned. It had been him and Jem, close and totally together, and then Smith had walked in and crushed the atmosphere like a beetle under the weight of his stupid fucking briefcase. There’d been one brief beautiful moment when Smith had walked into the kitchen and he’d felt like Smith was the odd one out, the spare part, and Jem was his.

But now the night was over, painfully over. Jem was clearing away the debris on the kitchen table, Smith was unknotting his tie and talking about his night with a load of Swiss bankers. It was over.

Ralph was anchored to the spot by the weight of his sadness. ‘Um, I reckon I’ll push off to bed then,’ he murmured quietly. Thanks for a lovely evening, Jem. Thanks for the Chilli Challenge and the curry and everything — it’s been brilliant.’

He leaned down to kiss her on the cheek, just as she turned her face towards him, and caught her fully on the lips. The unexpected sensation sent shock waves through his system, a current of excitement from his lips, down via his heart to a loop-the-loop through his stomach, and ended in a hot glow of pleasure in his groin. It was more powerful than the chillies!

‘Night, then.’ His body was suddenly contorted by the conflicting desires to stay and ravish Jem and to leave the room as fast as his legs could carry him. He stumbled into the bathroom and sat down hard on the covered toilet. He was shaking.

He loved her. He was totally and utterly, stupidly and wonderfully in love with her. Shit.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

‘Och aye, this is the life, is it noo?’

‘Och, and so it is, Siobhan, it’s a bonny wee country and that’s to be sure.’

Rosanne sat in the back seat of the Embassy, her snout stuck through the small aperture in the window, her eyes slanted closed against the bitter December wind that was blowing through her long black ears.

‘Considering you’re the Gaelic one, you do a crap Scottish accent, Mr Kasparov.’

‘Well,’ retorted Karl, ‘have you ever heard Sean Con-nery trying to do an Irish accent? Bloody dreadful!’

Siobhan and Karl had left urban Scotland behind them now, and the landscape was slowly building up momentum, growing from tentative undulations in the south to the full-blown tidal-wave formations they were driving through now, along unending, empty roads, a wonder of nature, a spectacle of breathtaking beauty around every corner. For the last forty-five minutes, since they’d hit the Highlands, their conversation

had consisted of nothing else but ‘ooh’s and ‘aah’s as the sharp Scottish light picked out shimmering threads of silvery water cascading down sheer black hills, or a tiny enchanted island artistically placed in the middle of a loch. The voluptuous landscape that loomed all around them was soft and womanly, carpeted in what looked from a distance like bright-green velvet, and the

late-afternoon sky touched the land below with gentle wreaths of pale-blue mist.

Neither of them had been to Scotland before, and they felt like over-excited children now, dying to see what lay around the next corner yet wanting to linger every time they encountered a view which they knew would stay in their dreams.

‘I hate to say it, but this knocks spots off Ireland. I’ve never seen anything like it,’ said Karl.

Siobhan was studying the atlas on her lap. ‘One more loch and we’re there,’ she said, brushing her windswept hair out of her face.

‘That’s a shame, I could keep driving for ever.’ This was definitely the easiest they’d been with each other for weeks. They’d obviously needed this, a break from London, some distance from their problems. Karl wished it was just going to be the two of them for the weekend, but he liked this Rick de Largy character. He was a nice bloke, maybe it wouldn’t be so bad.

It was four o’clock now and the low northern sun was already starting to set.

‘Should be just in time to see the sunset over the loch. Jeff said it’s breathtaking.’ Karl couldn’t wipe the smile off his face. He took his left hand from the steering wheel and placed it around Siobhan’s shoulders, giving her a little squeeze. ‘Are you nervous?’ he asked.

‘No, well, not really. A tiny bit maybe.’

‘Yeah, me too. It’s going to be fine though, you’ll see. And if you don’t want to join in you can just say you’re not feeling well and sit and watch the view.’

Siobhan forced a laugh. Karl registered its false sound with pain. He couldn't remember the last time he'd heard a genuine, raucous Siobhan belly-laugh. He loved

that laugh; it was a laugh which resonated throughout restaurants, which made people on buses turn and look, which would have got her kicked out of public libraries. Now it was paper-thin, so brittle it sounded as if it could turn to tears, just like that.

They drove on for a while, deep in singular thought, while the sky hung above them like a kaleidoscopic mosquito net, changing colour every second.

'Glencoe two miles: we're nearly there. Are you ready to party, girl, hmm hmm? Ready to take some class A narcotics and just be wild and crazy, hmm hmm!!'

They were looking out for a tiny turning off the main road. The trees were painted white apparently; that was the only way of identifying it.

'There - there!' Siobhan pointed to the left.

They pulled off and followed a short dirt-track to a fork. A peeling green wooden sign to the right said 'St Colombas.'

That's the place.'

The little black car bumped up the track for a while in darkness, but within a couple of minutes Siobhan and Karl were transported to Fairyland; the sides of the tiny lane were lined with bright pink and red Chinese lanterns, hooked on to the branches of diminutive cherry trees, prettily delineating the meandering route through the dark towards the chapel.

'My God, this is beautiful,' whispered Siobhan.

More was waiting for them at the head of the lane: the last dramatic red moments of the sunset reflected in the loch, the clapboard chapel lit up with fairy lights, a set of winding wooden steps from the graveyard down to the banks of the loch hung with more Chinese lanterns, shining the same warm crimson as the sinking

sun, a picturesque wooden boat tied to an ancient wooden jetty bobbing blissfully in the still, icy water. An owl called

from one of the towering chestnut trees around the chapel clearing, and windchimes hanging from the windowframes tinkled gently in a small gust of refreshingly clean air.

‘I want to be buried here,’ said Karl, his jaw hanging.

Even Rosanne was extra quiet, seemingly as enchanted as her masters by the unbelievable beauty of the place.

I thought it was going to be really flash but it’s not, it’s just beautiful. I reckon Jeff must have been a real old hippie when he did this place up.’

They slowly unbuckled their seat-belts and collected their bags from the boot. There was already another car in front of the chapel.

‘OK. Ready, Shuv?’ Karl held his hand out for Siobhan.

‘As I’ll ever be.’

Karl rang the large copper bell hanging outside the vast wooden doors. Within seconds the door was answered.

‘Karl, mate, good to see you. What a place!’ Rick was barefoot, in jeans and a big jumper, and holding a glass of wine.

‘Yeah, isn’t it! I’ve never seen anything like it.’ The two men shook hands.

‘Rick, this is Siobhan, my girlfriend.’

‘Lovely to meet you, Siobhan — Karl never stops talking about you.’

Siobhan attempted to smile, but she could barely breathe. This man was absolutely gorgeous! He was beautiful. She almost felt weak at the knees. Why did

men never tell you things like that; they never said ‘Oh, by the way, so and so’s really good looking.’ She wished Karl had warned her.

‘Pleased to meet you, too.’ Siobhan had suddenly remembered how to behave in a social situation. She smiled her most gorgeous smile and shook his hand firmly and confidently. She was *not* going to be a fat aunt in front of this angelic man, in this magical place. ‘Isn’t this the most

beautiful place you've ever seen?' She was thin, thin and beautiful and desirable. She shook her hair round so that it framed her face.

'Stunning, I can't believe old Jeff would be capable of doing something so nicely. I thought it was going to be all shagpile and satellite dishes and log-effect gas fires. Anyway, come in the two of you - it's freezing out there. We've put the central heating on and Tamsin's just lighting a fire.'

They followed him into the chapel - the damp stone hallway was full of Wellingtons and waterproofs and piles of wood — and then through the main hall and into the body of the building. They both gasped. The room was at least thirty foot high, raftered, galleried and cavernous. It was floored with antique boards and old rugs and lit up by an eclectic mix of dozens of Art Deco lamps and Victorian chandeliers. There were three enormous cream sofas at the far end, dressed in Chinese tapestries and an old oak banqueting table at the near end, covered in candelabras and vases of flowers.,

'Wow!'

. The girl kneeling in front of the monstrously large sandstone fireplace around which the sofas huddled got to her feet and rubbed at the knees of her jeans.

She was small, petite even, with soft, sandy-coloured curly hair tied back in a pony-tail and a light smattering of freckles over her nose and forehead. She wasn't wearing any make-up, and she was, Siobhan was pleased to notice, ordinary - pretty, but ordinary.

'Siobhan, Karl - this is Tamsin.' Karl and Tamsin looked at each other quizzically as their hands touched and a strange atmosphere suddenly descended upon the group.

'Shit—Tamsin—what a coincidence!' Karl was saying.

'Oh - yeah - hi.' Tamsin was looking slightly uncomfortable, stepping from foot to foot.

Siobhan looked at Karl in confusion. Rick looked at Tamsin in confusion.

'You two know each other?' asked Rick.

‘Erm, Tamsin used to be a student of mine - Ceroc -last summer ...’

‘Aaaah,’ said Siobhan.

‘Oh, right,’ smiled Rick. ‘Cool! What an amazing coincidence. I didn’t know you’d been a dance teacher.’

‘Well... you know ... mortgage to pay.’

Yeah, yeah.’

The atmosphere was inexplicably and negatively charged and, instinctively, Rick changed the subject. ‘Well,’ he said, clapping his hands together in an attempt to quell the unsettled mood, ‘let’s show you your room.’

Karl and Siobhan exchanged glances and followed Rick up the stairs and on to the gallery.

‘What’s going on, Karl?’ whispered Siobhan, as they unpacked in their over-the-top Rococo bedroom, walled with swathes of dusty satin Jacquard and batches of browning Victorian and Edwardian photographs in chipped wooden frames.

‘That’s that girl,’ whispered Karl. ‘Remember? That one I told you about. The nympho, steam-train chick — it’s her. The one who had that *menage a trois* with those two French guys.’

‘What?’ Siobhan put her hands to her mouth to muffle her delighted shriek. ‘God, no wonder she looked so awkward. D’you think she was going out with Rick then?’

‘God knows. Probably,’ said Karl, painstakingly arranging his trousers over a large wooden hanger. ‘They live together.’

Siobhan suddenly felt that everything was going to be all right. The house was beautiful, Rick was gorgeous, and his girlfriend was ordinary — an ordinary girl with an extraordinary secret that she bet Rick didn’t know about: it was Tamsin’s place to feel uncomfortable this weekend, not hers. She smiled as her hopes for the weekend elevated towards the woodworm-ridden rafters like big pink helium balloons. She was going to enjoy herself. This was going to be fun.

She flopped backwards on to the huge four-poster, her hair flying out around her head. ‘Isn’t this brilliant! I feel like a princess, the one in the Princess and the Pea!’ She began to bounce around on the vast bed. She was suddenly feeling unbelievably overexcited.

‘Careful, Shuv, that’s a really old bed. You might break it.’

Siobhan stopped bouncing and looked at Karl with disbelief. ‘Oh, charming! You wouldn’t say that if I was some slender young size-eight thing.’

‘I’d say it if you were Will o’ the Wisp, Shuv. Don’t be so sensitive, for God’s sake. It’s probably an antique, and it wasn’t made for bouncing up and down on, that’s

all I’m saying.’ Karl zipped up his holdall and shoved it into the back of the towering tallboy.

A few of Siobhan’s pink helium balloons had burst, leaving her feeling resentful and annoyed. ‘He’s very good looking isn’t he, Rick? You didn’t tell me he was so handsome.’ Siobhan felt the insecure need to wind; Karl up, get a reaction.

‘Yeah, he is, isn’t he? Especially for a radio producer!

Typical — no reaction whatsoever. Siobhan had never tried to make Karl jealous before. She’d never felt the need to test his love, to push him to see how far he could go, how much he could take. But after the way things had been between them for the last two months, since that night at the Sol y Sombra, Siobhan didn’t trust him any more.

Well, sod it. She certainly wasn’t going to let Karl’s attitude stop her from having fun for the first time in, oh, as long as she could remember. She was going to flirt with Rick, she was going to get roaring drunk, take any drugs that were offered to her and she was going to shine, even if it was only for a day and a half.

She decided to get changed, she suddenly felt uncomfortable in her old leggings and Aran cardigan. And she was going to put on make-up and do her hair. Just because Karl hated her fat, it didn’t mean that other men would.

She pulled her neglected make-up bag from her case and sat at the dressing-table under the huge stained-glass window.

Two small pink glass lamps illuminated the area, casting a soft flattering glow. As Siobhan delicately puffed at her face with a big soft brush and carefully applied a thin line of black liquid-liner to her eyelids she felt prettier than she'd felt in months. This

was a magical house: it wasn't 1996 any more, it could be any time, past or future, but it was a time when your dress size was irrelevant, a time when you could be beautiful just because of where you were, because of the particular light of a pretty pink lamp. Fairy lights; magic lamps.

Karl watched her from the bed. 'I guess we should try not to bring up the subject again,' he said.

'What?' murmured Siobhan, disturbed from her reverie.

Tamsin. We shouldn't say anything else about Tamsin and the dance class.'

'Oh, no, you're right. I don't want to talk about London and everything anyway, I just want to get lost under the spell of this place.' She was twisting her mane into an intricate knot of golden strands and stabbing it aggressively from behind with pins from a cardboard holder.

'Do you want a hand, Shuv?' asked Karl eagerly. Siobhan always asked him to put pins in her hair in the old days, when she used to wear it up regularly. He'd loved doing it, it was such a feminine act, and he'd thought himself privileged to be allowed to play such a vital role in Siobhan's grooming.

'No, I'm all right, thanks, nearly finished. You can go down if you like, I'm going to get changed now.'

I don't mind waiting for you.'

'No, really, you go down. It'll spare you the unpleasantness of watching me get undressed.' Siobhan hadn't meant to say that, it had just come spilling out; an unbridled, feral thought had just escaped from her mouth. It was something she'd thought a million times over the last few weeks, few months in reality, and had

never, ever intended to say, and now it was out, free, independent of her. She waited the split second for a reaction with her breath held.

‘Shuv, what the fuck are you going on about?’ Karl was incredulous. ‘You think I don’t like seeing you naked — Jeez, you’re so wrong — I love you naked.’

Oh, nice try, Karl, thought Siobhan, you expect me to believe that? ‘Karl, go downstairs. We’ll talk about this another time.’

‘No! I’m staying here and we’re going to talk about this now. Is this what everything’s been about, all this, all this ... sadness, this sadness between us?’

‘Karl, go downstairs. Go downstairs now or I’ll scream. I do not want to talk about this. I do not want to listen to your bullshit. Get out!’

_ Bald-faced lies. Bullshit. Bullshit, Karl Kasparov. If you liked me this size, why would you be getting sweaty and flustered by that girl from upstairs, why would you think I’d break the bed, why would you want me to get pregnant? Liar.

Karl slowly left the room, and Rosanne followed him, unsettled by the unfamiliar atmosphere, and scared by the anger on Siobhan’s usually placid face.

Siobhan felt no regret; she’d show *him* tonight. She’d be the old Siobhan, happy, poised, funny and attractive, except it wouldn’t be for Karl’s benefit - he wasn’t worthy of such a performance - this would be for Rick.

She slipped on her black tunic, the one she’d made for herself, with the indiscreet split down the front that revealed a good few inches of cleavage - this was the first time she’d had the nerve to wear it — and matching trousers, and slid her feet into strappy sandals.

She opened the door out on to the gallery and looked

down into the room below. Karl and Rick and Tamsin were all sitting on the sofas, drinking wine and talking quietly and politely. As the door closed behind her the trio turned around and looked upwards. Siobhan saw Rick gulp.

‘Siobhan’ - Rick stood up - ‘just in time. I was just about to break open the champagne.’

Siobhan moved as elegantly as she could down the stairs, her heels making a feminine click against the wood as she walked. She felt like a contestant in a beauty pageant.

‘I feel a bit underdressed now,’ said Tamsin light-heartedly, gesturing at her jeans and fleecy top. ‘You look fantastic.’

Rick handed Siobhan a champagne flute. ‘Here’s to a wild and wacky weekend!’

‘Here’s to Jeff!’

‘Here’s to Scotland!’

The four almost-strangers clinked their glasses together. Siobhan met Rick’s glass with a smile that emanated almost entirely from beneath her eyelashes.

‘And here’s to new friends,’ she beamed.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The first bottle of champagne lasted half an hour, the second twenty minutes, and the third was gone almost before it was opened. Siobhan was feeling flushed and was waving goodbye to the last vestiges of her inhibitions. She, Karl and Rick were talking animatedly and frankly about work, and Tamsin was in the kitchen heating through a fortune’s worth of party food from M & S. Siobhan would usually have volunteered immediately to help in the kitchen, and it had crossed her mind, but she didn’t want to, not this time. She wanted to stay out here with the men and elegantly cross and uncross her legs and join in the conversation. She was preoccupied with her posture, keeping her back straight and her chest out and her stomach in, occasionally smoothing her hair back with her hand or fiddling with her rings, watching Rick’s body language and responses, gauging his interest in her and then turning to Karl, wondering if he’d noticed yet.

Tamsin appeared, laden with plates of chicken wings and pizza squares and trout goujons. She put them down on the table unnecessarily hard, hoping to attract attention to herself and her efforts, but none of them even looked around from their conversation.

‘If anyone’s interested,’ she began, then decided to take the unattractive sarcasm from her voice, ‘there’s some food here

— it'll soak up the champagne.'

'Excellent/ someone murmured, but still no one moved, still they sat there and laughed and joked and revolved around Siobhan like balls on a weather-vane.

Rick poured the dregs of the champagne into Siobhan's glass.

'Oh,' said Tamsin, clutching her empty glass, 'was that the last of the champagne?'

'Sorry, darling,' said Rick, 'it was only a drop. There's some wine in the kitchen, do you want me to get you some?'

'No, it's all right,' said Tamsin, unashamedly playing the martyr. 'Til get it. The food's getting cold, by the way,' she added as nicely as she could.

'Oh, go ahead - I won't be eating anything,' said Siobhan. No way. There was only one thing more unattractive than a fat woman and that was a fat woman eating. Things were going really well with Rick, she was feeling wonderfully in control, she'd forgotten just how easy it was to turn a man to mush. She didn't want to blow it now by stuffing her face with chicken and pizza.

'Are you sure you wouldn't like me to bring you back a little something?' asked Rick, getting to his feet.

'Oh, no, really, we had a big lunch on the way down. Maybe I'll have something later.'

As Tamsin and Rick made their way over to the table, Karl approached Siobhan shyly.

'Are you all right?' he asked tenderly, leaning into her shoulder to whisper in her ear, brushing her neck with the tip of his nose.

'Never better,' she replied stiffly, trying to ignore the bolt of sadness and bitter-sweet love that coursed

through her at his touch and the feeling that she wanted to comfort Karl, to reassure him.

'You look a lot happier,' he whispered.

'Well, I'm having a great time. Rick's fantastic.'

‘Yes, he’s great, isn’t he? I told you you’d like him.’

Siobhan gritted her teeth in irritation. ‘I’m going to get some more wine,’ she said, getting to her feet, suddenly aware that she was drunk, as she felt her legs wobble slightly underneath her. She quickly gauged the distance from her seat to the kitchen door and the number of obstacles she would encounter on the way. The last thing she’d want to do now was trip over something or start weaving across the room like a dodgy shopping-trolley.

Unfortunately, she was already too drunk to start trying to regulate her drinking. But then, so was everyone else. The little bag of white powder made an entrance at about eleven o’clock and Siobhan was the first to accept the rolled-up fiver and square mirror from Rick. She turned away slightly in case she messed it up and dabbed lightly at her nose, dislodging a couple of small crumbs before passing the mirror on to Karl.

‘I guess this is when we’re supposed to start being wild and wacky,’ she said.

‘Ah, well remembered,’ said Rick. ‘I brought a tape recorder.’ He walked to the hallway and returned with a tiny, state-of-the-art machine. ‘It occurred to me that we’d come up with all these brilliantly witty ideas and we’d be so pissed that none of us would remember them. This thing’s brilliant, it tapes for six hours and the sound quality is breathtaking.’ He placed it on the mantelpiece. ‘Are we feeling funny yet?’

A general cheer went up and he switched on the machine.

Jeff was right about Rick. He was very funny and his humour infected the other three. They sat for three hours and talked complete nonsense, inventing quiz games and characters and role-playing, Siobhan and Tamsin pretending to be listeners phoning in. It was actually working. Jeff obviously knew what he was doing - there was no way they’d have managed to come up with so many good ideas sitting in a boardroom in the ALR building. The coke had given them all the confidence to contribute ideas they might have felt foolish about in other circumstances, and the alcohol had also lowered their inhibitions and freed up their imaginations.

Siobhan was having the best time ever. Rick thought she was marvellous, and her confidence was sky-high: she knew she was being funny, funnier than Tamsin, and she was thrilled to find that she hadn't lost the ability to flirt, to twist men around her little finger. Rick was hers, and she sat close to him on the sofa, her arm draped carelessly behind his back, not touching, but possessing him none the less. She'd forgotten how good it felt to be the centre of attention.

Finally the hilarity began to die down. It was early morning, the coke was wearing off and the conversation began to pall. Siobhan got up and stretched.

'Do you think we've got enough stuff?' she asked Rick.

'We've got enough stuff to last us the next five years,' he replied happily.

'Well, I need some fresh air,' she said.

'That's an excellent idea,' Rick said, standing up quickly. 'Let me get my coat - I'll come with you. Are

you coming?' He turned to Karl and Tamsin, as an afterthought.

Siobhan went up to her room to fetch her sheepskin jacket. She checked her reflection quickly in the mirror and tidied up her hair, smoothed her eyebrows and applied a little more lipstick. Adrenalin was coursing through her. What was going to happen? Would Rick try it on? How would she react? She thought of Karl and then quickly put him to the back of her mind. She'd go with the flow, see what happened — the worst thing that could happen was a kiss; it was too cold outside for anything else.

The night air hit them like a cold shower as they closed the chapel door. A wind had picked up now, a gentle low wind that whipped around their legs like a cold, ghostly cat. They wandered in silence towards the banks of the loch and sat down on the wooden steps leading to the jetty, listening to the windchimes and hugging their clothes to them to keep warm.

'Blissful, isn't it?' murmured Rick.

'Heavenly,' agreed Siobhan, her elbows on her knees, her face in her hands, watching the loch rippling in the pink glow

of the Chinese lanterns.

‘You could fall in love here.’

Siobhan bristled slightly. ‘Yes,’ she said, ‘I suppose you could.’

They fell silent again.

Rick cleared his throat. ‘You’re a wonderful girl, Siobhan, really you are. I’ve never met anyone like you before. Karl’s a very lucky man.’

‘I don’t think he sees it like that,’ she said with a nervous laugh.

‘Oh, no/ said Rick, ‘he thinks you’re marvellous. He talks about you a lot - he made you sound amazing and he wasn’t exaggerating.’

‘Oh,’ said Siobhan, ‘well.,.’ She was embarrassed.

‘No, really, I think you’re gorgeous ...’ he stopped, ‘Do you mind me talking like this?’

‘Oh, no, please carry on. I’m not going to look a gift compliment in the mouth.’ She couldn’t look at Rick, he’d see her vulnerability.

‘I just think you’re ... you’re ... stunning. You’re so funny and, and warm and clever and beautiful. God, I shouldn’t say this, Siobhan, but if I was single and you were single ...’

She turned to face him.

‘Go on,’ she said.

‘Well, you know, if I was single and you ... you were single, I’d just love to kiss you now.’

Siobhan’s whole body was tingling with excitement and nerves. A flush was rising from her lap to her face.

‘Do you think that would be wrong?’ he asked, his body turned completely towards hers, his eyes searching her face for approval.

‘Well, we could always try it and see if it *felt* wrong and then we could stop it if it did.’

‘But what about Karl?’ Rick pushed some stray hairs behind her ear.

‘What about Tamsin?’ she replied, every hair on her body to attention as a result of his touch.

‘Well, to tell you the truth, we haven’t been getting along so well lately. Tamsin ... Tamsin’s not a very stable girl, she’s not a very happy girl. I sometimes think I may have bitten off a little more than I can chew with her. She’s hard work...’ He was stroking her cheek

now, with the backs of his fingers. ‘God, you’ve got wonderful skin,’ he whispered, ‘it feels like satin.’

Siobhan’s groin felt like it had been plugged into the mains. She groaned softly.

Rick brought his face towards hers. ‘Just like a child’s skin.’ He rubbed his nose gently along her forehead teasing her with his lips. He held her neck with his hand and massaged her jawbone with his thumb. Finally his lips met hers and Siobhan succumbed, turning around to meet his body and his lips, goosebumps and tingles and deep hot flashes of sexual excitement and lust suffusing her body. She hadn’t felt like this for years. She opened her mouth to allow Rick’s tongue to caress hers. His lips were soft and warm, and his breath tasted of red wine and fresh air. Oh, God, French kissing was good. Why did people stop doing it after they got to know each other? Why was such an intimate and erotic act reserved mainly for strangers? She wound her tongue around his and up around his teeth, pressing her body against him as he leant her back against the steps and started to move his hands inside her coat and over the silky fabric of her tunic. She pulled his shirt out of his jeans and caressed the skin on his back, appreciating the solid feel of the muscle underneath and the tension, knowing it was his desire for her that was making him feel so good.

She was lost in their kiss, entirely oblivious to the windchimes and the owls, and to Karl, a few hundred feet away from her, inside the chapel. Rick moved his hands under her top and towards her bra. He let out a stifled moan as his hands found her breasts. Siobhan could feel his frustration at

the fabric that encased them and sloped her shoulders slightly to enable him to slip

the straps off and pull it down. Rick moaned again as his hands felt the bare flesh flow from her bra, she felt his excitement and she could understand it, two huge breasts in his hands: if she were a man she would be excited. He kneaded them gently, still kissing her, his tongue growing wilder and wilder in her mouth, her lips feeling wonderfully raw and sore. She wanted him to kiss her until they bled.

Suddenly he tore his lips away from hers and buried his head inside her coat, under her tunic, between her breasts. He was sighing and groaning and licking her breasts and sucking her nipples. 'Oh, God, Siobhan,' he kept saying. 'Oh, God, Siobhan.'

Siobhan bent slightly to watch him - she'd been staring at the stars, lost in desire and lust - and as her gaze fell upon the top of his head, his sandy blond hair glowing peach in the lamplight, the spell broke. What the hell was she doing? Why was she letting this man suck her nipples, this man with blond hair? For fifteen years she'd looked down on Karl's black mop, my God -Karl! - what was she doing?

Suddenly she was sober and she was cold, physically cold. Rick's hands were sliding down her body, towards the elasticated waist of her trousers, his fingers pulling at it, feeling their way down to the top of her knickers, but she was fully conscious now, wide awake, aware of her surroundings and her circumstances. She was with another man, on the banks of a loch on a sharp December night, her hair was unravelling, her back was aching, she was cold. She felt the last glimmer of passion desert her and anxiety begin to set in. Her body tensed and she pulled back slightly, wanting Rick to calm down too, wanting him to stop but not wanting to tell him to. She

looked down at him again; he was completely consumed, carried away, he wasn't aware of Siobhan's change of mood. This was all wrong, all wrong, it was just supposed to be a kiss — she could've covered up a kiss, walked back into the chapel still feeling confident and in control. This was getting out of

control, how could she hide this from Karl? This was all wrong! Oh, shit! What had she done?!

She sat up, and Rick moved his head from between her breasts and tried to find her mouth again. ‘Oh, Siobhan, I want you,’ he picked up her hand and put it to his groin. ‘Feel how much I want you.’

That was it.

‘Rick!’ she said firmly, ‘we’ve got to stop.’

‘Oh, no, Siobhan, we’ve got to carry on. I want to be inside you, you feel so good, you smell so good,’ he rubbed her hand up and down the solid shaft inside his jeans.

She pulled her hand away, pulled up her bra and her tunic, closed her coat. ‘No, Rick, we’ve got to stop. Karl and Tamsin are in there. What if they come out and find us?’

‘We can hide somewhere - let’s go into, the woods.’ His hand still rested on her knickers.

She pulled his hand away gently. ‘No, that’s enough. I want to, I really do want to, but I can’t, we can’t. It’s not right.’ She tried to smooth down her hair.

Rick’s face wore the expression of a thwarted schoolboy who’d kicked his football into a forbidden garden. Siobhan took his hands in hers. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said gently, ‘if circumstances had been different, if we weren’t here, if I didn’t have Karl and you didn’t have Tamsin ... but, thank you.’

‘What for?’ asked Rick incredulously.

‘Thank you for wanting me, for making me feel sexy and beautiful.’

‘Why would you need me to make you feel sexy and beautiful? You *are* sexy and beautiful!’ he said, kissing her hands.

‘I don’t feel it, Rick, but you made me feel it. I didn’t used to be this fat, you know, I used to be slim. I’m not used to it.’

‘You’re not fat!’

‘Oh, Rick, don’t be such a typical man. Of course I’m fat.’

‘OK, so you’re not Kate Moss, but you’ve got a lovely body, really you have. It’s ... it’s soft and warm and it smells good and it feels good and, OK, it might not look great in a mini skirt, but it looks great to me, like a real woman’s. The first girl I had sex with was round and sexy. She was called Drew, and she was so pretty and full of life and love, and I’ve never really stopped loving her, you know. People are just prejudiced, Siobhan, because maybe they’ve never had a chance to really appreciate someone who doesn’t conform to the ideal. Well, as far as I’m concerned, they don’t know what they’re missing. I mean, look at Tamsin, she’s tiny and she looks great in Lycra and all that, but sex is just, you know - it’s just not all that exciting, she’s very unconfi-dent, restrained. I’d rather have a big woman who loved it than a skinny woman who wasn’t too bothered. And besides, you’re firm, you’re not all flabby. I think that’s perfect.’ He kissed her cheek. ‘I think you’re perfect.’

Siobhan smiled a small smile and squeezed Rick’s hands.

Thank you/ she said again, fighting back a little tear, ‘thank you, you’re a very, very nice person.’

‘So, is that it then?’ He smiled. ‘I have a feeling I’ve just been therapy for you.’

Siobhan felt bad. ‘Oh, no, I mean ... well... I’d love’ to get to know you better... but, well... you know...

Tes, I think I do. You really love Karl, don’t you?’

She nodded.

‘So why all this? What was this all about?’ he asked tenderly.

‘Oh, God. I’m not sure any more. I thought he was interested in someone else. Well, I still do actually. I think. I don’t know. I just thought he was changing, going off me, didn’t fancy me any more. I’ve been feeling so insecure, incredibly insecure ...’

‘Have you spoken to Karl about it?’ Rick pulled her jacket closer around her as a gust of wind hit them from the surface of the water.

‘No, I just can’t. I’ve got some kind of block, I don’t know where to start. I’ve always been so confident and I don’t know if Karl could cope with me being like this, knowing the truth about how I feel.’

‘Look, Siobhan. I don’t know Karl very well, but from what I’ve seen and the way he looks at you and talks about you, he could cope. What he *won’t* be able to cope with is you not telling him. I wish things could be different, I really do. I wish I could have taken you into the woods and made love to you all night and then taken you home with me and made love to you some more, but things aren’t like that, so I think you should use what’s just happened here as a chance for a new start with Karl. Talk to him, tell him how you feel before it’s too late.’ He looked into her eyes seriously. ‘Really, I mean it. Don’t put it off - do it now, tonight, while you’re feeling like this, now! Come on, let’s go inside.’

They stood up and tidied themselves and slowly walked back towards the chapel.

Thanks,’ said Tamsin awkwardly to Karl’s back as he poked at the fire. He turned around. Thanks for not saying anything earlier on, you know, about last summer. I was ... it was ... a strange time...’ She brought a bitten fingernail to her mouth and began to chew.

‘Hey. Forget about it. It’s none of my business.’

They sat in silence for a second.

‘I wonder where they’ve gone,’ said Tamsin, as pleasantly as she could.

‘Oh, they’re probably looking at the view or something,’ said Karl, sitting back on the sofa.

‘Aren’t you worried?’ she asked impatiently.

‘No - why should I be? Rick’s with her, he’ll look after her.’

That’s not what I meant. For Christ’s sake, haven’t you noticed what’s been going on tonight?’

Karl looked blank.

Your girlfriend. Flirting with my boyfriend. Blatantly. Don’t tell me you haven’t noticed anything.’

‘Oh, that’s nothing to worry about. Siobhan always used to be a terrible flirt, it doesn’t mean anything. I’m just glad to see her enjoying herself for once.’

All the resentment Tamsin had been swallowing that night was starting to erupt. ‘God, you really are stupid, aren’t you! That wasn’t just flirting, that was a fucking mating ritual going on in front of your very eyes. They’re probably out there fucking each other’s brains out right now!’

Karl laughed. ‘I think you’re being a bit paranoid, if you don’t mind me saying so. I think you’ve probably had a bit too much coke and booze.’

‘Look, why don’t we go out and see for ourselves!’ she shouted, jumping to her feet.

‘Sit down, for Christ’s sake. You’re being ridiculous. Just because you don’t trust your boyfriend ...’

‘This has got nothing to do with not trusting my boyfriend! It’s your fucking girlfriend I don’t trust. She’s like a bloody black widow, all over him all night, spinning a web around him, like a great fat predator!’

‘God, you’re mad!’ said Karl calmly. ‘Siobhan is the sweetest, nicest, warmest person I’ve ever known and you’re just jealous. And you should learn to trust your boyfriend.’

Karl’s easygoing attitude and condescending manner were pushing Tamsin over the edge. ‘That’s it! I’m telling her! When she gets back, I’m telling her. About you. I know about you.’ There was a wild glint in her eyes as she stabbed the air above her with a finger to accentuate her point. You tell me I should trust my boyfriend! You fucking hypocrite! Why should I trust anyone when there are men like you around? Adulterous, slimy, two-faced, dick-led creeps who’ll fuck anything with a decent pair of legs!’

Karl should have known this was coming.

‘Oh, yes - you think no one knew about you and Cheri in the office at the dance club? Did you think we were all stupid?! Cheri told me all about it. All the sordid details. She told me about the abortion, too — your baby that she had to get rid of. What makes you think Siobhan’s any different to

Cheri? What makes you think I should believe that Rick's any different to you?! It's what makes the world go round, you smug arsehole — sex,

sex, sex! Siobhan wants it, you want it, Rick wants it, we all want it, and you can't trust anyone. So don't sit there telling me I'm paranoid, thinking that you're any different to anyone else, 'cos you're not. Wake up and smell the coffee, dick-for-brains: your girlfriend wants to have sex with my boyfriend and they're probably doing it right now!' Tamsin was crying, angry tears. 'And if they're not doing it they're sure as hell thinking about doing it!'

Karl adjusted himself in his seat and eyed Tamsin thoughtfully. He was still utterly collected.

'I have to say that I am not at all comfortable with the concept of blackmail,' he began, 'so let's just call this a deal, OK? But, if you even so much as think about mentioning my affair with Cheri to Siobhan, there are some things I could tell Rick over lunch one day that I feel sure you'd rather he didn't know about.'

'Huh!' said Tamsin, wiping at her tears, 'you don't really know anything. You can't prove anything.'

'OK, OK. Look, I'm not stupid either, y'know. Everyone knew what you were up to. Those two French guys couldn't keep their mouths shut about your little rosbif-sandwich interlude. There's no point going into this any more than necessary. As I say, this is a deal. I think we should just drop the subject now. If you're really that worried, then why don't you go and have a look outside, but I can assure you, it'll only make you feel worse about yourself. Trusting people has nothing to do with other people, it's in here' — he pointed at his head — 'and you can call it complacency, or smugness, but I call it dignity and happiness. I call it the only way to get through life and stay sane.'

Tamsin couldn't think of anything to say to that.

'Well, it doesn't look like we're going to be able to make any more small talk tonight, so I may as well go to bed,' said Karl. 'I'm very sorry things got a bit unpleasant there — I

guess it's been a long day and a long night. Do you think we could make a fresh start in the morning?'

Tamsin shrugged and stared at the floor.

Karl put out his hand to shake hers. She gave him hers, limply.

Whatever will be will be, Tamsin. Sleep tight.'

He tapped up the stairs, followed by Rosanne, who'd been sleeping in front of the fire, and Tamsin curled up on the sofa with the intention of crying and worrying and revelling in anxiety. Instead the huge amounts of alcohol in her system sent her into a deep and instantaneous sleep.

She didn't hear Rick and Siobhan tip-toe back in, and she didn't even wake up when Rick picked her up like a baby and carried her up the stairs to their room.

The lights went off around the house, toilet chains flushed, floorboards creaked, and suddenly it was silent.

Silent except for the windchimes, the owls and the gentle hum of the tape recorder still going round and round on the mantelpiece, where they had left it recording...

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Ralph woke up with a start. He'd been dreaming, deep disturbing dreams he wasn't used to having. He tried to remember them, but the details had fled his memory already. Something was strange, something was different. The alarm? Yes, the radio, music blaring out from the other side of the room where he'd left it... Why? ... What? He'd set the alarm, last night. What time was it? 7.30 a.m. — fucking hell. He pulled the thin pillow from under his head and put it over his face, trying to block out the music and the light strobing through the minuscule gap between the curtains. As consciousness returned to him, slowly and painfully, he became aware of the lyrics to the song playing on the radio: 'I feel so dirty when they start talking cute ... I wanna tell her that I love her but the point's probably moot... I wish that I had Jessie's girl...'

Jesus Christ! Ralph took the pillow from his head and sat up slowly. It was seven-thirty in the morning and he could relate

to Rick Springfield — this was a very strange start to the day.

Ralph pulled himself from under the warmth of his duvet towards the radio, trying to find the Off button on this alien piece of equipment. Eventually he unplugged it in desperation and sat back on his heels as silence returned to the bedroom.

Someone out there was trying to get at him; it was

the first time in months that Ralph had set his alarm and it woke him up with fucking ‘Jessie’s Girl’. Unbelievable!

He was utterly disoriented. What the hell was going on? The studio - of course! He was going to go to the studio today. Why? Because he was an artist? Sort of. Because he wanted to? Not really. Because ... because Jem had told him to ... that’s right. Because Jem had told him to. Well, not told him to exactly, but encouraged him to, advised him to, *wanted* him to.

He’d promised her he would, just to make her happy. You’re right, he’d said. Tomorrow — I’ll go tomorrow, bright and early. Don’t do this for me, she’d said, do it for yourself, promise me. I promise you, he’d said.

So here he was, seven-thirty on a Friday morning, shell-shocked, exhausted, cold and confused. He certainly did not feel like he was doing this for himself -this was for Jem, plain and simple, to make her proud of him, milk her interest in him. He would be her little project if that’s what she wanted: he didn’t mind playing the tortured artist for her if it meant that he occupied her thoughts for a while and displaced Smith. Smith was a banker, more or less, a boring old bloody banker, nothing there to capture Jem’s imagination.

He walked over to the windows and threw open the curtains, ready to face the day now he remembered why he was doing this. What a beautiful day! That helped. He’d borrow Smith’s bike and cycle there, get some oxygen into his lungs, as his mother used to say.

He pulled on some boxer shorts from a pile on the floor and made his way into the hall, quite perky now, humming to himself, ‘I wish that I had Jessie’s gi-i-irl, I want Jessie’s gi-i-irl...’

‘Didn’t know you were a Rick Springfield fan.’

What?’ Ralph jumped. It was Jem, coming out of Smith’s bedroom wearing one of his T-shirts that barely concealed her ... her knickers? Her hair was unruly, her face sweetly sleepy and swollen; she looked like a baby mouse. She yawned.

‘So,’ she said, ‘what do you think of seven-thirty in the morning, then? Horrible, isn’t it?!’

Not so horrible after all - not when you got to see Jem, braless and fantastically dishevelled, in a T-shirt with the tantalizing promise of maybe, if she was to bend over just the weeniest bit, glimpsing the last centimetre or two of her bottom, or maybe ... maybe ... if she was just to stretch a little bit and the front of her T-shirt was to ... augh, God. He pulled his gaze away from her legs.

‘Grim!’ he agreed.

‘I got up especially early to give you some moral support. I hope you appreciate it!’

‘Oh, God, you didn’t have to. That’s very sweet of you.’ She’d got up early, just for him! Left Smith alone in bed, for him. Yes! ‘D’you want to use the bathroom first?’

‘No, you go first. I’m going to make you some breakfast, set you up for the day! I wouldn’t mind a quick wee, though.’

‘Oh, sure, of course.’

He moved out of the way to let her get to the bathroom, her body just barely brushing up against his as she passed, just enough to induce an unexpected erection inside his baggy shorts, which forced its way jauntily through the gap at the front and emerged squinting into the brand-new day, like an overzealous mole. Shit. He pushed it back inside, buttoned the fly quickly with fumbling fingers and crossed his hands in front of his

crotch. Jem had left the door slightly ajar and he could hear her peeing, that strange gushing, jerky sound of girl’s pee hitting water, and then the sound of toilet paper being unravelled from the wooden holder and folded and wiped across her. And then she was out again, grinning widely at him.

‘I didn’t flush it — hope you don’t mind. See you in the kitchen!’

She skipped off down the hall. Ralph watched her as she went, her T-shirt rising just not quite high enough with every bouncy step she took. He exhaled deeply the breath he’d been holding since their bodies had touched and walked into the bathroom. He stared down into the toilet bowl at Jem’s pee and the raft of pink paper floating on top of it, sinking slightly as it became waterlogged, and aimed his semi-hard penis at the yellow water, feeling strangely gratified by the sight of their fluids mingling before his eyes. Yes, he liked the idea of their bodily effluents becoming as one ... and he absolutely adored the idea of Jem now, in the kitchen, tinily T-shirted and cooking his breakfast... mmmmm! He smiled smugly to himself. Things were looking up.

It had been two weeks now since their first night together, their chilli night, and Ralph had been working incredibly hard to sustain the bond they’d formed. He realized now that this was more than a crush, more than jealousy or lust. He was most definitely in love and he had no intention whatsoever of ignoring it, of putting his feelings to one side. He’d never been in love before and he was not going to let this opportunity slip through his fingers. He was going to take it slowly and cautiously.

He had suddenly started taking an interest in Smith’s social and professional affairs, subtly discovering when

he was going to be out and making sure he, Ralph, was in, that he had some time alone with Jem. He’d bought a couple of new tops and had finally washed his jeans, a job he’d been putting off for six months. He also bought flowers regularly now, from Northcote Road — peonies, of course - and made sure that he timed it so that he was artistically and sensitively arranging them in a vase when Jem got in from work. He’d even cooked for her a couple of times. And they’d developed a banter about hot food. ‘Oh, you must go to such and such a restaurant in Earlsfield/Bayswater/Brick Lane. Best vindaloo I’ve ever had — really, really hot’; or ‘Guess what? They’ve started selling Thai Bird chillies in Asda.’ Ralph had even found some chilli seeds for sale in North-cote Road, and Jem

and he had planted them, taking it in turns to water them and discussing their progress together, anxiously, like fretful parents.

This was a particularly successful development as it not only brought Jem closer to him, but also alienated Smith, who suffered from a tendency to order lamb pasanda and things with almonds and cream in. It was a tiny but effective little spanner in the works of Smith and Jem's cloying complicity. Ralph shared something with Jem that was somehow outside the realm of a non-romantic relationship — their own complicity. And now there was the tortured artist thing.

They'd been watering the chilli seeds in the airing cupboard the night before, and Jem had brought the subject up.

'Had any more thoughts about painting, Ralph?'

'Painting what?' he'd replied absent-mindedly, thinking maybe she was suggesting a new lick of paint in the living room.

'You know. Painting. You - studio - artist,' she'd said, with her palms outstretched, emphasizing his obtuseness.

'No. Was I supposed to?'

'No. You weren't *supposed* to, I just thought you might have, that's all.'

'Why's that?'

'I don't know. You just seem different lately, somehow. More... more... purposeful. More alive. I had actually been wondering if you might have met someone!' she j added playfully, nudging him in the ribs.

'No, I haven't "met" someone,' he retorted, nudging her back and laughing. 'I've got a girlfriend, remember.'

'Oh, yes - the lovely Claudia.'

'And what have you got against Claudia all of a sudden?' Ralph was surprised and faintly pleased by the mild sarcasm in her voice.

'Nothing' — Jem took a deep breath — 'except she doesn't make you happy and I think you could do better for yourself.'

She patted ineffectually at the moist soil in the small plastic pots, for something to do to cover her embarrassment.

‘Oh, bless you, Jemima. I didn’t think you cared.’ Ralph was coming across as light-hearted, but inside his chest his heart was racing like a Formula One car. Finally, finally, she was cracking- she cared, she cared!! ‘So, who do you think would be better for me then?’ he asked cocking one eyebrow slightly in an attempt to look coy.

‘Oh, I don’t know. Someone who makes you feel good about yourself, someone who appreciates what a lovely bloke you are and doesn’t just complain the whole time, someone who would inspire you to do what you’re best

at and not just treat you like a ... like a ... like an airhead gigolo!’ She was practically kneading the already smooth soil now, her face reddening slightly.

Ralph laughed, hard and loud.

“‘An airhead gigolo!’” God that’s funny. I’ve never thought about it like that before, but I think you’re right! I think that’s exactly how she sees me. A gigolo!’

‘No, really, Ralph, I’m being serious. There’s a desperate shortage of nice blokes around in this world and you’re wasting yourself on Claudia. Believe me, there’s thousands of girls out there, nice girls, who would just love to go out with a guy like you. And if you had a nice girlfriend you’d spend less time bloody worrying about what you were going to do wrong next, and being inadequate and not good enough for some souped-up Sloane, and more time doing what you’re good at. Painting. Really. I mean it,’ she finished, closing the door of the airing cupboard and heading for the kitchen. Ralph followed closely behind, not wanting to miss a syllable. ‘Girls like that make me so angry - they give other girls a bad reputation. Dump her and start painting, Ralph. Please.’

Oh, blimey. This was getting a bit heavy now. ‘Can I just try the painting bit first and then see if I still need to dump Claudia afterwards?’

She punched him playfully. ‘God - can’t live without the sex, can you!’

‘I’m not going to deny it, I’m a voracious animal,’ he smiled, leaning backwards against the work surface.

‘Well, I wouldn’t want you to do all this just because I say so,’ Jem said, replacing the water-spray under the sink, ‘but if you thought you were up to it you should definitely give it a bash, just one day at a time — see

how you feel. That’s always the way in life: the longer you leave things, the harder they are to do...’ She trailed off. ‘Do it, Ralph, go tomorrow. Get up early, get to your studio and see what happens. Maybe you won’t paint anything, maybe you’ll just come straight back again, but at least you’ll have got out of this cycle of just staying at home all day doing nothing — eh?’ She was standing in front of him, looking up at him through her eyelashes, a stern but amiable expression on her face which stopped Ralph from feeling that he was being pressurized and more like he was being cared for, warm and nice inside. It had been a long time since he’d felt that way.

‘OK,’ he said, feigning defeat under duress, ‘OK. Just one thing, though — what exactly do you mean by “early”?’

‘Oooh, no point being half-hearted about this. Seven o’clock?’

‘No way! Eight,’ he countered.

‘All right. Seven-thirty and no arguing!’

‘OK, but that stinks, it really does. Even you don’t have to wake up that early.’

Jem smiled. ‘You’ll feel good about it, I promise. You’ll feel happier with yourself.’

And then that all too familiar moment arrived — the depressing sound of Smith’s key in the lock, the twinge of pain in Ralph’s heart as Jem’s face lit up like the woman’s in the Terry’s All Gold advert, and she was gone, gone from him, and into Smith’s arms.

But she was his again now, for a few delicious moments, before Smith got up; she was in the kitchen cooking him breakfast - she’d never cooked Smith breakfast - and

she was wearing that teeny-weeny, itsy-bitsy T-shirt. He rushed his shower, not wanting to miss a moment, dressed quickly but thoughtfully in his cleanest clothes, splashed on a bit of designer aftershave (a present from an ex), fluffed up his hair and made his entrance.

Jem was coaxing the last few baked beans from the bottom of the can. 'I always feel mean if I leave a few stray ones,' she said, 'like they'll feel rejected or something.' She flicked on the gas ring and gave the beans a quick stir. 'Could you handle laying the table?' she asked. 'I'm just getting to the brain-to-hand co-ordination bit.'

She had put an apron on over the T-shirt, tied in a bow at the back, forcing the precarious garment a little higher up her legs but still... still just not quite high enough. Maybe if she had to reach for something from one of the cupboards higher up, like ... the ketchup!

'Jem, would you mind passing me the ketchup? It's in that cupboard just over your head.'

He watched with bated breath; Smith's T-shirt had been clinging stubbornly to the back of Jem's thighs all morning like a prudish nanny, but now it was time. There was no way its resolute spirit could survive the impact of reaching for the ketchup.

Jem raised herself on to tiptoes, her back started to stretch, her arm left its side to begin the journey to the cupboard, the T-shirt moved a millimetre, two millimetres, three millimetres, and there it was! Almost. Oh, God, just another millimetre ... Ralph was frozen to the spot with painful anticipation... Just another millimetre ... Shit! Shit!! Jem's free hand suddenly grabbed the hem of the hateful T-shirt and pulled it down staunchly over her thighs as she completed the stretch and grabbed the bottle. Ralph couldn't believe it.

'There you go.' She handed him the bottle, seemingly unaware of his intense disappointment and frustration

Let's face it, he thought, I was" not meant to see her bottom, it's not going to happen, forget about it. But, dear God, he wanted to see her bottom. If it was anything like her silken thighs he absolutely had to see it.

‘Sorry, Jem. Mustard?’ He gestured at the same cupboard with his eyes.

She tutted good-naturedly and reached for the cupboard again. The mustard was further back in the cup board and she had to stretch that little bit more, using her spare hand to steady herself on the work surface. Ralph stopped and stared again: one millimetre ... two millimetres ... three, four, five - Jesus! There it was! Six, seven ... his mouth was dry, his eyes bulging ... oh, sweet Jesus ... the most beautiful, edible, luscious little bundle of bottom, pale and smooth and... bottomy ... and, oh God, want to bite it want to bite it...

‘I hope you’re not looking at my bottom, Ralph McLeary!’ laughed Jem, turning around.

Ralph spluttered. ‘What? Me?’

‘Yes, you. Here’s your mustard.’

Ralph reached out for it with trembling hands, trying to look unfazed and innocent, turning too soon and missing the jar entirely. It dropped to the floor and, quite contradictory to Ralph’s expectation of what would happen if you dropped a jar of mustard on to a linoleum-covered floor, it smashed into several pieces, depositing a splat of dirty yellow paste all over Jem’s bare feet.

‘Oh, God, Jem, I’m so sorry.’ He rushed for the kitchen roll and pulled far too much off, bundling up the mass of paper and soaking it under the tap. ‘I’ll wipe it off for you. I’m so sorry.’

He got down on his knees at Jem’s feet and began to dab at the mustard. ‘There,’ he said, ‘it’s coming off.’

‘Of course it’s coming off,’ said Jem. ‘It’s mustard, not creosote!’

Ralph held her ankle tenderly as he wiped her tiny white feet. ‘There,’ he said, letting his hand slide a little further up her calf, his whole body stiff with the excitement of being so close to the hem of her T-shirt, his face inches from her naked groin, his hands encasing her legs and her feet, the mustard suddenly an erotic lubricant; he would quite happily have licked it off her.

‘There. Almost done.’

He tore a single sheet off the roll and dried her feet with it, delicately, moving the paper in between her toes with his finger, his other hand still moving slowly further up her leg, almost behind her knee now. He was disappointed to realize that the job was finished; all the mustard was gone. He patted her leg and got slowly off his haunches, leaning his body in a little bit as he rose, keeping his nose close to her body, breathing her in deeply. Suddenly his eye was caught by a couple of small yellow specks on her legs.

‘Oh,’ he said, breathlessly, ‘there’s a bit more.’

He put his finger back in the paper and brushed at the splashes, wobbling slightly on his tired knees and grabbing the top of her leg quickly to keep himself steady. Warm, soft, lovely, lovely legs. She didn’t flinch at all, just stood still, looking down at him with a small smile on her face.

‘You’re very thorough,’ she said.

‘All gone,’ he said nervously, slowly, very slowly getting to his feet, his nose almost brushing against the protrusion of her breasts through the T-shirt. He was

standing perilously close to her, towering over her, his heart beating so hard he could hear it in his ears.

She didn’t move. ‘Thank you,’ she said.

He didn’t move. ‘My pleasure,’ he said.

‘No mustard for your sausages, then,’ she said.

‘I guess not,’ he said.

Neither of them made any attempt to return to their respective chores. They stood where they were, for what seemed like eternity but was probably only a few seconds.

‘Ralph?’

‘Jem.’

‘Remember what I was saying yesterday — you know, about thinking that you deserved someone better, how I think you’re quite special?’

Ralph hardly dared breathe. He felt like he was being kept upright only by the magnetic force that Jem was radiating, like

if she was to walk away he would just collapse in a heap on the floor. Tes?’ he replied expectantly. Oh, God. What was she going to say?!

‘Well, I just wanted to say... oh, shit!’ Her face became panicked and she turned around abruptly, ‘Shit — the bacon!’ She pulled the pan off the heat and opened the window over the sink.

The kitchen was thick with grey, caustic smoke, the bacon annihilated, shards of brittle black charcoal sitting shamefacedly in the pan.

‘Oh, bollocks!’ she exclaimed, laughing. ‘No bacon either, I guess.’

‘Never mind,’ said Ralph, ‘the beans are my favourite bit anyway. Don’t worry about it. Carry on. What you were saying, you know, just now ...’

‘Oh, yes,’ said Jem, ‘That. I was just going to say ...’

A deafening wail obliterated her sentence, a high-pitched shriek emanating from somewhere in the flat.

‘What the hell is that?’ shouted Ralph over the din.

Smith was standing in the doorway in a green towelling dressing-gown, looking dazed, his hair all over the place. ‘What’s going on?’ he mumbled with annoyance. ‘Why’s the smoke alarm going off?’

‘Oh, God. I burnt the bacon,’ said Jem. ‘Quick, Smith, blow on it — blow on the alarm!’

The three of them congregated in the hall. Smith stood on a stool and blew on the alarm, fanning away the small amount of smoke with his sleeve.

‘What were you making bacon for anyway?’ he asked, bristling with irritation.

‘For Ralph. For his breakfast,’ she added unnecessarily.

Smith continued blowing and fanning until, eventually, the unbearable siren died down.

‘Jesus,’ he said, getting off the stool and smoothing down his hair,

‘Sorry, boyfriend!’ said Jem, holding out her hand to him. ‘At least we know it works, though.’

‘Hmmm,’ replied Smith, gruffly. Well, I suppose it was time to wake up anyway. Is there any breakfast for me?’ he asked.

She smiled at him radiantly. ‘Of course there is. Coming right up!’

Smith went for a shower then, and Ralph and Jem returned to the kitchen, Jem cracking eggs into a clean pan and turning the heat down under the now almost solidified beans.

‘Jem,’ said Ralph, putting out knives and forks, ‘what you were saying...?’

‘Til tell you later,’ she said, and carried on with the breakfast.

Later. Later? It was another one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, TEN! hours until later. How could he possibly wait ten hours to hear what Jem had to say? That was impossible.

‘Can you not just give me a little clue?’ he said, wincing.

‘Oh, God, Ralph! It’s no big deal. I’ll tell you later, OK?’

‘OK,’ he said, taking a seat at the table and watching her deftly co-ordinating the final stages of the greasily aromatic breakfast.

Smith came into the kitchen and breakfast was served.

‘There you go — a proper working man’s breakfast for proper working men,’ said Jem, placing plates covered with eggs and sausages and beans and mushrooms and huge slabs of hand-sliced toast dripping with butter in front of them. ‘Get stuck into that!’

‘You are an angel, you’re a saint, you’re totally and utterly perfect! Thank you!’ Under the circumstances Ralph felt able to blast Jem with superlatives and adoration without arousing discomfort or suspicion (the way to a man’s heart and all that) and Jem took it as it sounded rather than as it was meant, smiling happily at her satisfied customer.

His overpowering need for satiation, stimulated by the morning's string of oddly sensuous encounters, was projected on to his food, and he ate like an animal, wolfing down the huge plate of food in moments. He wanted to go now anyway. Smith and Jem were playing

footsie

under the table and smiling at each other over their breakfast plates. He took his plate to the dish-

washer, packed a small rucksack with a radio, some mini Mars Bars and a spare jumper, grabbed Smith's bike and helmet and set off down the road. Smith and Jem waved him off sweetly from the top of the basement steps, arms around each other, looking almost like proud parents. The notion made him feel queasy, quashing the whole air of ripe desire and eroticism that had inflamed his morning.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Ralph cycled quickly, taking the scenic route along the river, over Battersea Bridge, past the desirable residences of Cheyne Walk, down Grosvenor Road towards Millbank.

“Where can I find a woman like that - like Jessie's girl...” He sang loudly to himself as he pedalled, not caring who heard. He was bursting at the seams with pent-up everything - lust, jealousy, love, hurt, excitement, disappointment. This was unbearable, totally unbearable. How could he go on like this, living under the same roof with the two of them, Jem not minding if he saw her bottom, telling him he was ‘special’ and then playing footsie with Smith as if he didn't exist? Was she doing it on purpose? Maybe she was a nymphomaniac after all. No. No. That wasn't right. There was more to it than that, much more. There was something between them, something ... spiritual. Oh, what rubbish. Spiritual! No, they got on, it was as simple as that. They got on very, very well together, they had a ‘special’ relationship. If he didn't fancy her so much he could very well have been friends with her - that would have been novel, a female friend. But that was impossible now, especially after this morning, especially after the pee in the toilet and the T-shirt and the mustard and everything.

What was it she wanted to say to him? He couldn't get it off his mind. Oh, well — he only had one whole enormous, never-ending day to wait to find out.

He turned right and left at Parliament Square and followed the river on to Victoria Embankment, still cycling suicidally fast, ignoring the burning in his leg muscles and the possibility of errant pedestrians walking into his path.

It was a glorious day, cold in the nicest possible way, the sky an unfeasible blue, the Houses of Parliament gleaming like freshly washed bedsheets.

Fucking Smith. Fucking bloody Smith. Smith had always had the better luck. From early on. Smith had the smart house in Shirley, the nice liberal parents, the coolest friends, the best-looking girls after him, the flash car on his eighteenth birthday, the holidays, the job, the money, the flat, the career. Ralph had just tagged along to start with, feeling out of his depth and insecure.

His parents were old, much older than anyone else's parents, and timid of nature. He couldn't have invited anyone back to their house in Sutton—his mother would have laid a table of Viscount biscuits and cardboard jam tarts and wanted to chat with his 'ymmg friends' about school and the weather. His father would have taken refuge in the garden, pottering around in his twill cap with his rake and his hoe or whatever, looking like an elderly groundskeeper in a stately home. The television would be switched off- it was rude to have it turned on in company — and the small beige living room would have resonated with the sound of the old wooden clock on the wall ticking away the interminable seconds.

He'd had to work hard to find his feet in Smith's world. The first time he'd been round to see Shirelle, he'd been almost morally shocked by the attitude of Smith's

parents, who swore frequently and shouted loudly over the din of every television in the house, and let Smith's friends come and go without the slightest interest in who they were or how their schoolwork was going or whether they were about to have sex wi