

Chapter One

A body – his body, is lying in the middle of the floor. My floor. You can see straight away it's dead. One leg is drawn over the other at the knee, the leg beneath bent back as if he had been trying to run away horizontally, but the head half faces the ceiling, thrown back, face contorted into an agonised frown as if struggling to keep the soul from leaving. The hands have stopped pulling at the kitchen knife protruding from the dark, spreading stain on his shirt and lie limp, fingers curled. Life is a red rorschach pattern oozing across the parquet. Some of it has already soaked along the edge of the white rug lying near the body. Everything is immensely quiet.

Immediately I become aware that nobody who has touched, loved, known this body will ever be the same again. Change has arrived, violent and inescapable, unbearable yet having to be borne. I reflect on this with a peculiar clarity, re-visiting the past, visualising the future, aware of the tactile present – my fingernails digging into my palms, my elbows against the wall. The red stain on the white rug grows larger. This is the moment of rupture, the death of trust, the birth of remorse. The world of might-have-beens and should-have-beens and if-only's and why-didn't's has arrived to take over our lives forever.

And him. His picture will be seen, his voice heard - by us but not by him.

All these thoughts come to me with a cold matter-of-factness in the same moment that a hideous pain cramps my stomach and causes me to step forward and cry out angrily, Wake up, for God's sake! Wake up! wake up!

I'm outside myself. I notice myself sitting there, right next to him on the floor shaking at the body. Everything in the room is bright and hard. I can see the blood trickling towards the legs of the table, the rug is completely red now. I want to clean up, mop up. I try to get up and the light above the kitchen table starts swaying, the table itself starts swaying, I'm slipping over into the blood.

Then I'm lolling in a chair, someone is holding me and putting something cold on my forehead and saying, It's all right, trying to wash me clean and I'm not sure where I am.

* * *

The spring of that year. Janet and Ashley's spring party. The whole family was there: James, Robert and Thomas, with *her*. First time I'd seen them together as an item.

'Yes we've had to invite them I'm afraid,' Janet had said on the phone, 'no choice really darling,' I walked around the house with the phone, looking for cigarettes, matches, squeezing the handset between my ear and my shoulder, lit up and let out puffs and tendrils of smoke which drifted towards the ceiling while she talked on in her actressy voice... 'I mean, Bee darling, come on, you can't stay in hiding for the rest of your life. We'd absolutely adore you to come.'

'Have you asked the boys?' I wandered round the kitchen. The delicately balanced finger of grey ash had grown impossibly long. It fell into the butter dish as I reached over for the ashtray.

'Course darling.'

'And they're coming?'

'So they assure me.'

With my left hand I awkwardly scraped the ash off the butter with the breadknife. 'I'll think about it.'

James had telephoned me, 'Come with us, mum, I'll pick you up. I'll bring you home if you don't want to stay. Wear that green dress mum, you look great in it now you're so slim.'

Thomas rings me up once in a while. Salving his conscience. 'Are you all right Buddle?'

Yes, Buddle!

'Of course I'm all right. You okay?'

'Yeah, we're okay.' He clears his throat uneasily, 'Just got back from Mexico,' (he says Mehico, in that semi-ironic, apologetic way of the rather rich.) 'went before it got too late.'

'Got too late?' I know perfectly well what he means, but I need to embarrass him, give myself a nasty little lurch in the stomach.

He clears his throat again, 'Before the sprog decides to emerge.'

I take the high ground, 'Are you really up for this, Thomas, all over again? All those sleepless nights, pee soaking through the sheets, through the mattress, into the springs of...but then you'll be able to afford a nanny from the word go, this time round...'

'Don't start on me Buddle...too late now to...well,' the throat congested again, 'it wouldn't be fair to Sarah not to give her the chance to be, er,' nervous laugh, 'fecund.'

'No.'

'Seen much of the kids?'

Thus emerges the purpose of the call. They don't contact him much, the boys, well not boys, young men I suppose. They disapprove of him these days. Or so they tell me. And they can't stand her, the way she clings proprietorially to their father, her rapidly disappearing waistline, the way she puts out her starlet's fake smile, the way she chatters.

'They were over yesterday.'

'Oh.'

'James brought his new girlfriend.'

'Nice?'

'Same age as yours as it goes...seemed a bit more intelligent..'

'Buddle...'

'Okay, okay.' I punched the phone off and swing it about by the tip of its aerial. I like being caustic with Thomas. I feel like a pacifist fighting a just war, doing what must be done. Except for my guilt – another story, my guilt.

I gaze at the two of them now across Janet and Ashley's lawn. They look brown. Just back from Mehico.

Thomas is gone almost completely bald these days, I notice, trying to feel gleeful. Their bellies are approximately the same size, but hers is tauter. At skin level it must look something like the shiny brown top of his large head, whereas his belly is slack and creased, an old leather handbag which has carried too much junk about for far too long. At the moment it's weighing down his old denim shirt which manages to more or less contain it over the belt of his low-slung jeans. Small tufts of grey hair are visible through the stretched buttonholes. Even from here. What does she see in him, I wonder. Meal ticket? Career opportunity? Name to drop?

She will drop him I suppose, after a while.

I see my eldest son, Robert, wander into the garden with a young man I haven't seen before; a tall, slender young man with a narrow, eager-looking face. They stand looking around for a moment and then make for me. Robert puts an arm round me and squeezes. 'Mum, this is Jake, friend of mine from the maintenance department.'

You could tell straight away, or is it just hindsight, that he is nervous, this Jake. You can tell by the way he's smiling too hard. The kind of young man who would never miss a party, even though he knows he's going to feel like a fish out of water. He has an anxious, hunting look, the look of someone hunting for a friend.

'Hallo Jake,' I say, giving him the soppy welcoming smile that mothers reserve for their sons' acquaintances.

'Hallo Robert's mum,' he essays, looking hard into my face and shaking my hand, 'I've heard a lot about you, I mean, Robert's always telling me about what a cracking mum he's got.'

Robert glances at me and raises his eyebrows looking a bit irritated.

'He is ? ...he probably means cracking-up mum.'

'Mum,' Robert groans, 'I wouldn't say that...'

But Jake carries on, 'says you're a mother in a million...I'll bet you're a mother in a million...you look like a mother in a million to me...in fact, come to think of it, frankly, you don't look like a mother at all, sort of, you look like a...'

'Back in a moment,' Robert says, giving a slight wince, 'Mum'll look after you.' He smiles apologetically at me and vanishes inside through the French windows.

Jake's tongue flutters nervously round his lips, 'Shall I get you another drink, er, sort of...Mrs...er...'

'Bedelia.'

'Bedelia. Wow!' He snake-flicks his tongue and runs it round his lips, 'Bed-eel--ya. Cracking name. Completely.'

Did I really have a fleeting vision of the predator, relishing his future game, even then?

'Think so?'

'Completely.'

He fetches me a glass of wine and another can of beer for himself and stands next to me eyeing the garden. 'Helluva place this. I'll say. Worth a bob or two.' His eyes focus on the opposite side of the lawn. 'That your ex over there? Robert's dad?'

I glance over and fail to be nonchalant, 'It is, so help me. Thomas Grayson himself, writer, broadcaster, media personality, man of the moment, fifty-nine years old, expectant father...won't you look at the belly on him for God's sake.' My tongue, oh my tongue.

Jake looks at me speculatively, as if daring himself and presses his lips suddenly against the side of my forehead. They feel smooth and slightly moist from the beer. 'Don't you worry about it Bed. Plenty more fish in the sea...'

'Hm,' I say, 'sea's a bit overfished come October, nothing left but sprats and prats.'

But he's busy with his own sentence. 'Bed... Bed,' he sounds out the syllable exploratively, 'could be a bit...er...confusing that name of yours...bit of a come on...' 'Come on...Bed...' he laughs suddenly, embarrassed at himself, 'sort of.' He rivets his eyes onto mine. 'Bedelia, you're blushing.'

'Never.'

'I mean, I know I shouldn't ask ... how old are you Bedelia?'

'None of your business,' I move my eyes out of range.

'Like, old enough to be my mother, I know. Like, you don't look it' He gives that self-conscious laugh again, which was less irritating then than it is now. Irritating enough though.

'Don't you ever say anything original...er...Jake?'

It is his turn to colour up and I can see that I've hurt him.

'Not a very original person, I'm afraid, not your man of the moment...sort of just...'

'Salt of the earth.'

'Now who's being original?'

'Just trying to make you feel at home.' I could feel my bitchy mode coming on. What the hell am I doing, I thought, taking it out on this nice enough, ordinary bloke, because that fat slob is holding court on the other side of the lawn with his simpering twenty-five-year-old pregnant mistress - sorry, partner. I stretch up and return Jake's kiss onto his lightly stubbled cheek. 'I'm sorry Jake, that wasn't called for.' I laugh encouragingly, 'I'm a glutton for salt, actually.'

He beams with relief, 'Are you now. I think you need another drink.' He pushes his way through the crowd by the drinks table, squashing and discarding his empty can into a bin as he goes. I notice his purposeful, long legs, the way his dark blue cotton shirt pouches emptily over a plaited leather belt, the way his head is also almost bald, but from choice - a stubble of dark hair tapering into a sculptured, delicate nape.

I take in the scene in the garden. I half close my eyes and let the five or six circles of chattering people turn into multi-coloured shrubs swaying and gesticulating on the grass. I focus again on Thomas who has captured the boys, a fatherly arm around each of their shoulders, his voice slightly more resonant than anyone else's. Sarah sits on a stool next to him wearing her carefully constructed earth-mother-to-be smile, pushing her long, blonde hair back behind her ears. Around him a circle of acolytes murmurs and laughs in the short gaps between the sound of his voice.

I want Jake to come back quickly. When I catch sight of him inching towards me, holding my glass above the crowd, smiling his nervous smile, my heart lifts.

* * *

This party where I met Bed wasn't the most kicking party I'd ever been to, to put it frankly. Hardly recognised a soul except for a few you-must-know-me faces you might have caught on the eye-gum. Pitching the media-chat. Posing all over the grass. Photocall or what! Frankly I was going to be out of it. Then I copped sight of *her*, standing on her own at the edge of the lawn looking over at Robert's oh-so-famous dad and his knocked-up nymphet, trying to look as if she wasn't looking, if you know what I mean. We'd only just got there, me and Robert. Noticed her straight off, picked her out for real. Not young, but nice. You could tell she'd be nice. In this crowd she looked natural as a fresh breeze. She had this great mop of reddish hair flaming up all round her face. Not exactly good-looking but she had this sort of presence, like, you'd never pass her by without having to take a sneaky look at her.

Older women are tolerant, more tolerant. Have to be I suppose. More affectionate, and they love the sex. They've got used to it you see, and if there isn't any around they're grateful when you give them some. Well, that's my working theory. 'That one in the green dress,' I said to Robert, 'thin one with the curly hair. Who she?'

'Leave it out, that's my mum,' Robert gives me his sideways, like, sort of, he doesn't want to play with me any more.

'So...' I give him a friendly push, 'how about introducing me...'

'Well, er, I'm not...well okay...I suppose...'

Frankly, Robert's a bit wet behind the ears. Robert's mum. What! I thought. Now I completely understood what she was looking at the way she was looking at it. Robert's mum. I start seeing it all, it develops rapid as a waterfall in my head. That's what I'm like. I roll a scene open, inside, build it, take it forward,

fill in the details...Robert's mum...so probably lives on her own, I mean we all know her famous hubby left her for some soap star (made the press, bigtime, didn't it) she'll be living on her own with a nice bit of alimony or whatever, probably a flat in Kensington or somewhere, she'll be lonely, a bit desperate for it...I could, well...come down on weekends, cook for her, catch a movie. Or we'd go out to eat in a bistro in the King's Road...what a lot of older women want, a younger man with a bit of energy. I mean, I wouldn't take the piss. And I'd cook for her. She'd love my cooking. I mean I'm a cooking cook...I've just...I dunno...got a flair for it. On the first evening I'd make...no, come to think of it, not the first evening, on the first evening she'd cook for me, I mean you can't just go straight into someone's kitchen and take over... no, on the second evening... I'd make her my special curried king prawn stir fry with yellow pepper and lemon grass, I mean you can see she doesn't eat fattening stuff. I'll let her take care of the wine, she'll know about wine after all those years with him, common knowledge he knows his wines, and then I'll make her that special pudding of mine...you build this sort of stockade with finger biscuits round the edge of a medium-sized glass dish and then you get mango and raspberries and...

'Jake...?'

I realise I've been just standing there like a prat, probably my eyes are bulging from all the crap, the stale old dreams building up behind them. Things spark off, spool ahead as if I'm showing myself a speeded-up movie...

'Jake... I don't know if my mum...she's not feeling all that great lately, you know after all the stuff with my dad.'

'I see what you're saying...don't worry...I'll be nice to your mum. I'm good at mums.' This didn't seem to set his mind at rest, but I nudged him over and sort of claimed her. I'm brillish at sorting phase one with women. No problem. After that it gets difficult with me.

Frankly, I love women. Old or young, I just love them. I like their indulgent smiles, their gentle touch, the way their bums go when they walk. I soon collated Robert's mum, Bedelia, they call her. More than just a nice mum, nice bum and a gorgeous great bunch of auburn curls. I mean you could tell as soon as she

opened her mouth she was, like, sharp, deep, sort of. A style about her. I mean the woman's got a motoring sense of humour and she's smart.

The moment I see things, think of things, I want to go for them, but then in the end it doesn't usually work out. People think I'm all front. Tell me about it. How do you get behind your own front? I'm not a contortionist if you see what I mean. But *she* got there. Soon enough. I could see she was all tooled to wither me up and then she saw she shouldn't be doing it cos it wasn't my fault, so she backed off. You could clock her retracting the flick knife. Her look went from midsummer glare to tender violet in about three flaps of an eyelash. I appreciated that. The last thing I need is somebody's mother lilliputting me, balls and all, in the middle of this posing party. Not what this double-fronted shaky-Jake needs at all. She saw it.

'I'm a glutton for salt,' she says, and she kisses my cheek. Said it all, sort of. Told me my fortune. My good fortune.

We stand there chewing it. 'What do you do,' she quizzes me.

'I'm a wireman,' I say.

'High?' She stands on one leg, balancing on her toe and sticks the other out in front of her, putting her arms out to the side, balancing her wine glass on one palm. She wobbles a bit, lets her heel back onto the grass and looks at me.

I don't get it. Silly me. The slits at the side of her dress have fallen open. I take a quick butchers at her knees, still flat and brown. I'm wondering if I should just...bend over and touch one. She isn't showing-off all that much because the glass is empty. I drag my eyes back to her face. She puts her head on one side and cocks her eyebrows. The penny drops. 'No, not that sort of wireman, I work down holes actually, for BT.' I moisten my lips and start to explain to her about my job, like how I get down into these dirty big holes you see in the street with all that coloured spaghetti poking up out of cables, and I have to sort out the spaghetti, unplait it, put all the colours in the right order, the blue next to the pink, the green on the other side of the blue, next to the brown, no not next to the brown, but in any case not touching the...' All this time she stands on one leg with her arms out, balancing the glass, her eyes looking straight ahead. She might be

listening and then again she might not. I moisten my lips, ‘...yellow, and you get these great big plastic clips and...’

Suddenly this hairy arm appears from nowhere, a pudgy brown arm with liver spots, and snatches her glass.

‘Buddle...you must need a drink.’

It’s, sort of, mega-weird seeing television personalities in close-up, in the flesh. Thomas Grayson the man. You’d think he’d be taller, younger. He leans over, between me and Bed and kisses her on the same cheek which I’ve already sealed with my own logo. That Bed, she doesn’t lose her balance.

‘This is Jake,’ he’s a wireman friend of mine.

I like the way she says that. He nods towards me, ‘Howdy,’ (you can tell he doesn’t think wiremen need buttering) and goes off with Bed’s glass. She doesn’t move, except her head flicks to the other side and a frown creeps down it from the top and pulls her lips into a tight line. That Bed, I’m already loving her and I want to grab hold of both her bare knees and roll her onto the grass.

Tommy the Telly-Tubby reappears with a glass of wine. ‘I got you the Rioja, not a bad one as a matter of fact.’ I recognise the voice: straight off the set, deep and smooth, sexy as a BT takeover. She wiggles the fingers of her glassholder and he carefully balances the full glass on her palm like he’s, sort of, used to this, like, game of statues. I take a ganders across the lawn. Grayson’s seed pod is sitting there, chin jutting out like a fist, smile-paint cracking. Robert and James look like they’ve got toothache and need to leave in a hurry, know what I mean. They don’t look that comfortable. They’ve got that not-again-in front-of-everybody look.

Bed does this fizzulating trick, quick as a flash, mere flick of the palm. Now the empty glass is upside down, stem between two fingers, and the vintage Rioja is soaking into a fat pink plant in a Chinese pot. She puts her leg down at last, does a little skip and bows to the crowd sweeping her arms out behind her with the empty glass dangling about in mid-air by the stem.. I sideways Robert and James who’ve taken a step forward, putting my hand up to stop them coming over. I can handle this.

'Uncalled for Buddle,' Grayson mutters as his brown bonse takes on a purple tinge.

'Quite so,' Bed murmurs back. Turning to me she hands me the glass. 'I rather fancied a Chardonnay, nice and cold, preferably Bulgarian.' Her lips brush my cheek again. 'If you'd be so sweet..'

Slight case of lockeye. Me and Grayson twitching antlers. Think I'm in a no-lose situation. I shrug my what-can-I-do at him and go off with the glass. Bed's got both feet on the ground. I'll say. Time I get back with the wine, our Thomas is helping Pod into her summer jacket which won't meet at the front, kissing and waving all over the garden and speeding towards the front door.

That Bed. I love that Bed. But I see a tear in her eye, the eye is definitely moist. Completely moist.

'We could take a little stroll along the river maybe...' She delivers herself into my hands, meek now, plaintive. Yeah, this house is right by the Thames. Richmond way. Must be worth a Cruise missile. I walk along with her, holding her hand and telling her how sexy she is and I try to find out her age but she won't tell me. Not that it matters. Not really. Not to me.

But we didn't do the business until later. I was sort of on the rebound at the time, well, sort of. Needed a distraction, a bit of comfort after this lousy predicament I got myself into. Now we both wonder what the fuck we're doing. Bed worries about her age, wrinkles, what my friends will think and stuff. I worry about... well, the weird shit I worry about.

* * *

We walked along a dark path by the side of the Thames. I could hear the water lapping, the purr of an occasional boat, bursts of noise from houses where other parties were going on. He was still talking about his job, but I wasn't really listening. I was concentrating on the warm pressure of his hand in mine, and trying to match my steps to his, feeling the movement of his thighs next to mine. He let go of my hand and put his arm round my waist. I put mine round his,

feeling the plaited leather of his belt, the soft cotton of his shirt against my fingers. I was concentrating on not feeling silly, giving myself up to this odd recurrence of the past, before the children were born, when this sort of thing was what you did all the time.

'Look Jake, I think I'd better go home now.'

'Where do you live, Bed? Round here?'

'No, in town. In Waterloo.'

He squeezed my waist. 'You going to take me home with you Bed?'

'Not tonight.'

He didn't push it. 'But some night...?'

'Maybe...I dunno. Where do you live?'

'Out in the sticks, this, sort of, little village in Wiltshire, near Swindon, hardly a dot on the map. Actually it's a cracking little village in its way, used to be a...'

I cut in, 'so how are you getting home?'

'Robert said I could crash at his place.'

'So maybe we'd better get back to the party, so you can find Robert and I'll get a cab home.' I steer us in a semi-circle.

'If you say so, Bed.'

'I do say so, Jake.'

When we got nearly back to the house he took my face in his hands and kissed me with pouted lips. 'I like you Bed.'

I let my lips pout against his, putting my arms round him and feeling his thin, flat shoulder blades. I pushed him away. 'I've got to think about this.'

'I'll call you tomorrow...'

Chapter Two

But he didn't...nor the day after that.

One reason that I haven't completely hated being on my own is that I can do my dance practice. So I soon forgot that Jake hadn't phoned as I plie-ed up and down putting things away in food cupboards and bottom drawers. I made a point of doing an arabesque penchee as I opened the fridge, left foot well turned out, right leg perfectly straight, toe pointing somewhere above the light shade. I collected the lettuce out of the salad drawer with a graceful porte de bras then in a series of fuettes, my head whipping round after my body arrived at the sink in fourth position and started washing the lettuce. When I sat down to eat, I stretched one leg along the table using it like a barre.

I'd been doing this sort of thing whenever I could since Robert was born twenty-five years ago, but I didn't often get the solitude to do it. Now I could do it all day long if I felt inclined. I like to keep in practice, but mostly it's a question of reminding myself who I am. I've started going to modern dance classes at Morley - well they don't call it modern dance any more, it's all split up into different factions. I went to Jazz dance. (So different from ballet, feet turned in, torso lurching about all over the place.)

Now that I was on my own I had a few plans, muted ambitions. These came to me intermittently between periods when I seemed unable to think coherently about what I could do with myself in future. These ambitions involved creating a kind of dance therapy centre at the back of my house in the studio. Well it wasn't a studio exactly - yet - more like a shed, but big. It runs across the back garden which is really two gardens so the building is about forty feet long. Between it and the house is my scrubby little patch of lawn, a few mangy flowerbeds and a little patio. Not much of a gardener, the man who lived here before me. He was a jobbing builder, I believe, hence the shed, and hence the inclusion in the property of the shop next door. But my plan was to put Veluxes in the roof, a barre all round the walls, a sprung floor and a wall of mirrors

and...hey presto, Nureyev's your uncle, Fonteyn's your aunt (as Jake would say if he'd ever heard of Fonteyn or Nureyev...so uncultured, that boy!).

He didn't phone the day after that and I started thinking about Thomas again. (He hadn't phoned either - perhaps he was sulking after my little triumph at the party.) Thomas and I had had an 'open' marriage, his expression for it, not mine, a bit like a milk carton marked, Open This Side Only - his side that is. He was never without a little extra-marital dalliance and he kept me fully informed. Reporting back was fun for him, sexy. And when each affair broke up he cried on my shoulder. Although it was much less fun for me than I allowed him to assume, it made me feel mature, wise, tolerant, sensible and necessary.

Not such a bad arrangement in fact - Thomas earning lots of money, multiples of his face looming out into the street from the windows of Curry's and Comet as he interviewed, quizzed and chatted, shaking a little spare stardust from his wings onto me as I busied myself about the big Hampstead house (with my charlady to do the rough work), brought up the children, entertained the talkative and the famous, got invited to parties and previews, even did the occasional interview and was considered a really good sort - stable, intelligent, understanding, forgiving, nurturing...

But it wasn't what I'd had in mind. What I'd had in mind was to become a dancer. I was already becoming a dancer when I met Thomas. Seven years as star pupil of Madame Donashevsky's (Brenda Donutt as was) School of Classical Ballet in Kingston-on-Thames and already, at nineteen, in the corps of a widely respected company. And then Thomas arrived, determined to become somebody in television.

I can still picture him alighting in the wings, a thin slightly pigeon-toed smallish young man in his late twenties, intense and energetic with a less than original idea to do a documentary on touring ballet companies. Two children later I'm a housewife - a glamorous one, mind you, a face becoming familiar in the glossy magazines - while Thomas is well on the way to becoming the housewife's favourite chat show host.

Thomas doesn't know his left foot from his right: one of those chaps who shuffles around with his hands on your bum treading softly on your toes or jerks about frantically out of time to the music when drunk at parties. There were a lot of parties. I used to find it endearing and sweet, his physical ineptitude.

Thomas had this appetite, this determination to succeed. I admired that. Quite what he was succeeding at is still not clear to me. As I said, he can't dance, or sing or play an instrument or act. Someone else writes his scripts and he always needs a script. He doesn't have profound ideas. He is simply successful at being himself in front of millions of people he can't see. He can talk to himself in the bathroom mirror without embarrassment. Is that a talent?

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I don't, like, phone her for three weeks. Truth is I'm sort of scared. Overawed. I mean having an affair with Thomas Grayson's missus, like, hallo...? She isn't going to want it. I mean she's sharp, experienced, sophisticated. Rich?

Not that I'm a totally uneducated yob or anything like that. I mean my parents did their best, tried to get me to do my English homework – all that. Can't blame them if I didn't get myself off to uni and into the white collar club. But they're not media-speedier they're medium-tedium. Know what I mean. Ordinary. They sound their aitches but they don't really know anything. They believe in the queen but they don't know why. They go to church but they don't really believe in dear old God himself. They voted for Blair but they've never been socialists, they think that's a bit of a dirty word. They believe in democracy but they think people should do as they're told. Floaters. No opinions about anything out there. Like, middling. I mean,

I wasn't deprived or abused or anything. I suppose I'm just sort of self-obsessed. Not that I don't care about other people, it's just that I don't have any time or energy to worry about them because I'm too busy worrying about myself.

I'm so fucking alone. And I can't be. I can't be.

I want to be a success I suppose, but what do I mean by that? Money? Car? House? Marriage? I haven't got any one of those things and I don't know how to get them.

Everything I touch goes wrong. Frankly, I think it's because my mind is bigger than my brain, or perhaps it's the other way round. Like, the gulf between the pictures in my head and the world out there is wider than the Mississippi and just as full of crocodiles.

Take the rock festival. I had this fizzing idea to organise a rock festival in my village. The village green, the village hall - all that - perfect venue for a small rock festival - bank holiday weekend, get the local vicar involved, give the local youth something to do, and I have got energy, I know how to organise things...man you don't know villages! There's this bunch of dodderly old crabs and they see to it that, nothing ever happens, everything stays the same. Nobody breathes. Saturday night, well the local lads get a bit pissed, hurch and steam around the place, puke in people's front gardens, then zonk, everything goes dead again till the next weekend. Soon as the words 'rock festival' got around it started: people having a quiet word with my parents, people cutting you dead in the street, threatening letters (anonymous) slicing through the front door. Forget it. Why don't I get out of the place I keep asking myself. Twenty-nine years old and living in this poxy little room at the top of my parents house like I was still sixteen. Well I do leave. I leave from time to time and then I go back, always some disaster pulls me back - I lose my flat, I lose my woman, I lose my job and back I roll like a yo-yo on a piece of elastic. I seem to have this tag on my collar - 'if found please return to Lossford.'

How long will it take Bedelia Grayson to see through all my bullshit to the fucked-up peasant underneath? These days I'm a commuting peasant. Up to London every weekday on the seven-fifteen, doddle about in the muck under some pavement, back on the five-thirty and down the Goose and Widget for a pint and a game of pool with the lads before my mum serves up the meat and two veg. Like, that's the flop and ferret life I've been leading for the last six

months. Captivating wouldn't you say. But then I sure as hell don't want to be back on the social.

Weird how I got to know Robert. He's on the management side and I'm in maintenance, but I think he likes to slum it a bit. Bit immature, Robert, a bit, sort of weak. He didn't really want to take me to this party where I met Bed but I kind of pushed him into it, kind of let him feel it would be a bit snobby, a bit elitist to leave me out. I think he goes round in a state of embarrassment about his famous dad, can't bear to wallow in the old man's footsteps sort of thing. I was dying to go.

I'm so bored man. And I can't be bored. When I'm bored I go weird. Like I said, I'm all front, except nobody's all front, like you can't have a front without a back - fact of nature. My back is dark, not my darkness, someone else's darkness, the darkness of emptiness, darkness too dark to see; a void that I fill up with all this rattling noise. I talk and talk, in my head or out loud if I can get someone to listen. On weekends when I'm wimping about at home - their home - I go up to my room like I really am still a teenager and I put on this heavy, thumping rock as loud as I can get away with till it blasts my ears, blasts my stomach, drowns everything. I've built these speakers myself with a load of bass so the noise thrums right through me, clears everything out. The beat wraps round me like a thick rough blanket and I walk about in it, lining up the things on my shelves, making sure they're symmetrical - the picture of me with my real mum when I was four, the carved wood box I made at school when I was ten, my pewter beer mug and my silver brandy flask that I found down a hole once when we were digging around for cables. After a while I can't stand any of them, I knock them off the shelf with my arm and stomp off up the road for cigarettes or a drink.

Being on my own is not my scene, I have to have someone. Maybe I've taken to older women because they're sort of, easier to have. Young women scare me. They look through you, or play this what-are-you-going-to-go-through-for-me game, or they're dumb. Well round here they're like that - where I come from, the circles I'm stuck in here in my diddie little village.

The last woman I had was a disaster - thirty-eight years old and married to a plumber. God, did I love her! And I got so jealous. It's him or me - that's what I put to her. I couldn't bear to think of her in bed with her own husband, that's how dumb I can be, like, you can't afford to go getting yourself laid by some married woman and then get jealous. Of course she wouldn't leave him. But she still kept popping over to see me when the parents weren't about and I could never resist her. Finally he got pretty suspicious and they moved out of the village. One day she just wasn't around any more. I was so fucking gutted. I cried for days, up in my room, with the music reaming me out.

And now there's Bed - maybe. I'm up for it, a way out of the hole for me - not down among the cables, up among the tele-phonies. Well, Bed's no phoney. She's nice, very, very nice. I start picturing her, in the green dress with the brown knees, I lift the dress slowly, run my hands up her thighs - here I go again... I'm excited but I'm scared.

Tuesday night. I've lost three games of pool and I've had three pints of Boddingtons and it's nearly suppertime. Cold ham, salad and spuds followed by bought treacle tart and custard Wednesdays if I remember well. I fish around for my mobile and ring her from outside the pub. Yeah, I've memorised the number and the opening words...

Chapter Three

...'Hello sexy Bed.'

I'd almost forgotten him but not quite. My stomach did that sudden fluttery thing, like a baby when it first moves and that's how I knew I wasn't going to say no.

'Hello Jake.'

He went into a series of 'sort of's, like's and 'I mean's' culminating in, 'I thought I'd come and see you this weekend...I mean...no, I mean, I thought I'd drop over on Friday night after work, like, take you for a drink...sort of,' and then his laugh, a laugh that said, I'm trying to be cool but I can't help doing this laugh to fill in this potential empty hole when you might be thinking about saying no.

'Come to supper.'

'Brill.'

I spent most of Thursday deciding what to wear. I tried on half a dozen possibilities: leggings - too intimate; long blue wild silk dress - too formal, too posed; grey linen trousers and matching top - too businessy; long velvet skirt and mirrorwork top - too hippyish; track suit bottoms, trainers and T-shirt - mutton dressed down as scruffy lamb, made me look all skin and bone. I glared in the mirror at my elbows below the sleeveless shirt, stretching out my arms and turning them this way and that, you might as well wear a couple of arm bands saying 'coming up to fifty!'. I decided on my old black jeans and a long-sleeved, loose top with a polo neck - coverall job. I remembered the woman who photographed me for Vogue a few years back when the kneeless jean first got popular, saying, 'Grunge on the outside is one thing darling, but grunge against the skin is a turn-off. Who wants to undress a woman and find she's wearing an off white pair of last year's knickers, all stretched elastic and yellowing crotch. Contrast is everything.' So in the afternoon I walked over Waterloo Bridge into Covent Garden and combed the boutiques in Long Acre for simple but sexy underwear. I hate those little cubicles with mirrors on three sides. I could see an elliptical space reflected between my thighs even when I pressed my knees

tightly together. I have got too thin. I shoved my clothes back on and walked back out into the crowded street clutching my natty little paper carrier containing two black bras and several pairs of minute and sexy knickers covered with tiny pale blue polka dots.

A man was coming up the steps from the National Theatre as I got to the south side of the bridge, a man with his feet wrapped in black plastic bags secured at the ankle with pieces of string. His clothing was a collage of newspaper and old rags which hung and flapped and pouched. You could tell that under the bulkiness of his coverings the body would be sparse and wasted. He reminded me of that children's story, Stig of the Dump. He walked towards me and there was a swagger in his step, an ancient king emerging from the lower ground to challenge the false habits and beliefs of his successors. People were giving him a wide berth, avoided looking at him as if he were someone sacred but forbidden. I too took a step out of his path, holding my bag of useless fripperies, not enough to cover a flea, but he stepped in front of me, smiling through his great bush of yellowed beard. I stopped. He bowed, fished inside his papery garments and held out a white rose to me as if he were a conjuror, a perfect, fresh white flower.

'Only a rose,' he said in a deep cracked voice. He took a step nearer. He had a heavy, cellar-mould smell. 'Take it.'

'Thank you.' I took the rose and stood watching him as he swaggered on across the bridge. Passers-by in summer clothes stood aside for him and lowered their gaze.

'Must have fancied you,' an old woman at the bus stop said giving one of those raucous London laughs, 'pissed out of his head. Lovely rose though, dear. You should be so lucky.' She waved and got onto a number sixty-eight bus.

A sign, I thought. I turned into the side street beside the church, holding the rose in one hand and my bag in the other. Sign of what?

Not too long ago, Roupell Street must have been a dingy, even poverty-stricken working-class quarter. The chic little gallery along from my house was probably the local greengrocer, the fashionable pub over the road a cheerful

cockney tavern where costermongers drank and gambled away their wages of a Friday night. They've roofed over the back yard with glass and you can sit at rough wooden tables talking about art or the state of contemporary theatre, eating whitstable oysters or home made pork pies, washing them down with expensive champagne - a smart little hideaway for the familiar faces of politicians and media people. This was once Bill Sykes territory, Fagin country, but now it is MP manor, literati-land.

My house cost me, or should I say, Thomas, four hundred thousand pounds and already it's worth three quarters of a million. Once, you would have had some difficulty swinging a Manx cat in its cramped quarters but now, knocked through and with the addition of the shop next door, it is quite spacious. The front parlour, back parlour and scullery have become a single open room, from where a pretty, wrought-iron spiral staircase twists sideways through the old shop to the next floor, containing my L-shaped bedroom and en-suite bathroom. The staircase continues up to the top floor, an attic with dormers across its entire width at the back which open onto a balcony looking out towards the Thames. This is the guest room. From its windows you can see across the roofs towards the Thames, you can see the back of the Oxo building and the towers of the city invading the skyline.

As I said, the garden needs attention, but the shed, maybe once some sort of industrial building, a warehouse or stockroom, is promising...perhaps the reason I bought it. Another reason was the urgent need to find somewhere as distant and different as possible from the big, slightly pompous family house in Hampstead where Thomas and I had once held joint court. Thomas put his half towards a property in Muswell Hill, apparently just as big and pompous, for he intends to replay the family life.

I put the white rose in a narrow-necked blue glass vase and pstood it on the kitchen table. I told myself that if its petals fell before Friday I would not go to bed with Jake. It was already Thursday. On Friday morning when I tapped lightly down the spiral stairs the first thing I saw was the rose, fully opened but intact above the translucent deep blue glass.

One disadvantage of this big open room straight off the street is the draught that comes through the door when you open it. Even the arrival of a letter sets up a tiny sharp current of air. At six o'clock on Friday evening somebody pushed a free newspaper through the box. A single white petal fell without a sound. But that doesn't count, I said to myself and left it lying there on the table, a delicate curled shell such as Venus might have surfaced on.

Half an hour later the doorbell went. I took time to give my hair a quick finger primp and opened the door, my smile ready to put on...'

'Buddle! I'm so glad I found you at home.' He has a champagne bottle in his hand and he looks like an elderly man who hasn't slept. '...it's a girl!...I've just come from the hospital...mother and baby doing well...please Buddle...wet the baby's head with me...please Buddle...for old times' sake.'

How I once adored that famous, crumpled grin of his! 'I'm...'

'Don't deny me Buddle.' Thomas uses this mock-biblical quite often. He thinks it charming. I used to think it charming.

'I'm expecting someone.' But he's already at the kitchen end looking along the shelves for two glasses which he puts on the table while he carefully turns the neck of the bottle and expertly eases out the cork.

'I'm glad the baby's all right.'

He puffs onto a chair at the head of the table. Another petal falls.

'Thomasina. We've called her Thomasina,' he looks embarrassed, 'Sarah's choice.'

I remain standing. My champagne glass clinks against his and I drink the whole glass immediately. I didn't seem to care about the baby, or Thomas, my only thought is to get him to leave.

'Thomas, I'm expecting someone any minute.'

'That's all right Bud, enough here for three. I don't mind.'

'I mind.'

He rubbed a hand over his bald crown. 'I thought you'd be over all that by now...I mean... a beautiful blue-eyed girl...new to the world with everything at her...'

'I don't mind about that. You are about to intrude on my rendezvous is all...'

He stood up at once 'Oh...' looking at me strangely, staring at me in fact...'I'll go then....' a bitter note had entered his voice, 'do enjoy the champagne...the two of you.'

'I'm sure we will.' I held the door open for him at the same time glancing down the street which was empty except for two girls going into the pub. I watched him walk towards Waterloo Station, then shut the door and I poured myself another glass of champagne. 'Who cares about you or your fucking baby,' I said out loud. 'Who cares!'

* * *

All day Friday we're doing this repair job out in Dulwich. A ferocious great cable's gone outside the bank and we have to get this mega chunk of pavement up and cordon off the walkway. Bad news. All these oh-so-inconvenienced customers having to risk their arses out in the road to get into the bank, chuntering and grumbling. And I'm thinking of Bed, trying to imagine her house, trying to remember her face. All I can bring to mind is that glimpse of her knees when she was standing like, on one leg and the way her lips quivered, like a feather, sort of, against mine that night outside that duff party. And I'm hoping like fuck we don't have to stay after time to get this job done, because you can't like, leave the bank overnight with a dirty great hole underneath it, and I need to get back to the old HQ in Islington where I can have a shower and change into something more Bedworthy. In the end we get through at twenty past five and I get Fergus, this bloke who drives the van, to belt through the traffic like an ambulance on acid and drop me off.

I shut my eyes in the shower and imagine that the water is her hands, her tongue, stroking, licking me all over, every crack and crevice and crinkle-bollock, so that by the time I put my hand up to turn it off I've got this stonking great hard-

on. I don't skimp on the deodorant and I grab a quick pint at the Old Red Lion to calm myself down.

When I get off the bus in the Waterloo Road there's some sort of scuffle going on, big crowd of kids on the pavement all shoving and pushing and shouting, Do mine, do mine! Do what! Who do I see in the middle of the crush but Thomas the Telly himself signing autographs with this phoney-soppy look on his face like he-owes-the world-a-living-but-then again-he-doesn't. Smirkish. And we catch each other's eye above all the screaming kids. He doesn't smile or wave or nod like he recognises me. Oh no he wouldn't would he, not our Thomas, but I swear he goes pale. And his eyes glass up. I shrug, winning again aren't I, even if I haven't got a bunch of teenagers screaming for my mark. Coincidence or what, him there? And I follow Bed's directions and walk down this little side street by the church and I can feel his glassy peepers burning a hole in my neck.

I'm wandering about in these narrow streets looking for her place. It must have been pretty lowlife-ish round here at one time but you can tell by the dark green doors and venetian blinds, the art galleries and the deli I pass smelling of roast coffee that it's pretty pricey now. Tucked-away. Secret. Not a tree to be seen, no front gardens, single-file pavements, but posh. Subtle-posh - that's London for you. Not your yuppy-rich but your-arty rich moving down to move up. I like it. Jake the wireman wouldn't mind a little slice of this world. And what do you know, Bed's place is right opposite the pub and her house doesn't have a dark green door it has this sort of deep yellowy door, somewhere between khaki and saffron, like distressed sunlight. It opens in a nano-second and that Bed's standing there. She's got on these faded old jeans and a big sloppy T-shirt, like she's not showing off except she's standing on one leg again and the other leg's stuck out to the side propping up the wall, like, somewhere level with her shoulder. I feel mega-relieved I didn't wear a suit or any dumb over-the-top shit like that. She leans forward and kisses me on the cheek, 'Hallo Jake'. I grab her heel and lift her leg up as if I was opening a gate and let it down carefully onto the floor. She looks kind of flushed but relaxed and she giggles. I clock the half full bottle of champagne on the kitchen table as I move into the room.

She reaches a second champagne glass off the draining board and beams, 'Champagne?'

I sit down at the table and stretch out my legs, 'Completely.'

She pours the champagne and sits down too, but, like, Bed never just sits down. Oh no, not my Bed. She's always got to be, sort of, including her legs in the conversation. I realised that later, but it's a bit new to me just now. She props her legs up on the edge of the chair and puts her arms round them to keep them there. She's got no shoes on and she twiddles her long toes, looking at me.

What do I do? What do I want to do, as if I didn't know.

'Well?' she says. You can tell she feels safe, comfortable, at ease.

I can't help thinking about the second glass on the draining board, this white rose in a blue vase on the table. I'm like that, always looking for clues as to what's been going on that nobody's telling me about. She doesn't offer an explanation - not her style. But this was all before I really went for Bed, really got locked into her. I don't ask because we're playing that cool thing that you do at the beginning, like, explanations are naff, sort of. Come to think of it that was half the trouble, later on, the way we couldn't somehow, dig into each other, demand to know. But at this stage, I don't care, I really don't care. Sort of. In fact that little warning bell buzzing at the door of my brainbox, like, what's she been up to before I got there, makes me feel even hornier if that's, like, possible.

I swallow the champers and she's still watching me, saying nothing. That phosphorescent red, fuzzy hair makes her face look small, pale, intense. I bend and kiss first one knee and then the other. She just bunches there, letting me. I pick her up like a boney little bundle and carry her up these fancy iron stairs at the side of the room and deposit her on the monster-sized bed she's got up there, all brass and wood. She's got one of those old-fashioned white cotton bedspreads, embossed, sort of, a bit like Victorian wallpaper. Anaglypta, that's the word. I remembered it from this painting and decorating crap I did once. It came into my head, weird as you like, an anaglypta bedspread. And I'm whizzing off on this crazy word slalom - anaglypta...more like a kind of wine or some goddess...Anaglypta the goddess of love... and all the time I'm unbuckling my

belt and pulling off my shirt, while Anaglypta the goddess of love is drawing those heavy curtains closed across this enormous window that goes right across the back of the room. It goes dim as fuck but I know she's taking off her clothes, dropping them on the floor as she walks towards me. I meet her half way and pull her onto me like the finger of a glove. All these words fly out of my head. I'm empty, clean, ready. So is she.

* * *

It was silent, so silent, that first lovemaking. And strange, after months of nobody, after years of Thomas's steadily increasing flesh and decreasing appetite, to feel this lithe, flat body, eager, cleanly sweating against mine. But then afterwards I didn't know what to do with him. 'That was nice,' he said, and kissed my nose. We lay there for a while, pressed together and then went downstairs and made tea. I opened wine and fed us on a fish casserole I had keeping warm in the oven. He wouldn't stop talking. About what he'd been doing all day down some hole outside a bank, about his village and about food, what he was going to cook for me next time and precisely how he was going to cook it. And then he was itching to get to the pub before closing time. We sat in the room at the back with the big glass roof and he downed three pints of guinness while I sat sipping a scotch and he carried on talking and I kept saying, Mm, wondering if I was mad, if he was mad, and wanting to go back home and be by myself, practising a fuetta or two. But that didn't stop me saying, 'Are you staying over?' And he said, 'If I may,' peculiarly polite and formal, pulling his toothbrush out of his jacket pocket and smiling a little apologetically.

Saturday, he familiarised himself with my kitchen, ferreted around finding spices, vegetables, noodles, a wok, working with utter concentration and efficiency on the stir fry, unearthing chop sticks, candles, whilst I went out for more wine, prawns, lemon grass from the deli. I couldn't work out what it was about him that worried me, something alien in him which was hidden, struggling, trapped, under his would-be-stylish garrulity, the meticulous precision with which

he laid out bowls and chopsticks exactly opposite each other on my kitchen table, carefully removed the rose and its fallen petals to the bin and washed out the vase - as if an inexplicable, chaotic inner world demanded this symmetrical frame to stay contained.