

**That Car's
a
Dark Horse.®**

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Part One

A Merry Dance

1

Ian's Girlfriend

The doorbell trilled in the dark, faintly unsavoury hallway, provoking no discernible response from within. Claire tried again, a longer, more determined burst this time. There was a flash of light as a door opened on to the corridor, then the soft shuffle of stockinged feet on tiles. A turn of the Yale lock later, Nick pulled open the drab painted front door. Looking left and right along the road, he unwittingly confirmed what Claire already knew.

"Ian's not back yet", he said, self consciously flicking a strand of lank black hair from his eyes.

Nick felt exposed, standing at the open front door dressed casually enough to be sleeping under a bridge tonight. If he had known he'd be opening the door to Claire, he would have bought a suit, taken a shower, put on some shoes and had a shave. Let's face it, for Claire he would have worn a hair shirt and dined on maggots for the rest of his life.

"Will you wait in his room or in the kitchen?" he asked, standing aside to let her enter.

Claire had never asked Ian for a key to his room. It had never seemed necessary.

"You could wait in mine, if you like," offered Nick, because hope springs eternal in the breast of the single male.

"In the kitchen, thanks, Nick," she said, treating him to a brief yet heart stopping smile.

The kitchen was no venue for the faint-hearted: an overflowing bin, a cooker caked in grease, and worse... That Fridge. That Fridge would strike fear into bolder spirits than Claire's. Casting aside well founded misgivings, she stepped bravely over the threshold and started down the dimly lit hallway.

"You can use my coffee if you want," Nick called after her.

Nick was a tall, gangling, caffeine-addicted student in the final year of an English degree. It was a brave choice. As a native of Liverpool, Nick said himself, English was not his first language. He'd have loved to stay, dazzling and enthralling Claire with his eloquence, erudition and savoir faire, but leaking confidence by the second, he slunk back to his room and closed the door. Claire was a woman entirely beyond his aspirations.

Claire continued down the passageway, squeezing between Nick's old bike and an assortment of cardboard boxes, striding doggedly on towards the kitchen. Opening the door she was assailed by the aroma of Indian curry spices, a sharp contrast to the smells of fried food and stale sweat she had come to associate with her infrequent, usually fleeting visits to the house. A fair haired woman was standing at the stove, attentively stirring vegetables and dried fruit into a saucepan. A quick guess put her age at around twenty-five; younger than Claire by a couple of years.

She looked round from her cooking.

"Hi, come in, don't be shy. I'm Emma."

"Claire, Ian's girlfriend."

"Ah", said Emma, whether meaningfully or not, Claire couldn't tell.

Emma put down her wooden spoon and they shook hands.

"He isn't back yet, is he?" she asked, returning to her cooking. "He usually puts his music on straight away when he gets in."

"No, his truck's missing", replied Claire shortly. "I came all over here to surprise him, now I'm the one getting the surprise."

She sat down at the table, thwarted for the time being. Her annoyance would have been far greater, had she not met someone with whom to pass the time.

"I guess surprises have to be carefully co-ordinated with the person on the receiving end," sympathized Emma, "or they go pear-shaped. The surprise, not the person. I don't suppose he's gone far. Would you like a drink while you wait? Some tea, coffee, fruit juice?"

"Thank you. Juice please," Claire replied, flinching as Emma made to open That Fridge door, conscious of having made a colossal mistake in requesting anything from there. Better if she had asked for black tea or coffee. Something boiled, preferably for twenty minutes.

But the fridge was clean and hygienic. Ancient leftovers were gone, while the virulent green furriness that had threatened to colonize everywhere south of the freezer box had been banished.

"Who... Who... The Fridge?" asked Claire, temporarily incoherent.

"Me," said Emma, presenting her with a glass of cranberry juice.

"Thank you," said Claire, glancing up and observing Emma more closely, taking in her lightly tanned skin, green almond eyes and high cheekbones.

Taking a sip from her glass, Claire looked about her, noticing the numerous overdue improvements Emma had made throughout the kitchen. The removal of a pile of newspapers and men's magazines that had covered half the table to an impressively precarious height. Spotless floor tiles, work surfaces and sink unit. Better lighting now that a blown bulb had been replaced after nearly four years (though, in fairness to the present household, none of them was resident when it blew).

"But the work... ?" Claire asked, amazed that she had not recognized the wholesale transformation the second she opened the door.

"It took two afternoons about a fortnight ago," Emma replied, "but now that it is clean, the boys haven't been too bad at keeping it that way."

"You've lived here a fortnight, have you?" Claire recovered to ask.

"Uh uh," replied Emma, turning out the gas from under a pair of geriatric saucepans.

"Ian never mentioned anyone new had moved in."

Emma paused mid stir, remembering the day she'd arrived, modest holdall in one hand, a portable stereo in the other. Ian, the very model of solicitude, offering to help carry her stuff upstairs, then lending her an electric heater to battle the late November cold in her north facing bedroom. Selflessly volunteering to stay to chat long after what Emma thought was reasonable for introductions and pleasantries. He had, however, successfully freed a rusted window lock for her, proving that there was at least one benefit in sharing a house with a strapping fireman.

"Would you like some curry?" Emma called over her shoulder. "It's just about done."

"I wouldn't dream of depriving you of your dinner," Claire replied automatically, despite being hungry.

"There's plenty," Emma assured her. "Normally I would have the rest for my breakfast tomorrow, but I have other things. You'd be most welcome."

Claire accepted, watching while Emma served mouth-watering rich aromatic curry on to fluffy brown rice. Emma was slim, her short spiky hair flattering her face. The England Rugby Union shirt she was wearing, though patriotic and oddly appealing, began its career across far bulkier shoulders than hers. Faded denim jeans and a pair of low heeled boots completed a casual evening ensemble. Emma brought over the plates, then sat down opposite Claire. They began their meal. Claire complimented Emma on the delicious vegetable curry. Emma demurred, blushing lightly, but she took the opportunity to steal her first good look at Claire, having spent much of their acquaintance with her back to her, cooking.

Claire was beautiful. She had long, thick dark hair, flawless skin and deep blue eyes. She was taller than Emma. Tall enough to be a model, Emma guessed. A model or a film star. She considered Ian one shamelessly lucky bunny to have Claire as a lover.

"Where were you before you came here?" Claire asked, making polite dinner conversation, the way she had been brought up to do.

"Rhodes," Emma replied between mouthfuls.

"Really? What were you doing in Rhodes?"

"Selling artwork to the visitors, and then at weekends, I worked in a cocktail bar. Go on, ask me about any cocktail," she challenged. Claire named a few, Emma identifying the ingredients and relative proportions, accurately as far as she could tell.

"Where else have you been?" Claire asked, taking a drink of her juice.

Softness suffused Emma's face. Her eyes shone like emeralds.

"Inja."

"Where?"

"India."

Claire was becoming increasingly interested in her impromptu hostess, keen to know more, she asked,

"What is it you like about India?"

"Oh, the usual," Emma replied. "Masses of ancient temples, beaches, bazaars. Great vegetarian food. Curry, morning, noon and night, the trains... "

"The trains," laughed Claire. "What about the trains?"

"They're awesome metal monsters," Emma replied dreamily. "Longer than you would believe possible, with all India passing slowly by outside your window. You lie in the lower bunk in the early hours, looking up at the stars, and the train sways and rattles and clanks relentlessly on until you have lost track of where you came from, or where you are going. You can leave the southern tip of India to arrive more than three days later in the Himalayas, where the climate, the people, the food, everything is different. It's magical and romantic."

Emma was suddenly embarrassed. She had shared something deeply personal with Claire, and was uncertain now of the wisdom of such a confidence. Claire smiled warmly, moved by Emma's passion.

"That sounds wonderful."

Relieved, Emma returned her smile, happy to make the acquaintance of Ian's disarmingly lovely girlfriend.

Reluctantly, Emma turned to the clock on the microwave oven.

"I'll get this lot washed up, then I will have to be on my way."

"Are you going out?" Claire asked.

"Going to work," Emma told her. "At an all-night supermarket. But," she added self-deprecatingly, "next week I start at the Royal Mail. A step up in the world, wouldn't you say?"

"You're not from around here, are you, Emma?"

"No," she replied, gathering together plates and cutlery, "I'm from Oxfordshire, but I went to university in Birmingham and I have lived

here on and off since. It seemed quite natural to come back when I returned from Greece. I delayed my departure too long, though. I should have left when the tourists began to dwindle. As it was, I stayed on, spending the money I made in the summer. Costs were quite high out there, particularly for accommodation. I was looking for any job I could start straight away, but I will be done with the supermarket after Saturday."

"What did you study at university?" Claire asked, taking up a tea towel while Emma washed.

"Art. I lived in this very street as a matter of fact. Down the other end, near the petrol station."

They worked side by side, chatting companionably while they completed the chore. By the time the last glass disappeared into the cupboard, Claire knew quite a bit more about the woman in the too big rugby shirt.

"Five minutes more then I must go," said Emma, sitting down with a sigh, the kitchen clean and tidy once more. Claire took out an Edwardian silver card holder, offering a card to Emma.

"Thank you so much for sharing your meal with me," she said. "Can I invite you to have dinner at mine next Wednesday?"

Emma took the card and glanced at it.

"Are these your business contacts?" she asked.

"My private ones," Claire replied. "I'll write my address on the back if you're coming."

"I'm coming," said Emma, certain wild horses wouldn't stop her.

Claire sat alone in the kitchen after Emma left. At the end of twenty minutes, Ian arrived loaded up with groceries. His face dissolved into a grin at Claire's unprecedented mid-week visit. He dumped down his shopping, then swept her up into his arms, swinging her round and round. They laughed into each other's eyes, before Ian set Claire back on her feet. He quickly put away his purchases before they retired to his room. Not anticipating a visit, the room was a tip, but since Claire had been thinking about a surprise visit since she saw him last Sunday, she overlooked its dark, shabby appearance and unwholesome odour. They rolled and mock-wrestled on the bed, hugging and kissing for a while,

until Claire suddenly stopped. Supporting herself on her elbow, effortlessly restraining Ian with a fingertip, she said thoughtfully,

"I met Emma tonight. She's really nice, isn't she? There is a feline quality to her face, don't you think?"

Ian, instantly wary, treated this as a rhetorical question, knowing from experience the pitfalls of showing too much enthusiasm for other women around Claire. Despite her obvious advantages, she was not always the most secure of women.

"She was telling me about her travels. How she loves India and has been to South East Asia, and oh, lots of places."

"I know she arrived here absolutely skint," said Ian. "She had to put the deposit and the rent for this place on a credit card."

"Yes, she said something about that. How she stayed too long in Rhodes, spending what she'd earned over the summer. But Ian, the point is, having the courage to do these things in the first place. However they turn out. To go flight only to see some of the wonders of the world. I know if ever *I* went to India, it would cost an absolute fortune. But Emma does it all: food, accommodation, everything, on what I spend on a fancy coffee and a croissant of a Saturday at that little Italian café down by the Symphony Hall. She seems so independent and self assured. Different from everyone else I know. Very much herself."

Ian grunted. He had his own, less idealized opinions of Emma.

"Then I get to thinking," continued Claire, "what about me? What do I do? I work in an office five days a week, then scramble to do the things I really want in the remaining two days. Just to do it all over again the following week."

"Claire, Claire," said Ian soothingly, gathering her against his lean 6' 2" body. "You work for a company that thinks the world of you. They pay you handsomely, and then every twelve months, they reward you with a brand new motor. And not just any motor, either. Add to that your sumptuous executive apartment -"

Claire jabbed him in the ribs at this description of her flat.

"Your magnificent executive apartment," he reiterated, ignoring her ineffectual punches, "and the fact that you can go anywhere you choose in the world for your holidays, *and* not have to do it for the price of a cup of coffee, I'd say Emma should be envying you, not the other way round."

Pacified, she smiled. Snuggling contentedly against him, she kissed his warm, stubbly neck. Thus lifted and reassured, she lay happy and protected in his arms until, at Ian's instigation, they made love. Later, Claire turned the key in the ignition of the brand new motor, returning to her sumptuous executive apartment in the northern outskirts of the city.

The following Friday, Ian and Claire attended the grand reopening of Jasmine Garden, one of the best Persian restaurants in the country and a favourite of theirs until it had closed for refurbishment six weeks earlier. They were greeted as a combination of honoured guests and long lost friends. After much handshaking and many congratulations on the tasteful redecoration, they retired to a booth for a hugely anticipated romantic dinner for two. While waiting for their meal to arrive, Ian mentioned casually,

"Jack and Demi have asked us to celebrate Jack's birthday with them - I said we would."

"Yes, OK," Claire agreed. "When is it?"

"Wednesday."

"Oh sorry, Ian, I can't make Wednesday. Tuesday or Thursday would be no problem, but Wednesday is out."

"But I've told them we will go," he pointed out. "I'll feel an idiot if I have to tell them that we won't be going after all. Is it something to do with work? Couldn't you rearrange it? You usually can."

"You go, darling," Claire replied, "they're more your friends than mine, anyway."

Jack and Ian were workmates. They joined the fire service in the same week, surviving the practical jokes of their new colleagues together and becoming firm friends in the process.

Ian frowned.

"I really want you to be there, Claire. We're a couple, it will look funny if I have to go on my own."

"Then arrange something with them for the Friday," said Claire, tiring of the conversation. "We'll celebrate x number of years and two days. The fact is, I'm cooking dinner for Emma on Wednesday, and I'm not about to change our arrangements."

"Emma? Who's Emma?"

"Emma, from your house."

"What do you want her round for?" Ian asked, a whine creeping into his voice. "Anyway, she works nights, she can't *do* dinner dates."

"She is working for the Royal Mail from Monday, Ian, and she is coming to dinner because I want her to. She was kind enough to share her meal with me, now I'm looking forward to her company on Wednesday. I won't put her off for the sake of Jack and his blessed girlfriend."

"That Emma's just the kind of misfit you would take a shine to," countered Ian. "But let me tell you one thing. There's a lot less to that Emma than meets the eye. What do you really know about her anyway? She's scruffy and broke. Probably wants to tap you for a loan. Do yourself a favour - come with me on Thursday. You know you want to."

But Claire knew that she did not. They argued the point back and forth until the waiter reappeared with their order, but Claire remained uncharacteristically resistant. She would not give up her evening with Emma, no matter how much Ian whinged. As a peace offering however, she granted the following weekend entirely to Ian. Whatever choices he made for spending that time together, she would agree to... Guide's Honour.

2

Hen's Teeth

Claire warmly welcomed Emma to her flat. Chattering excitedly as she took Emma's coat, Claire led the way down the long, pale carpeted hallway.

"Did you have a good trip over?" she asked, glancing over her shoulder.

"It was fine except for a bit of a wait at New Street," Emma replied, omitting to mention that she did the journey two days ago to be certain of arriving on time tonight. She had walked up and down the cul-de-sac in the biting cold, establishing which of the two storey flats must be Claire's.

"We are fifteen minutes short of dinner," said Claire. "Would you mind coming through to the kitchen? Keep me company while I finish up."

It was an impressive apartment and Emma tried hard not to gape at its size and tasteful opulence. Claire took them through to the comprehensively equipped kitchen. It was on a grand scale. Shiny gadgets and appliances, all suffused in a golden glow of discreet, undercupboard lighting. There was a king's ransom in black, pink veined marble worktops and the wood was no veneer or laminate.

Producing a bottle from her bag, Emma said,

"I didn't know whether to bring red or white, so I brought vodka. Do you have any orange juice?"

Claire slipped the New Zealand white wine back into the fridge, producing a carton of fresh orange juice in its place.

"A vodka aperitif - why not?" she said, passing across two elegant crystal glasses for Emma to do the honours.

Claire brought the meal together in less than the promised fifteen minutes and with Emma's help, laid it out on the dining room table. The dining room was separated from the kitchen by a set of glass doors. Claire closed the doors, then took her seat. They wished each other bon appetit, before beginning their meal.

Claire asked about Emma's new job.

"It's fine for the present," she replied, "and there's plenty of overtime being near Christmas, but I'll be hoping to find something better in the New Year."

Emma asked Claire what she did for a living.

"I work for a precision engineering firm. Aviation. Weller's has a long and illustrious history, dating back to the early years of powered flight. It's owned by an American company nowadays."

"Oh yes," said Emma, pricking up her ears. "Do you ever get to go there?"

"It's one junket I haven't been on yet, I'm afraid" Claire smiled. "But hope springs eternal. A lot of the leadership and motivation work I do with senior managers is very much in the American style. I suppose it would be rather like taking coals to Newcastle, but as far as I am concerned, they needn't be shy in inviting me over for extra training or, well, any reason they like really. In addition to training, I take part in recruitment and disciplinary procedures. Plus I collect and interpret statistics, writing reports on everything from global trends in aircraft manufacture, to which brand of hand soap to use in the wash rooms."

"Would I know your company?" asked Emma, whose knowledge of aircraft engineering was pretty much akin to her knowledge of the life cycle of protozoa.

"Probably not," Claire replied, "but just about every aeroplane flying has Weller components. We manufacture here in the Midlands and at a huge site near Bristol. I divide my time between the two."

Emma wondered how this beautiful, intelligent, solidly middle class girl came to be with a thug like Ian. With diplomatic restraint, she asked how they met.

Claire smiled radiantly.

"At a party given by a woman who prides herself on always having the most diverse range of guests possible," she answered fondly. "People who ordinarily would probably never meet. I think she was driving past the fire station one day when they were fund raising for charity. She stopped and gave a party invitation to the most handsome man there."

"Yeah, right," thought Emma. "But he couldn't go, so he passed the invitation on to Ian."

Hiding her complete disdain for Claire's boyfriend behind an expression of polite interest, Emma concentrated on her plate of tofu and mushrooms in a rich, creamy sauce. Whatever her views to the contrary, Claire was convinced that her meeting with Ian was a fortuitous and wonderful event. She therefore kept to herself her second opinion, another that she doubted Claire would appreciate. To Emma's jaundiced mind, "That woman, whoever she is, should have been taken from her party, put against a wall and shot."

Offering the basket of garlic bread, Claire said,

"You know, Emma, I think that you would fit right in at one of Hannah's parties, being artistic and well travelled as you are. Let me ask her for an invitation to the next one for you. She would adore you, and you never know, you might end up meeting your opposite number there, the way I did mine. They do say that opposites attract."

"They say a lot of stupid things," thought Emma.

"Thanks, Claire," she replied, not wishing to offend a lovely woman, "but I'll sort out my love life in my own way, and anyway, an opposite isn't what I'm looking for."

"Well, I'm sure there'll be artistic and well travelled men there too," teased Claire. "You're not obliged to meet people with whom you have nothing in common."

"On the contrary," said Emma, watching Claire closely, "I generally have a great deal in common with men."

"There you are then!" cried Claire triumphantly. "Say you'll come. Ian and I will be there."

"Thank you, Claire, I'm sure you're being kind, but I'll deal with my own love life. I'm gay. My lovers have always been women and I like to choose them for myself. I don't mean to seem rude to you or your friend, but well, that's the way it is."

Emma took a sip of her vodka, all the time keeping her attention fixed on Claire's face. Claire put down her knife. Reaching across to place a professionally manicured hand over Emma's, she said,

"I am so sorry, Emma, I've been babbling on like a fool. I do hope I haven't offended you. I really didn't mean to."

"It's nothing," said Emma, embarrassed by the apology. "Besides, no one who can cook this well can offend me."

"I'm glad," said Claire, resuming her meal.

They ate on for a time, mellow background music plugging the breach in the conversation, until Claire glanced up to say,

"Do you mind if I ask you something?"

"Ask," shrugged Emma, far more nonchalantly than she felt.

"You said that your lovers are always women. When did you first...?"

"Sleep with a woman?" Emma finished the question.

"Yes."

"Not until I was sixteen."

"Because of the age of consent?"

"No, not because of that." Emma laughed, dispelling some of the tension she had been feeling. "It was nothing to do with morality and everything to do with opportunity. Eligible lesbians are as rare as hens' teeth now that I'm twenty-six. Ten years ago I was beginning to despair of ever meeting a girl like me."

"But you did eventually?"

"Eventually. I'd like to tell you that she was beautiful or captivating or something, but she wasn't. She was a relief to me though. If there is one there can be others, and I'd finally broken my duck. Not particularly romantic or glamorous, I know, but if we had walked away from each other then, there would have been no knowing when the opportunity would have arisen again for either of us. You can't afford to be too choosy when you're a lesbian. At least, I've never felt that I could be. Her name was Diane, if you're interested."

"Did you love her?"

"It took time, but yes, I did love her in the end. I was disappointed that she wasn't more attractive, but I did become fond of her, then found one day that I loved her."

"How did it end?" asked Claire.

"She discovered men," Emma replied flatly, dropping her gaze momentarily.

"I didn't sleep with anyone until I was eighteen," confided Claire, after a pause. "I bet you can guess when it happened, too."

"Eighteen?" mused Emma. "Was it at university? The first year at university? First term? Oh no, not Freshers' Week?"

"Yes, Freshers' Week."

"Oh no, Claire."

"I know, I know. I was beguiled and mesmerized by a final year biologist. It had to be someone, I suppose, and he wasn't so bad really. He helped me find my feet, away from home for the first time. He stayed around too, it wasn't just hit and run."

"That sounds as glamorous and romantic as my first love experience," remarked Emma.

"It got it out of the way, I guess. I was flattered too to receive the attentions of an older guy." Claire blushed. "I find it all rather embarrassing now. But tell me about you, Emma. When did you first realize that you preferred women?"

"I always knew. They weren't women at first, of course, they were girls, same as I was. I always knew that I wanted to hold and love females rather than males. All the pop and film stars I was ever interested in were female, always feminine and always beautiful. By nine, I'd learned to touch my little girlfriends' aura where it overlapped with mine. Even then, I knew that real touching wasn't likely to be well received. Not by

most girls. The first time I applied the term lesbian to myself, I had just turned twelve in the summer holidays. That's why it seemed such a dreadfully long time before I was able to do anything about it, aged sixteen with Diane."

"Touching auras," pursued Claire. "That's extraordinary. Can you still do it?"

"I suppose so. The nice thing about being a grown up is I do get to touch for real every now and then."

"Was there anyone in Rhodes?"

"No," Emma replied. "I kept my eyes open, but the people I came into contact with seemed unrelentingly hetero. I got to thinking that there must be a clause when you book a package tour, where you confirm that you are straight. The way you have to promise to look into other insurance when you turn down the tour operator's own. And another thing; did you know that there really is one large tour operator that will not accept same sex couples on their holidays? It's shameful. Working in the bar, I saw some unusually friendly women, but that generally meant they'd imbibed too much cheap booze, or been too long in the sun. Frequently both. There was never an occasion where I'd have staked my weekend's wages on a person being gay. Except for men of course, they're generally pretty obvious. But what's the point in spotting them? There had been somebody, before I left Birmingham, Trish her name was, but that had all gone sour weeks before."

"Was she feminine and beautiful?" Claire asked.

"As close as I could hope for. She designed all her own clothes and jewellery. A case of punk temptress meets urban sophisticate. I always thought she looked very dramatic and alluring."

Emma paused.

"Problem was, there were plenty of blokes that felt the same way I did, and it caused no end of trouble between us, her sleeping with men. It would have been different if she'd been seeing other women, I would have been open to that. She said I had double standards, which is quite true. Anyway, this thing with Trish started well but ended badly, and led to me taking off for Greece last April."

Emma spread her hands in wry submission.

"So there you have it. The squalid life and times of Emma Jarvis from age nine years, to the present day."

"You must have been a precocious child to know what you wanted so young," suggested Claire.

"Maybe," agreed Emma. "But knowing what you are is not the same as getting what you want. I'd say it's better not to know what you want, then it doesn't bother you when you don't get it."

Newly introduced to Emma's unique brand of logic, Claire suggested they finish their meal in the living room. She carried through plates of tiramisu, placing them on tables to either side of a cream leather sofa. Emma went into raptures over the Italian dessert, obliging Claire to admit that it was bought, not home made. Scraping the last of the dessert from her plate, Emma leaned back into the sumptuous leather, eyes closed, a look of unalloyed bliss on her face.

"The sofa reclines," Claire told her, leaning across to operate the mechanism. A footrest rose to support Emma's legs, while the back slid smoothly away, leaving her semi prone and blissfully relaxed.

"Oh this is living in the lap of luxury, Claire. A great meal, tiramisu and a reclining sofa. Life can't get any better."

"I'm pleased you're comfortable and enjoying yourself. Now, what would you like to do next?"

"Do? Do? You're not going to suggest anything that involves moving are you? I was thinking of lying here and seeing if I explode. You must understand that if I die now, I will die a happy woman."

"I was going to suggest another drink and a movie. Would you like another vodka?"

"I'd love another vodka but I'd better not if I'm to navigate my way home from here. I don't want to wake up in Coventry."

"Who would?" asked Claire, raising an eyebrow. "Coffee then, it should be brewed by now."

Emma languidly acquiesced to coffee. Claire brought her in a cup, setting it down on the small side table.

"Now, what about a movie?"

"You choose," said Emma, sipping her coffee.

"How about *Thelma and Louise*?" Claire suggested.

"You know, I've never seen that film," admitted Emma. "I don't know how I managed it, but that and *Casablanca* have eluded me all these years."

"Well I don't have Casablanca, but we can fill in a gap for you as far as Thelma and Louise is concerned."

Claire set up the player, then carried over the remote control, together with a replenished glass of vodka cocktail, placing them both a little unsteadily on the coffee table in front of her. She sat down, reclined her seat, then slid her arm smoothly through Emma's, saying,

"You'll enjoy this film."

Two of Claire's fingers rested lightly against Emma's wrist, burning sizzling bullet holes through skin and bone. Emma glanced casually down. She was amazed not to see two smoking tunnels, cut clean through her arm to Claire's long linen skirt below. While Claire was intent on the movie, Emma was intent on Claire. To save her life, Emma could not say what the movie was about, but she quickly became attuned to the fragrance of Claire's skin and hair, the movement of her breathing against Emma's arm, and the weight of Claire's hand where it fell unheeded against her thigh. Emma endured the exquisite agony of her new friend's proximity, as her body temperature rose to that of boiling lead. Part of her brain calculated the distance to Claire's lips to five decimal places and gave a journey time of less than two seconds, even allowing for the yielding, voluptuous nature of the sofa. Emma felt her heart beat against Claire's bare arm, and knew that she could no more reach out to touch her than fly. If Emma had been a man, Claire would have needed to find some other time in which to watch the film, but given Emma's reserves of respect and awe, she could have sat watching it naked and Emma wouldn't, indeed couldn't, have made a move towards her.

To add to her discomfiture, Emma found she needed to go to the bathroom. She ignored the feeling until it could be disregarded only at her peril, finally asking Claire to pause the movie.

"For all the difference that will make," she thought, getting to her feet. She had taken nothing in since the copyright warning had scrolled up the screen more than an hour ago. As Emma stood washing her hands in the luxury bathroom, she looked at her reflection in the over basin mirror. Her skin was flushed. She was burning hot, tiny beads of sweat glistened on her upper lip. Slowly she wiped her mouth with a towel, taking deep breaths as she struggled for composure. Her biggest fear as she returned to the living room was that Claire, who did not appear to notice that she had her arm through Emma's, might now choose to sit in a more conventional manner on her return.

Pausing before sitting down once more, Emma finished the remains of her cold coffee. Claire restarted the film, taking Emma's hand in hers. Turning to her, she said,

"It's a good film, isn't it?"

"Yes," croaked Emma, thinking, "It's the best damn movie I've ever sat oblivious through. I shall remember not watching this till I'm old and grey."

Holding hands with Claire, Emma began at last to relax. Claire could not be unaware that she was hand in hand with Emma. A lot further up the scale of friendly contact than arm in arm, itself quite intimate enough for the mid week watching of old films in the stylish and expensive living room of a straight woman acquaintance. A recent straight woman acquaintance, at that.

No stranger to confusion caused by women at all ends of the emotional/sexual spectrum, Emma did the only thing that made any sense at present: she watched the film. It proved to be near the end. The climax came and the final scene was acted out. Credits rolled up the screen for minutes on end.

"No *Thelma and Louise* Two then?" said Emma, when the music had died away.

"No," laughed Claire.

"But that's dreadful, hounding them over a cliff like that."

"They die in a bond of friendship."

"They die in a grisly mangled mess at the bottom of a cliff" insisted Emma. "I'd never have done that to Geena Davis. I would take such good care of her, she'd be safe with me."

"I'm sure she would," said Claire, gently withdrawing her hand from Emma's. She stood, stretching long limbs, then retrieved the film from the machine. Emma wiped her damp hand against her skirt. She glanced at the time, then stood too.

"I must be going now, Claire. But before I do, I want to give you this to thank you for dinner."

She handed Claire a cardboard tube from her bag. Claire popped open the stopper to reveal a roll of watercolour paper.

"Oh it's beautiful," she exclaimed, unrolling a painting of Rhodes' ancient harbour. "Thank you so much," she said, kissing Emma's cheek.

"I shall get it framed. I know just the place to hang it. It will be the first thing I see every morning and the last thing I see every night."

Emma swallowed hard.

"It's so very kind of you," Claire continued volubly. "It's lovely, I hardly know what to say."

Though not obvious, Claire had been drinking steadily all evening. She was now almost certainly drunk. Even so, Emma never expected such an effusive response to a gift which had, in all honesty, narrowly escaped being left behind in Greece. She had painted the scene from a vantage point above the harbour. While climbing up, the sun, which had been shining from a beautiful blue sky, had disappeared behind cloud. She continued to paint it as a sun-flooded scene though, putting in the characteristic blue of sea and sky, so typical of the islands dotted throughout the Aegean. Whether the watercolour buying public saw through the deception, or perhaps for some other reason, the sunny harbour view never sold. While others found homes across the world, this one had stuck doggedly to its creator. At the last minute when packing to leave, Emma had thrust it in amongst her clothes for the journey home.

To Emma it was a pretty enough picture. One of the few she'd painted from life. Yet Claire was behaving as though she had been given something of great value and merit. Emma wished she had given her one of the others she brought back, intending to sell them in the coming spring or summer. Everybody likes to be appreciated, but Claire's over the top reaction to a pleasing, but in no way extraordinary watercolour, left Emma feeling distinctly uncomfortable. She felt mean too, giving Claire something that she alone had liked. Still, there was nothing she could do about that now, so she smiled and said that she was pleased Claire liked it.

"I love meeting creative and interesting people" said Claire. "If you'd like to come to dinner again next week, you'll be able to see it framed and hung. We could finish your vodka too. How are you getting home tonight, by train?"

"The train from New Street, but it's too late to get the last train from here into the city. I'll catch the bus on the main road."

"Will you be all right, going to the bus stop on your own? Would you like me to ask the night porter to walk with you?"

"There's no need," Emma declined the offer. "The road is well enough lit and I'm stone cold sober again, but I would love to come over next week to see what you have done with the picture."

"Do you have time for more coffee?" Claire asked.

"Not really, I'm afraid." Emma replied, having no choice but to leave, "but thank you for a lovely evening."

Claire led the way into the hallway, fetching her guest's coat from the cupboard by the door. Putting it on, Emma stood debating the best way to say goodbye to her new friend. She was halfway to taking Claire's hand when Claire hugged her, trapping her arm between the two of them and leaving Emma to make a clumsy, one armed embrace. Emma escaped into the night air, hurrying to the bus stop without looking back. If she had, she would have seen Claire looking after her from her bedroom window.

As the bus jogged and lurched towards the city, Emma sat gazing at reflections in the window, her mind entirely with Claire. She felt the spot on her cheek where Claire had kissed her and the ghostly impression of her fingers, entwined for the final half hour of the film. She relived Claire's excitement at being given a second rate painting and her reaction to the news that Emma was a lesbian. She ran through the entire evening in minute detail, without once arriving at any understanding of Claire's puzzlingly flirtatious behaviour. She gave up the unequal struggle, imagining instead Claire's development seminars with senior managers. She saw them sitting cross legged and holding hands, each declaring how much better things were in finance or human resources since the other came to work there.

As an artist and almost by definition, a person who worked alone, Emma had little experience of the touchy-feely approach to staff training, but Claire's closeness and spontaneous displays of affection would surely stay with her tonight, and for many nights to come. On the one hand, she was pleased that Claire was sufficiently at ease with her to be warm and affectionate. On the other, she was sorely rattled that someone as attractive as Claire *was* warm and affectionate with her. It was simply not good for Emma's equilibrium. She felt an unrequited love affair coming on, while all the time, Ian lurked in the background. A big blond fly in the ointment, reminding her that however much she would wish it to be otherwise, Claire was not a woman like her.

3

What Does Emma Want?

"Blooming 'eck, Claire, how is it there's still no lift here?" demanded Jessica, bursting through the door of Claire's flat the following evening. Jessica, fifteen years older than Claire, had been battling a weight problem for some time. By no means the first time Jessica had made the journey over, she had nevertheless, made identical complaints on each occasion.

"I guess the architect didn't think I needed one, being only two floors up," Claire replied patiently. "Besides, these flats are designed to have a low environmental impact. There's loads of insulation, solar panels to supply a proportion of the electricity -"

"My point exactly," cried Jessica, pouncing on Claire's words with the uncompromising determination of a sumo wrestler. She tugged off a black knitted hat, revealing a mop of dark, tousled hair, shot through with an occasional strand of silver. "The solar panels could run the lift.

Or an escalator, I'm not fussed. Or place oxygen cylinders on every landing, surely that's the least they could do in the circumstances."

"I'll drop a line to the management company," promised Claire, smiling. "Oxygen on landings."

"You do that, Claire. You'll find a lot more people will make it up here if there are a few emergency medical facilities on hand."

"I have exactly the number of people I want visiting me here," Claire stood her ground. "Ian most weekends. My sister from time to time. You and my parents every third blue moon. Everyone else I go out to. I love being here alone, Jessica. It took me an age to find this flat, and it's absolutely perfect for me. I don't even mind the distance I have to travel to work each day. I did have a new visitor here last night, though. Her name is Emma. She lives in the same house as Ian. She's an artist and a lesbian."

"Why do you say that?" Jessica asked, making herself at home in Claire's favourite armchair.

"I don't, she does. She's quite open about it. It's clearly important to her that people know. If others have a problem with it, there is no point continuing with them. I'm sure that is how she thinks. She is working for the Royal Mail at present."

"Designing stamps?"

"Seasonal work in the sorting office. Anyway, Jessica, how is the new diet going?"

"Brilliant," replied Jessica, producing a box of cream cakes, fresh from the Austrian patisserie closest to her heart.

"But Jessica!" protested Claire. "Cream cakes?"

"Don't worry about that," said Jessica airily. "The cream cakes are my reward for giving up the biscuits."

"You've given up biscuits, have you?"

"Mostly," Jessica replied.

"Oh, right," said Claire, giving up. "Well, coffee's nearly ready. I've got sweeteners for you."

"Thanks. Did you get any cream?"

"I have skimmed milk."

"Oh, OK," replied Jessica, less than thrilled. "How's Fireman Sam?" she asked, recovering from crushing disappointment.

"Ian's fine thank you, Jess. A bit peeved that I wasn't at his friend's birthday bash last night. I had to fight for my right to see Emma. He wanted me to cancel or postpone, which I was not prepared to do this time."

"Not worried about you hanging out with artistic lesbians, is he?"

"I don't know if Ian knows she's gay. He never said anything to me if he did. So, there I was, Jess, prattling on about how I met Ian. Suggesting that she should come to one of Hannah's parties. Just assumed that Emma was single, even though she'd never said anything one way or the other. I tell you, I couldn't have made a worse mess of things. I could see she wasn't as overjoyed at the prospect as she might have been, but I carried on digging. Telling her how she'd meet well travelled, artistic men there, because Hannah scoops up disparate individuals like a black hole. She had to do something to shut me up. A gag or a straitjacket. So she told me, politely but firmly, that her lovers are women and she likes to choose them for herself, thank you very much. I felt such a fool. I mean, why is there never a trapdoor in the floor when you need one? I expect Hannah would have a token lesbian or two at any party she threw, but I can see that Emma would view that as patronizing."

"I would too," said Jessica, cutting her cream cake into diet sized pieces. "What's she like, this Emma?"

"To look at?" asked Claire. "She's about 5' 4", I suppose. Slim, with shortish, sun bleached, light brown hair. She has high cheekbones and cat-like green eyes. You might say she is quite androgynous in some ways," she mused.

"You mean butch?" Jessica asked.

"No, absolutely not butch. The day I met her, she was wearing a rugby shirt, but even then she looked nothing like a rugby player. She is actually an attractive woman, but she seems quite independent and self contained. We tend to associate these traits with masculinity. In Emma, this hint of androgyny makes her stronger somehow. As if she is used to being an outsider. She can never have the protection and social legitimacy conferred by a husband or boyfriend. Consequently she lives life on her own terms. That sets her apart. I respect her for holding out for what she wants."

"I see you've been thinking about this," remarked Jessica, spearing more cake with her fork.

Claire gestured in the direction of her spare bedroom.

"I have shelves full of my old university textbooks in there. They deal with the individual as part of the business organisation, but it applies just as much to social interactions. It's about motivation and reward. The psychology of who we are and why we do things. It's natural for me to want to understand people. Especially someone like Emma, who isn't the kind of person I come across every day."

"And what does all this hard won and expensive education tell you about Emma then, Claire?"

Claire picked at her cream cake while she considered.

"That she doesn't get what she wants," she replied. "Which is strange, because research consistently shows that good looking people do better than average looking ones, when it comes to getting what they want."

"And what does Emma want?"

"A lover who is feminine and beautiful."

Jessica raised a sceptical eyebrow.

"Is that realistic?" she asked. "I've not come across too many women I knew for certain were lesbians, but I'd never have described any of them as either feminine or beautiful."

"Emma said that gay women are as rare as hens' teeth, so I don't expect she does find many who do meet her criteria. She did say there was a woman earlier this year who seems to have fitted the bill for her. But this woman was bisexual, which is obviously something Emma is not comfortable with. That's another strange thing. She said that she can't afford to be too choosy, but then is prejudiced against bisexuals."

"I guess that hypocrisy isn't confined wholly to the heterosexual classes," commented Jessica.

"I don't suppose she is entirely aware of the inconsistency of her views," said Claire. "She will have valid reasons for how she feels, however contradictory those views appear to anyone not party to the transaction."

"It's like I said. Hypocrisy," said Jessica.

"Conflicting drives," argued Claire. "The desire not to be alone is countered by a stronger urge, resulting in an antipathy towards women

she believes are not putting her first. I expect it's rooted in insecurity. She feels compelled to control the odds on losing. I don't condone prejudice, but I do see how experience can mould personality. Ultimately nobody wants to share. Even if we will go along with a situation for a while, eventually it will resolve itself into some less complex arrangement."

"What like?" asked Jessica, her mouth full of cake, her forehead creased in an attempt to follow Claire's quasi-scientific reasoning.

"Well, the least complex of all is remaining alone, but for obvious reasons, that is not a popular choice. The least complex relationship involving others is the almost discredited arrangement whereby two people engage in monogamy."

"So Emma wants the bisexual woman for herself?" guessed Jessica.

"It's simple." replied Claire, "Nobody would choose to share. There are sound evolutionary reasons for it, and it is undeniably the least complex model of relationship."

"I see," said Jessica, though whether she did or not was open to question. "Well, I pity poor Emma. She popped round for a cheesy dip and a cherryade, then got two hours on the analyst's couch for her sins. Falling victim to that well known cause of indigestion; a third degree grilling under the intrusive microscope of Professor Claire."

"I would never do *that* on anyone's first visit." Claire was aghast.

"You always do," insisted Jessica. "You minutely dissect every new person that comes into your life. I hate to think what you made of me when we first met."

"Well I'm a people person," Claire explained. "I take an interest in people and their lives. And anyway, Emma and I had a perfectly ordinary evening yesterday. These conclusions came this afternoon. I'm not criticizing Emma for her opinions. We use a variety of strategies for staying safe and painfree. When it comes to getting what we want, or at least minimizing the amount of what we don't want in our lives, there is no limit to the lengths a person might go."

"I doubt you have much trouble getting what you want," said Jessica. "Seems to me the world is falling over itself not to disappoint lovely Claire."

"Not disappoint me? It is continually disappointing me," said Claire. "The benevolence with which the world habitually treated her was clear to the most casual observer, yet Claire did not see it. In no mood to have

the spotlight turned upon herself or be deflected from her lecture on the frailty of human nature exhibited by others, she bit firmly between her teeth, Claire continued, "Rationalizing the illogical in the hope of deceiving oneself and those around us is nothing new, they are everyday occurrences. Emma holds some strange opinions, but let's face it Jess, no one is perfect."

"Tell me about it, Claire!" Jessica exploded, cutting short any further debate on the contradictions in Emma's credo. "I'm a vicar's wife for God's sake. I get to see major hypocrisy and humbug up close and personal. I'm sorry if I was rough on your friend. Anyone diced and sliced and put under your microscope deserves my sympathy."

"She is coming to dinner again next week," said Claire. "I'm sure to learn more about her then. She gave me a painting. I pick it up from the framer's tomorrow. I feel humble that she gave me something beautiful she created herself. Imagine being able to do that. I gave her supermarket tiramisu."

"The one in the gold box?" asked Jessica.

Claire nodded.

"Any left?"

Claire scowled at her. Jessica reclined her chair and asked,

"What does a lesbian artist paint - women?"

Claire laughed.

"I think I may already know her well enough to predict her reply to that. She would say, "Yes, given half a chance." But it's actually a delightful harbour scene. She was in Rhodes up until a few weeks ago. She has travelled a lot in Asia too. That's another reason I'm interested in her. She goes to these places alone which must take courage."

"Ole Fireman Sam's going to have to pull his socks up if you're not to lose interest in him," Jessica said, archly. "Learn to draw, see a bit of the world."

"Oh no, Jessica. I bow to your advanced age and greater experience in most things, but in this case, you are just plain wrong. There is at least one department where Ian is a runaway winner."

"How does Emma react around you, Claire? If ever a woman was beautiful and feminine, you are."

"She seems fairly frank and honest with me. She told me some quite revealing things, not all of them to her credit. She is candid about her flaws, which is an uncommon degree of honesty. Physically she doesn't seem to react to me at all. I kissed her when she gave me the picture, then hugged her before she left, but neither time did it provoke much of a reaction. We watched a film together, sitting close and friendly on the sofa. It was nice. Cosy. She seemed to enjoy the film. End of story."

Jessica was dismayed.

"Oh Claire, you can't honestly believe that. The poor girl's androgynous hormones must have been doing backflips, snuggled up on the sofa with you. I've got kids to attest to my heterosexual credentials, but I still think a couple of hours cuddled up with you would have me doubting my commitment to James."

"Really Jessica?" teased Claire. "I never knew."

"There's nothing to know, you idiot. I'm simply telling you; it must have tormented your friend to do that with you."

Claire was contrite.

"I never thought of that. I'd had one or two stiff vodkas to cloud my judgement. I just remember thinking, how nice it was, to be warm and close with someone, without there being any question of things going further. The way it should be ideally. The way it probably was in a more innocent, less knowing age."

"Be that as it may, Claire, Emma is a thoroughly modern woman. It would have cost her to do what she did last night."

"What do you think I should do?" asked Claire, concerned. "Should I write and apologize to her, or call off next week's dinner?"

"I don't think you need do that, it isn't the end of the world," Jessica assured her. "Be aware of her feelings, that is all I am asking. You're loving and affectionate and that's nice, but it is likely to mean more to Emma than it does to you." Jessica smiled. "I'm sorry, I'm getting heavy again. I'm sure Emma can look after herself - she's how old?"

"Twenty six."

"There, she's a big girl. Quite able to take care of herself. Now, I have tickets for you and Ian for The James Brown Soul Roadshow."

"The what?" Claire laughed.

"It's James. He's tired of having his leg pulled over his famous name. He's been taking singing and dancing lessons lately. He's putting on a show for church funds. He is "The Soulfather of God." He does a very good Sex Machine, you know. Come if you can. How are you planning to spend Christmas?"

"Here, I expect," replied Claire, with a shrug. "With Ian. We'll pull up the drawbridge, get quietly merry. Spend a lot more time together than we usually do."

"You'll have to get used to that when you're married," warned Jessica. "It can last a lifetime if you do it right. Or just feel that way if you get it wrong."

"I know, but it will be such a wrench, having to get rid of the flat. I can't share it, it's too much me. It will have to be sold and we'll get somewhere together. Anyway, he hasn't asked me to marry him yet, and I won't be dropping any hints this Christmas. Between you and me, Jess, I rather like things as they are. I don't have to see him every day to know that I love him."

"Your parents think a lot of him, don't they?"

"They'd be dancing at my wedding tomorrow morning if they had their way," confirmed Claire, "And mum, always bringing the conversation round to their grandchildren, and how I shouldn't leave it too late. Well, I love children and I want heaps, but I can't see how I can find the time to have any before I'm about forty five."

"It's funny that you should mention forty five, Claire. That's the age I'm hoping to be completely rid of mine. One at university and the other in the Air Force. James and I are planning to move house and not tell them, just in case they decide they don't like the grown up world after all, and think that they can come back. We've done our bit for the population supply. We can die content in the knowledge that we have replaced ourselves with one of each. I love our Leah to bits, but if she'd been another boy, I don't think I could have gone through all that again, just to complete the set. You have no idea how much it hurts."

"Your children are a credit to you, Jessica, they're nice kids."

"They are. Now I'm looking forward to them spreading a little joy and happiness anywhere but here." Jessica spoke with an air of finality, brooking no further discussion on the subject.

"Do you have any Trekkies' conventions coming up?" Claire asked, referring to Jessica's lifelong Star Trek fetish.

"There's a lull now until the New Year, then there's one in Swindon. Why Claire, are you interested in coming?"

"I don't think so, Jessica. I know it is heresy to say this around you, but I was never a great fan of Star Trek."

"Shame on you, child," scolded Jessica. "Keep this quiet," she said, leaning forward, lowering her voice conspiratorially. "It's the original 1960's series that does it for me. I love a good Victorian morality tale and a happy ending. It is always worth endangering the ship and her crew for a principle. And you know what? It always works out fine in the end. They share their little joke and all is well in the Universe once more. So I'll mostly be watching the year dot episodes and the first batch of movies."

"Don't you know every storyline, every word of dialogue, every piece of action?" asked Claire.

"Oh yes, that's the joy of it. But there is no point trying to explain the enduring appeal of classic sci-fi to a Philistine like you."

"That's not fair," Claire was indignant. "I was watching *Thelma and Louise* only last night. That has got to have been at least the tenth time. I understand perfectly well that something you enjoy isn't diminished by repetition. It was the first time Emma had seen it, though."

Jessica did a double take.

"Where's she been, this Emma? In a penal colony on a D-class planet at the backside of the Gamma Quadrant?"

"She may have," laughed Claire. "She gets around a bit. She did say she didn't know how she'd avoided it all this time. I suppose prison could be one explanation. I'm going to see if I can get hold of *Casablanca* for her too. That's another one she's never seen."

"And you bang on about me liking old films," said Jessica, a twinkle in her eye.

"It is not just an old film," Claire retorted. "It's a classic in the art of film making. It was something she mentioned in passing. She probably doesn't even remember saying it. It will be something nice to do when she next comes round. Maybe we could make it a regular thing. I'm determined to hold on to my current friends, Jessica, and be open to making new ones. You've seen for yourself how insular I can become with my boyfriends. That's why I'm glad I've met Emma. I want us to remain friends. She has a very direct way of looking at a person, does

Emma," Claire was musing again. "You know how people usually only look at you to make sure you haven't fallen asleep or left the room? Well, Emma looks you straight in the eye. It's an uncommon thing, when someone gives you their full attention. Makes me wish I had more to tell her."

"Certainly I remember how insular you can be," Jessica said, despairing at Claire's Jekyll and Hyde personality. "You would disappear into a cosy cocoon with your new man. Us gals hardly got a look in. I'd book time with you weeks in advance, but there'd still be every chance of you cancelling or rearranging everything we had agreed. You were always excited about your latest and greatest conquest, then in no time at all, you would be excited about the next one. Come to think of it, Claire, aren't you overdue for the next one?"

Claire laughed nervously.

"I think I'll stick with Ian, Jessica, I'm sure he's the one. I had to take all of my boyfriends seriously. I had no way of knowing at the time which would be the one I'd eventually want to marry. But I've learned my lesson. I'm taking a more measured approach to Ian. I'm not going to lose sight of my women friends ever again. It is not as though there are so many to keep track of."

"I've noticed that you always call Ian your boyfriend rather than your partner," remarked Jessica, "Isn't that a touch archaic?"

"Maybe it is, Jess. They had to call it something when marriage went out of fashion. But to me, partner is ridiculous. It's having a business education. In my world, a partner is someone I'm in business with. I do the buying, my partner handles the accounts, that kind of thing. Ian would need to do a degree in design or marketing for me to see him as my partner. I'm an old fashioned girl. I use old fashioned language. It's the way I am."

"You can come round to our house, try teaching some old fashioned language to my two," offered Jessica.

"Are you a household divided by a common language?" Claire asked.

"I'm not sure what Daniel speaks," admitted Jessica. "Nobody has heard him say anything intelligible in the last three years. If he did speak English, he would probably ask why his legs have grown so long, or what *is* this vacuum cleaner thing his mother wants deployed in his bedroom. Now Leah, she's lovely. Bright, sporty, popular. There are so many

interesting things we could discuss together, if only she had time to send me a text message."

"Cheer up, Jessica," Claire consoled her friend. "I'll send you a text message. Or better still, an old fashioned letter. Hand written and chock full of archaic expressions and anachronisms."

4

Beloved of Bored Housewives

"Can a girl buy you a cup of tea?" Emma asked the thin, balding guy busking in the subway.

"You must think I'm so cheap," he replied, unhooking his guitar strap. Leaning the battered instrument against the wall, he held out his arms. Emma hugged his bony frame, coming up almost to his collarbone.

"It's good to see you, Emma. When did you get back?"

"Nearly a month ago now, Pete. It's taken me a while to get sorted. All dealt with now, though. I'm living in a house in Richmond Road, like in the old days. My last, best offer: hot chocolate and a bacon sandwich."

They made their way to a busy café, where Pete ordered coffee and a burger and Emma, a cup of tea.

"When you hadn't turned up by October, I thought you'd be away for the winter," Pete said, copiously sugaring his drink.

"I was having a reasonable time out there," explained Emma, "though the weather was nothing to write home about. Trouble was, I didn't make any real money after early October, but I was spending plenty. I really should have come back then. Anyway, it's all come together now. A job, somewhere to live, what more could a girl want?"

"You should have come to us, Em, we'd have shuffled round and made room for you."

"I know you would, but I didn't want to put you out. So how are Simone and Rosie since I saw them last?"

"Both are more beautiful than when you saw them, Em. Rosie's growing up fast. It won't be long before she's three. The time goes so quickly," Pete replied, a hint of regret in his tone.

"She's got Simone's good looks all right," said Emma. "It's lucky your daughter looks nothing like you."

"She's bright, Emma. Knows all the names of the Blues' first team, even the tricky foreign ones."

"Brains as well as beauty," agreed Emma. "She's a star."

"Want to guess who I saw about a month ago?" Pete asked. "Out shopping with her brother's wife. Have a guess."

Like commuter trains closing on the same track, Emma could guess what was coming.

"Trish," Pete announced, as if pulling a rabbit from a hat.

Emma nodded, remaining silent.

"That project of theirs should be up and running by now. She said it would be open by the New Year. It's huge, I passed it on the bus last week. It looked great."

Emma had not joined a group of Trish's more avant-garde friends in turning a former car dealership into an exhibition space for both their own work and that of other artists. Seldom inspired by large-scale experimental art, Emma was skilled in the execution of traditional themes. Those preferred by customers who use their own money to buy art. She had not the time to wait while her work won a prize, or was chosen as the centrepiece for a multinational's new headquarters, or its carpark. Besides, her relationship with her lover Trish, was deteriorating, and not about to be improved by borrowing money towards a venture to which she was not one hundred percent committed. It was simply one

more thing that came between them, helping seal the end of their relationship, some nine months earlier.

Emma wished Pete would leave it alone, move on to something else. Yet predictably, because Emma would rather have discussed anything other than Trish, Pete's determination to bring her up was equal to, if not stronger than, Emma's desire to avoid the subject at all costs.

"Will you be going to see her?" Pete asked.

"Me?" replied Emma, startled. "I can't imagine she wants to see me. I'll go see her when I'm mature and grown up, she was forever exhorting me to become those things. I'll go to see her in about twenty years' time."

"Come on, Emma, it's Christmas. Let bygones be bygones and get in touch with her. You've been away; you've both had time to think. At least send her a card."

"Yes, maybe," said Emma, squirming. "Who's she with now, Pete, do you know? She'll be with someone. She's pathologically incapable of being on her own."

"Gavin."

Emma's face was a picture of dismay and disgust.

"No, not Gavin," she wailed. "Anyone but him! He is such a pretentious prat and not even a particularly good artist. Always working on installations, he should have been a plumber. That woman has such appalling taste in men, I despair for her. Now Mark, I could just about go along with her seeing him, I suppose. But Gavin!"

"She looked better than she has in a long while," Pete replied undaunted. "Stronger. The way she did when the two of you got back from Romania that time."

"Yeah, I remember," said Emma quietly, studying the network of fine scratches on the melamine tabletop.

"She asked about you, asked if I'd seen you," Pete went on remorselessly.

"I'll send her a card," Emma relented. "Wish her Season's Greetings and all the rest of it, but I didn't leave until it was pointless me staying. I'm no good at that "We can still be friends" stuff either. Especially if she is with Gavin."

"She loved you once, Emma."

"Aye, and she loved a lot of other people, more than once. And don't give me any of that, "She's a free spirit" rubbish, either. She was just undecided. She never made up her mind to want me enough."

Mercifully, Pete turned his attention from Emma's failed relationship to his plate, adding extra ketchup to his burger. He leaned across to swipe a paper napkin from a nearby table. He finished the meal then said,

"Do you recall the time you went home with a woman, then completely forgot her name?"

Emma rolled her eyes skyward,

"Don't remind me," she said. "I called her love and sweetheart. Darling, honey, beloved, all night long. She must have thought I was totally besotted with her. I remembered her name three days later. It was Claudine. No wonder I forgot it after two minutes. Worse than that though, was the time I was seeing two women with the same first name. Now, why should that be a problem? Well, you need a way of telling people apart. Now these two were both dark haired, about the same height. No scars or distinguishing marks. Usually you do it with a name, if you can remember it, but as I say, they had the same name. I got over it by giving the one her full name, while I called the other by the diminutive. The one said it was sweet that I called her by her full name, nobody had done that since she was at school. I couldn't tell her that it was the only way I could separate them well enough not to make a fool of myself."

"You're bragging," accused Pete.

"I'm not bragging, I'm confessing. I'm easily confused."

"You've got a degree."

"In art, Pete, it's hardly rocket science."

"How about now, Emma, you seeing anyone?"

Emma shook her head.

"I've had my work cut out keeping body and soul together recently. I even had to fly to Gatwick, for my sins. The airport at the end of the universe. It was a hard day's hitching just to get up here, and then there was work and somewhere to live to sort out. Dead people have had more fun than me recently. I did meet this really gorgeous woman, though."

"But?" asked Pete.

"But what?"

"There's always a but with you, Emma. But she's married. But she's off to live in Tokyo. But she's a terrorist suicide bomber or a Jehovah's Witness."

"She's not married, she lives here in Birmingham, and I don't know anything about her religion. But - "

"Here it comes," said Pete, bracing himself against the table.

"She's straight. She's got this hulking great boyfriend. We live in the same house, as a matter of fact."

"It gets weirder," muttered Pete. "Why do I get a bad feeling about this?"

"Must be indigestion. She's lovely, Pete. Her name is Claire. I can't imagine what she's doing with Ian; slumming I suppose. She is very classy. We went through an entire canteen of cutlery, eating one dinner for two. And drinking coffee, I didn't know what I should do with my little fingers."

"Keep your little fingers to yourself, Emma, they only get you into trouble."

"She's got this flat. Like the centre spread in an aspirational lifestyle magazine. All glass and wood and polished stone. It has to be seen to be believed. My little flat in Rhodes would have fitted into her bathroom. Or rather, one of her bathrooms. I only saw the public one."

"How did this doyenne of style and sophistication come to let you into her flat?"

"Hey that's good, Pete. Doyenne. Where did you come up with that?"

"I read it in Readers' Digest. Learn a page from a dictionary every day, it said. Thing is, let's say the library was open three hundred and sixty days a year, and I went every day. It would still take over thirty years to memorize every word in the English language. At my age, I'm wondering if it's worth it, just to trot out a few words beginning with ZY."

"Doyenne was a good one though, Pete."

"Glad you liked it."

"Anyway, it happened like this," Emma said, regathering the thread of her tale. "Claire turned up at the house one night, having misplaced said hulking great boyfriend. So I was in like a shot, wooing her with a plate of my finest veggie curry. You know the one. Kashmiri style, with dried

fruit and cream. Next thing, she's inviting me round for a spot of home cooking of her own. Very nice it was too"

"You make a decent curry," conceded Pete, finishing his coffee.

"The best this side of the M40," Emma replied proudly. "Anyway, I'm on for dinner again next Thursday."

"Does she know you're a disreputable little lesbian?"

"I'm not little," Emma replied, offended. "I'm just below average height for a British woman. She knows about the other thing, as a matter of fact. I had to tell her. She was well on her way to marrying me off to some mismatched bozo at a party. She asked the usual questions. I gave her my heart wrenching hard luck story. Then we watched a movie. Hand in hand. I kid you not, young Peter."

"Do you think she swings both ways? Is she bisexual?"

"God, I hope not."

"Well, why not? You've slept with enough bi women, or so you told me."

"That was different," argued Emma, a curt shake of her head. "Those women didn't care anything for me, and I certainly wasn't going to break my heart over them. They were part-timers, crawling out of the woodwork to scratch an itch. Then back to the boyfriend for more happy families with the kids."

"Who are you trying to kid, Emma?"

"Me?"

"Yes, you. I'd believe this baloney if I hadn't been around to see how upset you have been over some of these women. You care, I know you care."

"Well, it won't be that way with Claire," Emma promised. "Of course I've fallen in love with her, but she doesn't need to know."

"Another one way love affair," commented Pete.

"It's what I do," replied Emma, with a shrug. "I was in love with Trish for over a year before I found out that she sometimes went with women. Maybe they'll put that on my tombstone - "Here lies Emma Jarvis, who loved women from afar, and was beloved of bored housewives."

"Don't worry, Emma, you'll find somebody. You're young, there's plenty of time. I was an old man when I met Simone. Now we've got Rosie. If someone will take me on, there's hope for everyone."

Emma patted Pete's scrawny hand.

"Sure, Pete," she smiled, "but Claire is a kind, considerate girl. It may take her a while to find a way of letting Ian down gently, without hurting his feelings. In the meantime, though, I think I had better see what more realistic opportunities are out there."

5

Ian's Better Plan

Claire's Saturday began with the installation of a brass picture lamp. The weekend had been relinquished to Ian to do with as he wished, but the lamp was important. It was positioned carefully, on the wall opposite her bed. Claire went downstairs to borrow a cordless drill and screwdrivers from the concierge's office. She hurried back with a bag of tools to begin work. Apart from having to undo the cover when they switched on the power before tightening the last screw, thus tripping the circuit breaker, the job was done quickly and tidily, entirely to Claire's satisfaction.

"What's this for?" asked Ian, switching the light on and off.

"This," said Claire, retrieving a parcel from the walk-in wardrobe. She took it from its wrapping.

"That's nice," he remarked, studying Emma's newly framed watercolour. "Where did you get it?"

"Emma did it."

Ian frowned and Claire, keen to avoid another round of "Why couldn't you have gone to Jack's birthday drink, instead of seeing that Emma?" steered him expertly on to the subject of the new hi-fi equipment he wanted to buy. Emma was blanked from his mind. Until the next time, Claire supposed.

They went out shopping mid morning, scouring the electronics retailers in the high street, together with several out of town superstores, compiling the complete picture where quality sound reproduction was concerned. Ian did not actually buy anything, but professed himself well pleased with the research he had done. Claire was bored but tolerant. There were worse ways to spend a December Saturday than warm and dry in a string of hi-fi shops.

Time sped by and, after a hasty lunch in town, Claire and Ian made their way to Villa Park. Aston Villa were entertaining Manchester United for the afternoon. A Leicester man by birth, Ian was nonetheless, hoping that Villa could ruin Manchester's weekend. He considered them over rated. Passionate about his football, Ian was keen to see them humbled by the Birmingham side.

There was a large police presence in the streets around the stadium. A capacity crowd was confidently predicted, despite the televising of the match on satellite TV. They were herded into the ground like cattle, rival fans kept segregated by police officers, police horses and police dogs. They made their way to their seats without incident. The tension in the ground was palpable. Claire felt intimidated in the midst of the noisy, boisterous, often foul mouthed throng. She gripped Ian's hand, glancing nervously about.

Claire recalled what Emma had said in the kitchen of the shared house, about the fickle nature of football support in Asia. How one can know the age of a vehicle by the stickers in its windows. Museum pieces were held together by Liverpool FC stickers. Fifteen years later, they proclaimed their owners' undying allegiance to Manchester United. Later it was to Arsenal, then Chelsea. Decade giving way to decade. Success in the English Premiership mapped in glass and steel. A story as meaningful to the football fan as that told by successive layers of fossils is to the palaeontologist. All the world really does love a winner. Claire smiled. Ian noticed, taking it as proof that Claire was enjoying herself.

After an interminable wait in the icy wind, twenty two men worth more than the combined gross domestic product of Africa, came out to

kick a football. It was a tentative affair, culminating in a stunning nil-nil scoreline at half-time. Ian swapped observations with a seasoned Villa supporter to his left, before leaving to buy coffee. When he returned aeons later with two styrofoam cups, Claire did not know whether to hit him for leaving her, or hug him for returning. Ian tried to engage Claire in the finer points of the game, but even he had to admit that the first half had been dull.

The second half got under way with substitutions on both sides. They had little effect, the ball bouncing around the midfield area, a long way from troubling either goalkeeper. In the eighty seventh minute, desperate to make something happen, Villa flooded forward, miraculously taking the ball with them. A series of blocked attacks and half clearances then ensued, and somehow the ball was scrambled into the back of the net. The crowd exploded, shaking the stand to its foundations. The home side hung on for the remaining minutes of normal time, plus four more of stoppage time. All the way back to the carpark, diehard Villa supporters celebrated the crushing one nil victory over the men in red.

Driving home, high above most other vehicles in Ian's mighty 4x4, it occurred to Claire that she was paying a high price for her four and a half hours with Emma. Frozen stiff and bored was as good as it got for her at the football match. Other emotions: trepidation when Ian left her and terror when the stand erupted to celebrate the goal, all contributed to a less than wonderful Saturday afternoon out for her. Across the cab, Ian was still cock-a-hoop over the win. He was grinning inanely, bopping along to the music that thundered from the in-car entertainment system. Claire presumed he'd be deaf by the time they married. Then she smiled to herself, relenting. There were times when Ian was happy that Claire could see exactly how he must have looked, aged six. By the time they got back to her flat, she had forgiven him for taking her to the match. She was pleased with the home win too, though she harboured no personal animosity towards United. It was not as if any of the players actually came from Manchester.

Ian's plan for the evening was a simple one, namely a three litre wine box and a home delivered curry. Prowling round the kitchen waiting for his dinner to arrive, Ian came across a dvd face down on the breakfast bar. He flipped it over.

"Casablanca. Is this for tonight?" he asked.

"If you like, darling. I got it for next week when Emma comes round, but we can watch tonight if you wish."

"Actually I've seen it, and it isn't my favourite Bogart. Anyway," he added lecherously, tossing the dvd back down on to the granite work surface, "I've got something better planned for tonight. Is that what the two of you do here, watch Bogart films?"

"She is coming to see her picture now that it is framed and hung, but I expect that we will eat, talk and maybe watch the movie. She said she'd never seen it, though she didn't expressly say she wanted to see it. I'll offer it as an option, then take my cue from her. You know, Ian, I like talking to Emma. She tells me things I don't know about. Like the time she was a walking tour guide in the city centre. She began embellishing the commentary to make it more interesting. According to Emma, Birmingham is where King Alfred burned the cakes, and Stephenson developed the Rocket. She started doing it when she got fed up with the job, so didn't care when she was fired for it. She's been telling me about her personal life too. Did you know she's gay?"

Ian's eyes opened a fraction wider, but he showed no other reaction.

"I thought there was something odd about her," he replied.

"In what way odd?" she asked.

"Oh nothing I could really place."

Ian had tried his manly charms on Emma from the beginning. Not as a serious attempt at seduction, he was on far too good a thing with Claire for that. He did it simply because women always responded to hunky Ian and his clean cut good looks. When they cut no ice with Emma, he had redoubled his efforts, in time becoming something of a nuisance to her. Eventually she found it preferable to avoid him whenever possible. Not once since his voice broke had any woman been indifferent to Ian Jeffrey Patterson: fireman, footballer and all round babe magnet.

Ian frowned.

"I know you like to know things, Claire, but couldn't you just get a book? You shouldn't encourage her to hang around you. Tell her the picture looks fine, thanks, then get rid of her. I'll tell her if you like."

"You will not, Ian," Claire stabbed his arm none too playfully with the fork she happened to be holding. "I wish I'd never mentioned it to you now. She's very sweet and we'll continue to be friends until we decide otherwise. Now get that wine box opened, the curry will be here soon. I'll warm the plates."

Ian put into practice his “better plan for tonight” when they went to bed. Claire was tired and wanted to sleep, but yielded to Ian's wishes, considering it part of the whole weekend she had traded in return for Wednesday night. Needless to say, it was not an auspicious beginning, and while she did not mind being underneath occasionally, tonight she found it irritating. Ian's weight was crushing and she resented being unable to move. She had always enjoyed finding new ways to please her lovers and had often been described as adventurous, kinky even. To be pinned down and immobile was tedious, even if she was too tired to take part as she might like. “Somebody more sensitive would wait until I was ready for sex,” she thought. She wished that he would hurry up and be done so she might get some sleep.

To pass the time, she drifted away into a familiar daydream. She imagined a pale skinned, curvaceous woman, wearing ivory silk lingerie and stockings. It was an image she had often conjured up and was no more explicit than a page from an underwear brochure. She never saw the woman's face, only her body. On this occasion there was a novel aspect to the recurrent fantasy. Enter Emma, stage right. She crossed to the bed where she began slowly and expertly to caress the woman in lace trimmed silk. Running her hand down her back and over her hips, Emma unsnapped the fasteners of the suspenders. She rolled a stocking down a long, creamy leg, around the heel and over the toes. She lingered, stroking the slender foot, kissing pearlescent toenails. Claire watched the slow, intimate movements. Emma removed the other stocking. Claire felt a sudden, sharp pang of nostalgia. Nostalgia for something she had never known. With a start, Claire realized she was envious of the care the phantom Emma was bestowing on this woman. A woman with no existence beyond her own imagination.

Absorbed, Claire watched on. She saw Emma run her hands over the soft, sensual body of the unknown woman, lingering a while over breast and hip and thigh. Claire became aroused, a feeling that had nothing to do with Ian's not inconsiderable efforts above her. The spectral lovers exchanged long, deep kisses, the face of the unknown woman hidden by Emma's head. Her long, dark hair lay spread across virgin white pillows. Emma had risen to her knees, preparing to take their love making to another level. She was gazing down on her recumbent love, when Claire's train of thought was interrupted. She put on hold the remainder of her private fantasy, or any analysis of its meaning, when Ian chose this moment to orgasm. Something he did with his usual groan and slump.

Before he could fall asleep on her, she pushed him out of the way then slid out of bed.

"Did you come?" he asked, sleepily.

"Yes," she lied, smoothly. "It was quite a gentle one, I'm rather tired. I enjoyed it though."

She smiled, but he didn't notice. He was asleep.

Claire ran a bath with a mass of fragrant bubbles, then lay soaking. She recalled her fantasy. Intensely vivid at the time, she found she could recall it equally clearly in retrospect. The images had not been sexual, they were instead erotic and deeply sensual. This unsettled Claire, as tonight's love making had been devoid of sensuality, she being simply the receptacle for Ian's lust. "It happens that way sometimes," she knew, but still she was concerned that she felt more from something imagined than from the attentions of her lover. She brushed bubbles absent-mindedly from her firm, flat stomach. Lifting one leg, foamy water cascaded into the bathtub, her painted toenails glistening in the candlelight. She was not disturbed by the lesbian content of the scene, recognizing it as a reflection of her desire for intimacy and tenderness within a relationship, rather than any latent desire for a female lover. She soaked for a while longer, then crept back to bed and fell asleep.

In the middle of the night, she woke to find Ian padding quietly back from the bathroom. He took her in his arms and they cuddled until feelings intensified. Claire sat astride him, her full, upward pointed breasts silhouetted against the light shining down on Rhodes harbour. Her resentment cast aside, Claire's passion let rip. She really enjoyed the sex, having no need for fantasies this time. Fully justifying her claim to Jessica that there was one area where Ian was a runaway winner.

6

It's Free Advice, Ignore It

Emma did not often wear make-up, but she applied some tonight, subtly adding emphasis to her eyes and sculptured cheekbones. She put on a new, figure hugging tee shirt, bought especially for her second dinner at Claire's flat. The long black skirt was the same one she wore the previous week, but as her only dress-up skirt, it would have to do. As she crossed the town from the station, Emma was excited to be seeing Claire again. She had been giving the meeting a lot of thought and was ready for Claire to be as friendly as she liked this time, determined not to be taken by surprise like a bashful teenager.

Claire had the meal ready by the time Emma got there and they lost no time in adjourning to the dining room for dinner. The vodka was smooth and mellow after eight days in the deep freeze. Claire poured generous amounts for them both, topping up with fresh orange. The food was good and Emma appreciated dining early, having eaten lightly at lunchtime. Ignoring their trip to Villa Park on Saturday, Claire talked

about the lovely time she and Ian had enjoyed last Sunday. There had been a fine lunch in a country club restaurant, then over to Leicestershire for a visit to Ian's parents. They had rounded off the evening with a gig at a pub. It was a rough and ready venue, but popular, with its own dedicated fan base. The gig was Ian's last throw of the dice before his weekend dictatorship came to an end. What the band lacked in talent, they had more than made up for in raw energy and Claire thought she got a glimpse of how music was done in the early days of punk.

Emma wanted to hear about Claire's wonderful weekend with Ian like she wanted a stick through her eye, although her own week's news was hardly going to enthrall Claire in return. She had met her oldest friend in an underpass, before going to a greasy spoon for a drink, a wander down memory lane and a burger (Emma did not even have the burger). Later she had painstakingly drawn and coloured a Christmas card for her former lover. The message took her a long time to decide upon, wanting as she did, something friendly and cheerful, but not too eager. She did not want to be too hurt or disappointed should she receive no reply. She had then written it all out again in flowing calligraphy. The remainder of the week had revolved around the early hours of the morning at a Birmingham sorting office. Riveting, she thought. It seemed to Emma that life was on hold while Christmas was disrupting everything. Nothing could be done until the New Year brought a subsequent return to normality.

Her blue eyes shining, Claire asked,

"Do you want your dessert now or can I show you something?"

Emma elected to be shown something, hoping fervently that it would not turn out to be hours of photographs of Claire and Ian, frolicking on their summer holidays.

Claire took Emma through to her bedroom, where she flicked on the lamp above the rehabilitated watercolour. Suitably framed and illuminated it did look very good, Emma was surprised to note. She could see no reason at all why Claire had been the only person ever to have liked it.

"Really," she decided appreciatively, "it's not half bad."

Claire was clearly very pleased with it, smiling happily. Gratified, Emma hung her hand out by her side, convenient for Claire to grab, while bracing her body for a spontaneous hug, should Claire choose to launch one. Claire did neither and, feeling slightly deflated, Emma cast her gaze over Claire's bedroom. Pale pastel green in colour, the large

room looked even bigger, reflected in a wall of mirror-fronted floor to ceiling wardrobes. The full width patio doors to the terrace would let in a lot of light too, but not today, the shortest day of the year.

"You never said you were a musician," said Emma, gesturing towards an electronic keyboard. Claire went over and switched it on. She pushed buttons and adjusted slide controls, then began to sing her version of an Elkie Brookes song.

"Claire's a singer... she stands up when she plays the piano..."

"Very good," clapped Emma delightedly when Claire ended the song with a flourish. She went over to Claire, intending to be proactive in hugging her for once, but Claire deftly sidestepped her. Making for the door, she suggested that they might like their dessert now.

"It's tiramisu again," said Claire, bringing a tray from the kitchen. "I know it shows a sorry lack of imagination, but you did seem to enjoy it so last week."

Emma expressed her thanks for the slice of dessert, but she wasn't happy. Claire's attitude to her seemed quite different this time around. She was friendly and hospitable still, but gone was the physical closeness they had enjoyed the previous week. Or perhaps, she reasoned, only she had enjoyed. Claire was keeping her distance, as though, given time to contemplate Emma's sexuality, she had decided that she was not at ease with it after all. Emma was deeply hurt, cut to the quick. She glanced across to the far end of the sofa to where Claire was eating. She was balancing her plate on the arm, half turned away from her. The distance between them was vast, the meaning sharply pointed. Claire's essay on "My perfect Sunday" had clearly been designed to disabuse Emma of any tendency to confuse natural friendliness on Claire's part, with the encouragement of Emma's affections. Emma's throat constricted, she had difficulty swallowing her sweet.

"I have this if you would like to see it," said Claire, placing Casablanca on the vacant centre cushion. Emma picked it up, overcome that at the same time that Claire was backing away from her, she was also out buying a movie, for no other reason than that Emma had never seen it. She looked at the running time and then at the clock. She would see the film, then go. It would be a reasonable time to leave, she decided. Claire would not notice that she was running away, yet the trains to the city would still be running. Emma warmed open her throat with her drink. She said that she would like to see the movie, that it was kind of Claire to get hold of it.

"More vodka?" asked Claire.

"Please," replied Emma, feeling no desire for sobriety tonight.

Claire brought in fresh glasses of vodka cocktail, then slipped the disc into the player. Sitting down on the edge of her seat, twisting to regard Emma, Claire said seriously,

"Do you mind if I say something?"

Emma would have preferred she didn't, suspecting that she was not about to find what Claire had to say at all comfortable. Probably a lecture about how Claire was not like her and how Emma would only cause problems if she harboured inappropriate feelings for her. Emma had heard it all before. If called upon, she could have recited it verbatim, however, as a guest, she was in no position to object. Emma indicated that she should go right ahead. Claire began gravely,

"My friend Jessica thinks that I should stop being affectionate with you. That I am being unfair. Even unkind. She said that I should take heed of your feelings. Understand that we may perceive things differently. I don't want to hurt you. I would die if ever I did that. Do you think that we could be close without that happening?"

Emma let out her breath.

"Claire, the surest way of hurting me is not to be affectionate. I was wondering if I had offended you tonight. I'd noticed the change between us and I was at a loss to understand it."

"So you're saying that my friend is wrong?" Claire asked.

"Completely," Emma assured her. "It's free advice, ignore it."

"OK," said Claire, pointing the remote control at the home cinema, "I will."

She moved across towards Emma, taking the empty centre seat. Reclining the back of the sofa, Claire swung her feet round to the side. Her weight was thrown against Emma, but Emma did not mind. Her spirits soared, her beleaguered heart somersaulting faster than a Bulgarian gymnast. The tears which pricked the back of her eyes when she thought that Claire had turned against her, now threatened to spill out as tears of joy. Hand in hand, their free hands clutching their drinks, they watched Bogart and Bergman smoulder in monochrome Casablanca. Fortified at a rate of 40% proof, they descended into hysterics with every memorable scene of the world's most parodied film.

When Emma announced that she needed the bathroom, Claire offered to "Race you." Scrambling from the sofa, pushing and shoving indecorously, they reached the living room doors. Successfully through, they parted company, Emma going left down the hallway, while Claire headed for her en suite. Once inside her allocated bathroom, Emma's euphoric state mingled with rapidly advancing inebriation, making haste impossible. Taking two swipes just to hook the hand towel, she then fumbled to return it neatly to the heated rail. Resigned to coming second, she near collided with Claire coming from her bedroom. Arms around each other's shoulders, they attempted to co-ordinate their way back to the squidgy sofa. They made it, but only after some random stumbling and once arriving in the dining room. If Casablanca was hilarious, this was the funniest thing ever. They collapsed on to the sofa, howling with laughter. Still laughing, Claire got to her feet, a trifle unsteadily but with great determination. Navigating from one item of furniture to the next, she crossed the room to her music collection. With the deliberate movements of a dignified drunk, she selected some of her favourite albums, feeding them into the player.

"Emma," she said, sitting down again, "why don't you stay over? I have a spare... thingy"

"Bathroom?" suggested Emma.

"No... bedroom... I have a spare... bedroom."

"Swhat I meant," said Emma.

Claire nodded.

"I can't, Claire. Gotta go to work in... " Emma peered at the clock, but couldn't quite make out the time. "Soon," she finished lamely. "I can't get here from there." There was something not quite right about this last statement, but Emma couldn't fathom exactly what. Claire would understand.

"Then you must drink water," Claire declared, pronouncing her words with exaggerated care.

"All right," said Emma, struggling to her feet.

"It's in the fridge door," slurred Claire. "From Buxton."

"The fridge door is from Buxton?"

Claire cracked up all over again. Emma set about undoing the fine work of the last few hours. Perched on a high stool at the breakfast bar, she drank mineral water until fit to burst, then waited. In time Emma's

blood alcohol began to fall to a level where she felt that she might soon function in the wider world. That hazy world beyond the welcoming glow of Claire's sumptuous reclining sofa. She needed merely to get to the bus stop, where she would show her travelcard to the driver, the last train having recently departed for the city. Having had her fill of mineral water for the present, Emma carried a glass in to Claire lying curled up on the sofa.

"Here, drink this, you'll feel better."

"I feel great... I'm floating," she giggled, but drank the water obediently, before lying back down again. Emma crouched by the side of the sofa, stroking Claire's hair. It was thick and soft, and what Emma wanted more than anything, was to kiss her. Picking up Claire's empty glass with a sigh, Emma took it out into the kitchen with her own, refilling them both from a fresh bottle of mineral water. Nothing but sublimation activity, she recognized from experience. A way of distracting herself from her impulse. Emma left a glass on the carpet by the sofa, then took her own drink to an armchair a few feet from where Claire lay singing softly to herself.

The second part of the evening had been light and fun, enjoyable for them both, but Emma was certain that the desire to kiss was hers and hers alone. She needed the distance to wrest back control of hypersensitive emotions. Yet far from sober, Emma was, nevertheless not stupid. She was not prepared to ruin a budding friendship for the sake of a stolen kiss. Claire pulled herself upright, making room on the sofa for Emma, misconstruing her need to sit in isolation. Emma shook her head, relaxing into the chair and letting her eyes close.

Suddenly, the hallway lights went on. A shaft of light stabbed through the glass doors, illuminating half of the living room.

"Darling... It's me!" came the manly cry.

"It's Ian!" cried Claire, drunkenly. Emma uttered an expletive which Claire, in her frantic effort to stand to greet her boyfriend, failed to hear. Ian marched in, catching hold of Claire and lifting her off her feet. Claire gave a cry of surprise or glee, or perhaps surprised glee, Emma couldn't say for certain which. He dropped her to her feet, his big hands engulfing her backside, his mouth eating her alive. Emma turned away in disgust. When she glanced back, he had Claire's blouse out of her skirt. His hand was high up her back, working on undoing her bra.

"That's enough of that," decided Emma. "He can undress her on his own time. I'm out of here."

She stalked out into the kitchen where she poured herself the last of the vodka, not bothering to find the orange juice. She stood for a time, drinking and seething, before making a final trip to the bathroom. She passed an oblivious Claire and Ian on the way out.

Emma looked at herself in the mirror. She was scowling angrily. She tried to rearrange her features into something less transparent, finally managing tight-lipped annoyance. Deciding that it was the best she could manage in the circumstances, it was past time to go. She was crossing the hall to get to her coat when Claire called from the other end of the passage,

"So there you are, Emma. Isn't it wonderful? Ian is here. You can go home together."

Emma would rather have walked home barefoot over hot coals, but Claire was advancing down the hallway. She was trapped. Claire grabbed Emma's wrist, dragging her reluctantly back to the living room. Ian was standing in front of the fireplace, his thumbs hooked in his belt loops. Balanced on the balls of his feet, he looked about with proprietorial pleasure. Without appearing to notice Emma, Ian said goodnight to Claire in exactly the same way he'd said hello.

Much grinding, pawing and kneading later, Emma was obliged to leave the flat with Claire's boyfriend. She had no chance of thanking Claire or saying goodnight herself, Ian somehow contriving to place his body in the way each time she tried. Or he would suddenly say something earth shattering, demanding Claire's attention this instant and obliging her to break from Emma in order to respond to him.

Still seething, Emma trudged down the stairs to the basement car park. Voila, Ian's awesome motor vehicle. She slipped off the sidestep, then struggled to open the heavy, armoured door. Ian smirked. They drove all the way back with no word passing between them, though Ian was in high good humour, singing along to Oasis.

Once home, Emma was obliged to thank him for the lift, before scurrying disconsolately up to her room. Her last view of Ian had him looking very pleased with himself, taking the front steps to the house two at a time.

Emma scrubbed at her make-up in the bathroom mirror. Suddenly deciding to take a shower, she threw off her clothing, swapping common sense for the caprice of the hot water heater. Half way through and covered in soap, she realized she had forgotten to bring a towel from her room. Drip-drying miserably on to the bathroom lino, Emma recognized

the hopelessness of her situation. War with Ian was something she could never hope to win and Claire, oblivious to Emma's suffering, had nailed her colours firmly to the mast. Ian could do no wrong. It was time Emma recognized these inescapable truths, then beat a hasty retreat. Beginning to shiver, Emma resolved to finish once and for all with boorish Ian and his insensitive girlfriend. Starting tomorrow, she would take steps to remove herself from harm's way.

7

Dartmouth Terrace

Claire woke in the dark an hour before she must get up for her last day at work before the Christmas break. A feeling of unease, which had been in its infancy when she had finally gone to bed, woke with her. She and Emma had had a very silly time last night, but that was not what was unsettling her. It was Ian. In her drunken, happy state, she had welcomed his unexpected arrival. Emma could have a lift home, sparing her the trial of a long journey on public transport. It had all made perfect sense five hours ago. Now she saw events from a very different angle. That Ian had come over especially to break up her evening with Emma was glaringly, depressingly obvious. She had thought at the time that Ian's embrace had been rougher than usual, more overtly sexual. Now she understood why. He had been asserting his rights over her, marking his territory like an animal, warning potential rivals to stay away. When Claire found Emma in the hallway she had just come out of the

bathroom, but she was heading to the closet for her coat. She had been on the point of leaving when Claire had hauled her back, insisting she get a lift with Ian. With dismay and rising annoyance, Claire recognized the truth of this revised understanding of events.

A feeling of panic welled in her chest. She urgently needed to speak to Emma, to explain and apologize to her. But Emma was at work and Claire did not know where that was. There was a phone at the house, but she did not know the number. Ian would know, but he would want to know why she needed it, and she was not yet ready to tackle him over last night. With all other channels of communication blocked, Claire decided to write a letter. Passing through the hallway to her small study, she noticed the book on the hall table, the return of which had been Ian's paper-thin excuse for his late night visit. Claire composed and wrote her letter, dropping it in to the box in the foyer for the early collection, hoping to repair quickly any damage done.

Emma was a woman on a mission. Impatient all morning, she dashed into the city after work for some urgent sorting out with her landlord. She quickly explained what she had in mind, then browsed the details of the numerous properties owned or managed by them throughout the area. She found two of interest to her no more than a few streets apart. It was at this point that she had a stroke of luck. The firm's building manager was going out to an address near to one of her chosen properties and would happily give her a lift. Emma accepted with alacrity.

He made phone calls from the car while Emma took a look at the first of the rooms. She approached cautiously, but was pleased with what she found beyond the untidy front garden. On offer was a large corner room with windows on two sides. The furniture comprised a double bed with a scroll metal bed head, a large dark wood wardrobe and a wooden desk and chair. An adjustable lamp, together with the light from the windows made the desk a useful place for drawing or writing. A fancy old gilt mirror hung above the mantelpiece. Below, an electric heater sat on the hearth in front of the boarded over grate. Carpet and curtains all seemed quite serviceable, although she would never have chosen a blue and orange colour scheme, given a choice. All the windows open freely and, given that this place was actually cheaper than Richmond Road (due to its greater distance from the city centre, she supposed), Emma was content that she had found her new abode. She quickly checked out the upstairs bathroom, the kitchen and the rear garden. Finding no unpleasant surprises from these quarters, she returned to the car to

complete the paperwork and sort out payment. The room would be cheaper in the long run, but right now she was being made to pay for her sudden change of mind. Everything done, she returned to the house to call a minicab from the payphone.

Returning to Richmond Road, Emma packed quickly, having acquired next to nothing since her arrival in the country. Before leaving, she remembered to check the mail for the last time, finding one dove grey envelope in her slot. She then took the waiting minicab back to her new address. Nick arrived just as Emma was shutting the front door. She offered no explanation for her sudden departure, but she did ask him to hold on to her mail until she could call for it in the New Year. Nick agreed readily, sorry to see her go.

The house in Dartmouth Terrace had been empty when Emma had inspected it earlier. On her return however, she heard signs of life from the downstairs front room. Disembodied revving, excited commentary and the scream of overworked tyres now blared from that former living room. Emma descended from her room to the kitchen to make a drink. Bone weary, she ached for a long lie down on her new bed. Picking up her tea to go upstairs, Emma ran into the owner of that downstairs front room. A woman in her thirties, she was startled to see Emma emerge from the kitchen.

"My God," she said, clearly Irish, "I thought I was all alone here for at least another hour."

"Sorry I made you jump," said Emma, offering her hand. "I've just moved in upstairs. I'm Emma."

"Gerry. Geraldine to my mother. I didn't know anyone was moving in today."

"No, it came as a bit of a surprise to me too."

Gerry looked at her quizzically, but Emma did not elaborate.

"Do you drive?" asked Gerry.

"Sorry?"

"Do you drive?"

"That depends. If you are asking whether I have a licence, then the answer is yes. But if you want to know if I have a car, the answer is no."

"What was your last car?"

"A Mini," Emma replied, bemused.

"Colour?"

"Red, with the flag of St George on the roof."

Gerry nodded, saying to herself, "That would be right, or the mark two Volkswagen Beetle. Same thing."

"I learned to drive in a Beetle," offered Emma. "A silver one. It belonged to a friend. It was already pretty ancient when I got to have a go. I passed my test in it."

It seemed innocuous enough small talk to Emma, but Gerry, her face glowing with delight, gripped Emma's elbow saying,

"I can see that you are fascinated by this too. I have so much to share with a fellow enthusiast. Come on, I'll show you."

Gerry opened the door to her room, beckoning Emma to follow her inside. In addition to mundane, rather tired bedroom furniture, the room boasted a huge plasma TV, sitting four-square on a sturdy old oak table. The multiplicity of strategically placed speakers were more than enough to account for the near lifelike sound effects heard through the bedroom floor. Seeing Emma glance at the equipment and the bevy of brightly coloured storage crates, Gerry stepped nimbly forward to explain.

"The pink boxes are Detroit. Yellow Geneva. Blue Frankfurt. Red is, or rather was, Birmingham. I have motor shows going back to the 1970s. Some only existed on videotape. Over in the Tesco trolley, I have every edition of Spare Wheel and Engine Nuts, the only programmes on TV if you ask me. You're welcome to watch them with me on the big screen or borrow them any time you like."

"Thank you," said Emma, wondering whether to tell Gerry that she was grossly overestimating her interest in cars. To Emma a Supercar was any car that started and stopped when she wanted it to. Yet Gerry seemed so happy in her misapprehension, why disappoint her? Without doubt, she would have a great deal to share with a fellow enthusiast, should she ever come across one. She was pointing now to the back wall of the room.

"Magazines are against that wall. English on the left, German on the right. I go to night classes on a Tuesday to learn to read the German ones. I've been going since September though, and all we have learned is "How many brothers and sisters do you have?" and "How much is a second class rail ticket to Bremen?" Not much use when assessing the merits of a couple of Teutonic coupés. The Pampers box contains official fuel consumption figures. Any model, any engine. Systematically

arranged for easy retrieval. You have to be organized to do this properly. I'm a dental receptionist."

"Very impressive," said Emma, dutifully, undecided on whether Gerry was a danger either to herself, or to the wider community.

"What's it all for?"

"This," said Gerry, expansively, flinging out an arm to take in a shelf of garishly coloured ring binders. "My Magnum Opus. The Complete Theory of Car and Driver Psychology. It's a comprehensive statistical analysis. Perhaps you can help me."

"I can?"

"It's this one," said Gerry, pulling a pea green binder from the shelf. "The UK Car Market and Dental Health, with special reference to cosmetic treatments. It occurs to me that it is too technical for the general reader. I think it should go, what do you think?"

"I think it should go too," said Emma, who made a point of never arguing with mad women.

Gerry sagged, visibly relieved.

"I'm glad that's over. I've been wrestling for weeks with the idea of omitting it from the final draft. I was attached, I'd be the first to admit it. It represents years of research and observation. It contained an analysis of dealer prices before discounts against dental bills, plus the incidence of missed appointments by model and colour. I had some interesting results too. Are more appointments missed by red or blue?"

"Red. Blue," hazarded Emma.

"Silver," said Gerry. "Plus most people are amazed to learn the average cost of crowns for the owner of a new Hyundai. What I needed was someone like you to come along and say, "Gerry, it's just not going to work. Let it go, girl." Thanks, Emma."

"You're welcome," Emma replied politely, concluding that Gerry was almost certainly harmless, if only because she was too busy to be a danger.

Lying on her bed later, absently gazing up at the dusty light fitting, Emma reviewed the last twenty four hours of what passed for her life. She knew that going for dinner with Claire would be tiring, a late night when working unsociable hours always was. Still, she had not counted on being unable to sleep when she did get home, followed next day by an unexpected house move. Time alone with Claire was an intense

experience for Emma. She was grossly oversensitive to Claire's every gesture and expression. But no more. The humiliation suffered at the hands of Ian was the end. Claire could find herself a new playmate in future. Emma suspected that this would not in reality prove difficult, imagining that what Claire wanted, Claire got, and all without any undue stress. Emma's heart still ached for Claire, even while she was annoyed with her, but in time this would surely pass. It could never be as painful as continuing to know her. Exhausted, Emma drifted off to sleep, for the first time in over a week, not dreaming of Claire.

8

Claire is not a Lesbian

Jim threw the remaining darts disgustedly into the dartboard. Just forty-eight scored in six darts, a ten year old could do better. He returned to his drink at the bar. He was sandy haired and stocky, ex-army now working nights for a security firm. Ian came out of the gents, resuming his seat next to Jim. For several seasons they had played for the same local football team until, at age thirty five, Jim had decided that he was too old for that kind of carry on. He asked about the team, the Panthers.

"Fourth as of last week," Ian replied. "Well placed for a push in the New Year and maybe some silverware. I reckon we can do it this season. We've got a couple of quick young kids up front that could make all the difference for us. You can see they're competing more with each other than with the opposition. Not exactly team players, they're a bit on the selfish side, hogging the ball when they get it. Thing is, they put the ball

in the back of the net, and that's what matters. Move over, Smethwick," he predicted confidently, "there's some big cats on the prowl."

"Hope you're right about that. Beating Smethwick would be a first for us," agreed Jim, signalling the barman for another round of drinks.

"So how's the security business?" Ian asked, returning from his delusion of sporting excellence.

Jim grimaced.

"Fifteen years in the armed forces and here I am, guarding a baby food warehouse. I must've been mad, leaving the army."

The former squaddie pondered his pint, disgruntled.

"You could always offer your services in some war somewhere," Ian suggested helpfully. "Never a shortage of those."

"You can keep that," Jim replied grimly, "mercenaries get killed. I suppose I could manage a spell as an instructor though, nice and safe away from the action. I might give it some thought. Gotta be better than this, I suppose. You still sitting around watching TV and eating fry-ups?" he asked, slapping Ian's well muscled belly.

"Knock it off, Rambo. It's a noble calling, the Fire Service. Who are you going to call when you set fire to all that baby food with one of your cheap smuggled cigarettes?"

Jim shrugged. Point conceded, he changed the subject.

"I moved house the other week. I'd had it up to here with that landlord. It was move out or murder him. I'd worked out seven different ways of doing it, so I reckoned it was time I left. I didn't go far. Same area, same sort of house, different landlord. You still in that place with all the students? Looking for a cute little thing doing night classes in sports science?"

"Gymnastics, Jim. Nocturnal gymnastics."

"Aye, that was it."

"Still there, but one of the students left and we got this woman in his place. Well, not a woman exactly. A lesbian."

Jim was incredulous,

"She told YOU she's a lesbian?"

"Claire told me. They were well on their way to becoming bosom buddies."

"Is she good looking, this woman?" Jim asked.

"Yeah, she was all right. Anyway, she isn't a problem any more. Claire refused to see just what this woman was up to. She can be ridiculously stubborn when she finds someone she says interests her. Collects weirdos, she does. Anyway, I sorted it all out."

"How?"

"I went round Claire's last night. Well this morning, really. I let this woman, Emma her name was, let her know that I wasn't having anyone mess around with my girlfriend."

"How did that go down?" asked Jim, taking a mouthful of best bitter.

"Oh, she got the message all right. You could see she didn't like it one little bit either. I put paid to her scheme for the evening, didn't I just?" Ian laughed nastily. "Claire always wants to know about other people's lives. It's like a hobby with her. We met this old man once. He'd spent forty years on fishing trawlers. Claire wanted to know everything about it. I could have told her in ten seconds. It's cold, it's wet and it's pointless, there aren't any fish left anyway. Instead, she wastes half the holiday, getting the same information from him. So this woman was at Claire's flat, having dinner and being interrogated, I shouldn't wonder. Oh, she had to see some stupid picture she'd painted as well. Just another excuse, if you ask me. Luckily, I got there just in time."

"Why - what were they doing?" Jim asked, agog.

"They weren't doing anything. That's what I said. I got there just in time."

Jim gave this some thought before replying magnanimously,

"Well I for one am not against a little girl on girl action. You should have got there a bit later, maybe they'd have let you watch, or join in. You never know your luck."

"You're sick you are, Jim, d'you know that?"

"I'm just saying, if they are going to do it anyway, it would be a crime if you weren't there to enjoy it. I'd want to be. Stands to reason, doesn't it?"

"Claire is not a lesbian," Ian stated flatly.

"Then what are you worried about Ian, old son," jeered Jim, pointing out, "It takes two, y'know."

"They were drunk, Claire would have been putty in that woman's hands."

"Do you think so?" Jim asked, unconvinced. "I mean, if you say she isn't then she isn't. You should know. Would you go to bed with a bloke just because you were drunk?"

"Course not, and keep your voice down, will you? They know me in this pub. No I wouldn't," insisted Ian, sotto voce. "There isn't enough whisky in Scotland to persuade me and I'd break the arm of any bloke that tried. But women are different."

Jim eyed him sceptically.

"Women are different," Ian insisted. "They're closer than we are. More likely to whisper and giggle and discuss things that should by rights be kept private. Then it's only one little step to going the whole hog, and ending up in bed together."

"Know a lot about this, do you?" asked Jim. "What you're saying is, women aren't to be trusted. They should never have been given the vote. And while you're at it, let's not waste time educating them, either. They're far too silly to make a rational choice, and they're just the same when it comes to dealing with their own sexuality."

"I know what her sexuality is," snapped Ian, suspecting Jim of winding him up. "Claire's straight as a die. She never likes to think the worst of people, that's her trouble. She probably thinks it's really right-on to know a lesbian. Thinks it's all just girly empathy and understanding. Probably hasn't made the connection that lesbians have sex with other women."

"Almost a definition, I'd have said," put in Jim.

"Right. Well, tell that to Claire."

"I will if I see her," Jim volunteered affably. "I don't often nowadays. Not now I've given up the beautiful game."

"There's one more thing, Jim", said Ian, "and I don't want you treating this as a joke or discussing what I tell you with anyone else. You got that?"

Jim shrugged.

"It's Claire, always wanting to understand things. Wanting to know for herself. Truth is, I was scared that she might decide to sleep with this Emma person just to know what it was like."

"I don't think so, mate," refuted Jim. "Claire's really staunch about being faithful in a relationship. I've heard her say it. She wouldn't leave you just to try it with a woman."

"I don't mean she'd leave me," scoffed Ian, "it's not like lesbians have proper sex. How could they - they're not equipped."

"More giggling and whispering?" suggested Jim.

"I'd been to bed once, but I just couldn't settle. The idea that she might go for it, just as a one off was eating me up last night, so I went round. I had to put a stop to it."

"Let me get this straight," Jim recapped, pointing a stubby forefinger Ian's way. "You thought Claire, who's straight as a die, might fancy some woman on the grounds that she had drunk enough booze? So you went round to her flat mob-handed. You beat down the door, then fanned out. To find them where, in the bedroom?"

"The lounge, drunk."

"Naked and in a compromising position?"

"Well, no."

"You find the two of them fully dressed and doing nothing in the lounge?"

"That's right. And I'll tell you another thing," promised Ian, his eyes mean, narrow slits. "They won't be doing it again."

"What happened on Thursday, Ian?" Claire asked sweetly. It was Saturday night at Claire's, and they were getting ready to go out. "What brought you here so late?"

"Nothing much," replied Ian, lounging expansively on the sofa, watching while Claire styled her hair. "I thought I'd bring your book back. Didn't you say you wanted to lend it to Jessica?"

"Yes, sometime in the next six months," replied Claire, turning to face him. "It didn't require a forty two mile round trip after midnight. Now tell me, what was the real reason?"

Ian paused then said,

"Well, I hadn't seen you since Sunday and I wouldn't be seeing you again until tonight. Quite naturally, I wanted us to spend more time together. I don't know why you keep me so much at arm's length, Claire. It isn't normal."

"I've explained all that to you before. I want us to have our own friendships and interests. That way we will stay more interesting for each other. Besides, you only stayed twenty minutes on Thursday, groped me outrageously in front of my friend, then you were off home again."

"I was giving your precious little girlfriend a lift home," protested Ian, appealing wide-eyed to the jury. "What's wrong with that?"

"I think you came here to check up on me. To break up my evening with Emma. I think you're jealous of her."

"Jealous?" scoffed Ian. "Of her?"

"Yes jealous. I don't know why you've taken a dislike to her, but you have to accept that I like her and I won't have you storming in here to wreck my time with her. I think you can't stand the fact that I have more fun with her than I do with you," she said, straying from her carefully rehearsed approach to get personal.

"Anyone can have fun with a bottle of vodka," countered Ian. "You were legless. I wasn't groping you, I was holding you up. I could've come in and found Emma on top and you giggling like a two year old. You were helpless."

"That's it. That's what it's really about with you, Ian. You can't get your head around me having a gay woman friend. Someone who isn't trying to get into my underwear. You judge everyone by your own pitiful standards. I'm going to keep seeing Emma, you will just have to come to terms with that."

"Has she rung you?"

"No, why?"

"Because she has left. Nobody knows where she's gone. Left yesterday afternoon. Nick saw her go. So Claire, your darling best friend has done a runner, and if you ask me, it's good riddance to bad rubbish. We are all better off without her."

Jolted, Claire sat down abruptly, forced to add further intelligence to what she already knew. It ran to a sorry length, revolting her. Ian had begun by crashing in on Claire and her friend. He'd embarrassed her, fondling her in front of that friend. She had tried to write to Emma, but her apology for Ian's behaviour might never reach her and might even end up in Ian's hands. He could already be in possession of it! she realized with alarm. And if all that wasn't enough, Emma had

disappeared with no way of contacting her. Claire was appalled, not least because the spider at the centre of this vile tangled web, was Ian.

9

Happy Christmas, Emma

"Here's to a great Christmas, and a happy and prosperous New Year for everyone," said Simone, raising a glass of wine with Pete and Emma. Rosie, boosted up to the table on cushions, raised her glass of blackcurrant.

"Let's hope," said Pete, offering his seventh toast, "that fool of a manager never thinks of selling Thomas Jacobsen, our glorious new striker and the best thing ever to arrive at St. Andrews."

They drank to that too.

"How about you Emma, another toast?" he asked.

"I've already done four, Pete, on the first bottle. Or was it the second? I'm a bit too squiffy. Anyway, I think Simone said it all in the last one. About a great Christmas and New Year. Happy, healthy, prosperous, the

new parent and toddler group in the community centre and Birmingham City's ... I dunno... goalkeeper or whatever he is."

Emma was spending Christmas Day afternoon with Pete, his partner Simone and their beautiful mixed race daughter, Rosie. Simone loved the dangly earrings Emma gave her, and Rosie her drawing materials, particularly the bottles of coloured glitter and the pink, fluorescent paper. She got Pete a quality dictionary so that he might spend more time at home in future.

Emma had a surprising amount of fun playing with Rosie and Rosie's Christmas presents. She drew cartoon characters for Rosie to finish in primary colours with lashings of magical sparkle. Emma had never thought much about children, considering them something like timeshare apartments or varicose veins. They were things that other people had. Still, she was very much charmed by Pete's little girl.

"Did you send a card to Trish?" Pete asked, his sleepy daughter curled up on his lap.

"Yes I did, and I got one back. It came Friday," Emma replied.

"Did she have much to say?"

"A fair amount, she sent a bit of a letter with it. You were right about her being with Gavin nowadays, but that aside, she seemed quite human and friendly. She has invited me over to visit."

"Will you go?"

"Oh, yes. In the New Year, when I've found a new job. I'm curious to see what she has been doing for the last ten months. Not what she's been doing with Gavin, I can imagine that only too well, but if Trish can be friendly, I guess I can be too."

Emma looked about her. She and was happy, enfolded into the heart of Pete's family, four floors above any passers by. Pete seemed contented, stifling a yawn and adjusting Rosie's weight on his arm. Emma picked up her glass, accepting another refill from Simone. As she drank her wine, she hoped for an end to her unsettled existence, silently wishing for a life with a girl of her own.

"Well, Emma," said Pete later, "it's down to you and me now. Do you want to wash or wipe?"

"I'll wash."

"We've got to sober up and get this place sorted out. The Campbells are coming."

"Gosh, are they?" asked Emma.

"They are," replied Simone, returning from stacking Christmas presents in Rosie's bedroom, "but only a cross section of them."

"Mrs C?" ventured Emma.

"Certainly. She'll want to see all her grandchildren on Christmas Day. Plus she never misses an opportunity to chide Pete over his church going."

Emma took her position at the sink, shoulder to elbow with Pete. They sniggered and plotted, convinced that Simone had generated a ludicrous amount of washing up to punish them for their conspicuous absence during the preparation of the festive meal.

"What's this?" asked Pete.

"A turkey baster."

"Didn't know we had anything like that."

He filled it with greasy washing up water, then threatened to shoot her with it. Emma snapped the damp tea towel painfully across his calves. They laboured through the mound of dirty pots and pans.

Returning to the living room, they found that Simone had been busy, putting away the table and having a general tidy up. After a quick dash round with the Hoover, the three adults perched nervously on the sofa to await the imminent arrival of Simone's family. They didn't have long to wait.

The intercom sounded. Rosie scrambled on to a chair to press the door release. Moments later Simone's sister and three brothers appeared at the door, preceded by the indomitable Mrs Campbell, herself preceded by her awe inspiring bosom. Emma exchanged greetings and handshakes with each of the brothers, then with Beatrice, the youngest of the Campbell siblings. Mrs Campbell signalled that Emma should kiss her. Wading heroically through acres of bosom, she planted a kiss on the matriarch's cheek. Mrs Campbell took off her pastel green hat then sat squarely in the middle of the sofa. Everyone else sat wherever they could find space. Simone leapt up to put on the kettle for tea, suddenly presiding over a teetotal household. Pete dropped a sweater innocently over the bottle of wine Emma had brought to the meal. All eyes turned to Rosie as she clambered on to her grandmother's lap.

"I hope you are all having a happy and a blessed Christmas Day," beamed Mrs Campbell. Everyone nodded.

"And Rosie, celebrating the baby Jesus's birthday?"

"Yes, Grandma," Rosie replied, guilelessly.

"I don't suppose you found time to go to church this morning, Peter?"

"Er, no," said Pete. "We've been celebrating the baby Jesus's birthday here since 4:30 this morning, haven't we Rosie?"

Rosie buried her face in Mrs Campbell's cardigan. Simone reappeared from the kitchen, bringing in the tea. Emma darted out to carry in cake and mince pies for her.

"How's the St. Kitts Visiting Fund, Jerome?" Pete asked Mr and Mrs Campbell's first born.

"Coming along, Pete, coming along." Jerome replied.

With a possible inkling of trouble to come, the Campbells had named their three sons after Christian saints: Jerome, Francis and Anthony - and all had gone well while they had lived at home. But as each son left the childhood home, one by one, they all became known to the local police.

Three months ago, Mrs Campbell issued a decree. The three brothers would make a pilgrimage to the island of her birth and girlhood. Furthermore, she would accompany them, her three sons to bear her expenses. Finally, they must raise the money honestly, their labour sanctioned in the Bible. As the brothers faced up to the prospect of making a living as a carpenter, shepherd or fisherman, their mother had reissued her decree, explaining patiently that she meant only that their income be earned legitimately.

Jerome now worked in a garage. Francis was a trainee estate agent, while Anthony worked with Mr Campbell, delivering for a builders' merchants. Her daughters, whom Mrs Campbell had not seen the need to name after saints, were given the option of going or not as they chose, both having small children. Jerome and Anthony also had small children, though this was not considered sufficient excuse to avoid spending time in contemplation and moral improvement, far from the wickedness and temptation of Britain's second city.

When Emma heard the story, she could not imagine Mrs Campbell ever having been a girl, young and carefree under a warm sun. Pete reckoned that even Bernard her husband called her Mrs Campbell and the only person ever heard to call her Theodora was the Minister of the Gospel Church, and then only after knowing her for forty years.

"And you Emma, no babies for you yet?" Mrs Campbell's searchlight attention had moved from Rosie. Fastening on a hapless victim, Emma had been trying to hide behind Anthony, who turned out not to be as broad as she had hoped.

"Huh? Ah, no," she replied, almost choking on a mince pie. "I don't think I have what it takes to have a baby."

Embarrassment descended on the gathering, it being well known to everyone except Mrs Campbell that Emma was a lesbian.

"Are you staying for Christmas, Emma?" Beatrice came to the rescue.

"No, just down for the day. They're trialling Christmas Day public transport in this area. I'll be getting the bus home later."

"I'll walk you to the stop," Pete announced, snatching up his jacket.

Emma had not meant that she was leaving straight away but nevertheless, she found herself wishing goodnight to everyone, then pulling on her coat and scarf. Riding down in the lift with Pete she asked,

"What's all this walking me to the bus stop? You never walked me anywhere in your life."

"I had to get out and get some air," gasped Pete, slumped against the back wall of the lift. "It's Simone's mum, she has us all terrified."

"She's the most morally upstanding of women," said Emma, "but she doesn't frighten me."

"Oh no, then why don't you tell her you're gay?" Pete challenged. She laughed.

"You know why. Because she's religious. I don't want her telling me I'm going to Hell. Or wearing out her knees on my behalf, praying for my redemption. I like my life. OK, maybe not the detail. But the bigger picture, that I love women. I wouldn't change that."

Out in the street, Pete hunched his shoulders against the night air.

"What time's your bus?"

"Half past."

"Oh," he said, realizing that it would be another fifty minutes before he could return to the warm flat. Putting an arm round her shoulders, they walked briskly away towards the bus stop.

Across town, three long-standing inmates of Dartmouth Terrace were absent for almost a week after Emma moved in to the house. With the main Christmas holiday now over however, they began to drift back from parents' and girlfriends' homes. As the house filled up, Emma felt daily more certain that her decision to remove herself from Richmond Road had been a good one. Buoyed by Christmas goodwill, she looked forward to a settled and contented stay, free from strife with fellow residents, and at peace with the world at large.

"I need some female company," Emma announced decisively.

"I'm not going anywhere tonight," replied Gerry, taking ice cream from the freezer. Emma was nonplussed.

"Some *all night* female company," she said, hoping that Gerry would catch her drift.

Emma told Gerry of her special romantic requirements shortly after moving in. Gerry had asked if she was seeing anyone, then lost interest when Emma answered in the negative. No lover, no car. No car, no prospect of a chapter on 21st Century Lesbian Attitudes to British and European Models.

"Yes... right... of course... hmmm," said Gerry, who then rallied with, "Do you have anyone in mind, or is this a general wish?"

"General, I'll be starting at square one."

"Where's that?"

"In the pubs and clubs of the gay village. I've been around for five or six weeks now. All I've done is run round after accommodation and jobs. It's enough to drive a girl to drink. It's about time I had some fun. And some drink."

Gerry started rooting around inside a cupboard, looking for chocolate sauce.

"Do you think you will meet anyone?" she asked, her voice slightly boomy.

"Quite possibly not," Emma was candid. "If you're out with someone, it's assumed that she's your girlfriend. No one will speak to you, because it's also assumed that she is a violent psychopath. If you're on your own, no one will speak to you because you're weird, or why else would you be on your own?"

Gerry pointed chocolate sauce at Emma.

"Emma, you've got to think positive."

"I do, Gerry. Every time I go out, I am positive I'm going to meet Julia Roberts, though I would always settle for Sissy Spacek. Still, I'm realistic enough to know that I'll probably go home with John Hurt. Maybe. If I'm lucky."

"That sounds like a self fulfilling prophecy if ever I heard one," remarked Gerry, drawing up a chair in readiness for a good chat.

"Are you straight?" asked Emma.

"Course I am Emma, why do you ask?"

"Well, I didn't want to offend you by assuming that you were. But since you are, let's say you go into a room or a bar maybe -"

"Or an ice cream parlour," Gerry suggested, hopefully.

"Yes, you go into an ice-cream parlour, and there are ten men eating cornets. How many, after you have weeded out those too old, too young, too ugly or too stupid; how many might you still find to go out with?"

"None," replied Gerry, "I've always been very unlucky with men."

"No, statistically Gerry," Emma ploughed on gamely. "Ten guys, how many might potentially be available to you?"

But Emma could see that her analogy was foundering.

"OK Gerry, ten cars on the quayside -"

"Where from?" asked Gerry, lashing sauce on to defenceless iced dessert.

"Ten cars from Japan. How many of them are not either silver, red, blue, black or white?"

"Not many," Gerry was confident, "those colours make up ninety, maybe ninety five percent of the market. There's very little produced in orange, pink or purple"

"But I'm looking for a green car, Gerry. What are my chances of finding one?"

"Well, there might be one," Gerry replied doubtfully. "It would increase your chances if you had a bigger sample."

"This is the only batch of cars I'm allowed to choose from," explained Emma, "it's the law. Let us say that I'm in luck - there is one green car sitting on the quayside. I had better not have too many preconceived

ideas about whether I want a saloon or a hatchback, prefer diesel or petrol, manual or automatic."

"What it comes down to is take it or leave it. Twist or stick. Am I right, Emma?"

"Got it in one. The options are play or pass, and tonight I would be inclined to play."

Emma dressed in skin-tight Wranglers and a maroon tee shirt. The black skirt was a non starter, ditto any make-up. She did not want to be mistaken for a straight woman tonight. After two false starts in pubs where the nearest thing Emma found to a woman, was a six foot tall, acid tongued drag queen in a sequinned gown, she arrived at her favourite disco bar.

Beginning at opening time with music from the 1960's, the dj was in the mid 70's, on target to play contemporary hits by the early hours of the morning. Already busy with people relieved to be out after the Christmas hiatus, Emma felt instantly more hopeful. Yet despite being barely nine o'clock, time was not necessarily on her side. Emma had to be out of there before the 1990's. She patted the cash in her pocket, but she was well aware she could not afford the quantity of drugs needed to enjoy Techno or Trance.

Wasting no time, Emma bought a drink from the bar. Stepping back, she cast a practised eye over the scene. Most of the clientele were male, but eventually her gaze lit upon three women sitting together. Two sported regulation SAS haircuts and beige sweaters. Both were somewhat overweight and heavy breasted. They held hands lest there be any doubt as to their relationship. Emma wondered if they really were two people, or simply one woman sitting by a mirror. The third member of the group had shoulder length dark hair and was infinitely more interesting from Emma's point of view. Middling attractive, she was smartly yet casually dressed in pants and a short sleeved red tee shirt. Emma wondered if she was gay, or a straight woman out with gay friends. Gay, she convinced herself, basing her conclusion on no evidence either way. It could just be wishful thinking, she knew. Emma waited to see if they were joined by a fourth woman, back from the cloakroom, the bar or from parking the car. No one came. The bar area was becoming crowded. Keen not to remain a spectator all night long, Emma had to make a move.

She made up her mind to go over, enquiring if all the seats at their table were taken. They were not, as Emma was well aware. Ignoring the

empty seat next to the woman in red, she sat down on the stool opposite. Emma introduced herself. The object of her attention was Kate. The clones were Jill and Wendy.

Emma took an instant liking to Kate. Not Julia Roberts admittedly. Not Claire either, but slim and self possessed, she had the overwhelming advantage of being out this frosty Thursday evening. So far most of the talking had been done by Jill (or was it Wendy? Emma was already confused). She continued,

"If it wasn't for Wendy and me," (it must be Jill), "I don't think Kate would ever go out of a weekend."

Kate just smiled.

"We have to wrinkle her out of her shell," she added, miming energetic wrinkling. Wendy joined in with,

"We threaten to go round there, embarrass her in front of her landlady if she won't come out with us."

"I've never told my landlady I was gay," Kate told Emma.

"Bingo," thought Emma, her evening looking up.

The conversation switched to occupations. Jill and Wendy worked in railway catering, Kate for a bank.

"No, not personal banking," Kate replied when Emma asked. "We handle the funding for large projects, such as overseas development or infrastructure. It can be grants, loans, or a mixture of the two. The money might come from government or be guaranteed by it. It might mean working in conjunction with international agencies, or paying out the money in phases. Hundreds of millions it can add up to. It focuses the mind, dealing safely with large sums."

Emma asked how long she had worked for the bank.

"Eleven years. I joined when I was eighteen," she replied. "Straight from school."

Emma knew her next question was rather personal and frankly none of her business, but she asked it all the same.

"Then how is it you have a landlady? Surely it would be easy enough to get a mortgage for a place of your own?"

"I like to be independent," Kate replied, unruffled. "If ever I felt like leaving, I could just go. I wouldn't have to think about disposing of a property first."

It did not seem likely to Emma that anyone who had worked in a bank for eleven years would ever do anything sudden or spontaneous, but she let the matter rest. She was not interested in Kate's living arrangements, much less her financial affairs. Emma finished her drink, then asked Kate to dance. She held out her hand and they manoeuvred through the crowd to the dance floor. Jill and Wendy smirked knowingly and in unison as they left.

All the way from the early 1980s, Ultravox were adamant,

"This means nothing to me."

They danced for a while, but it was merely a ploy to escape Kate's minders. They soon headed off to the quieter upstairs bar. Emma brought drinks over to the table Kate had appropriated.

She asked how Kate met Jill and Wendy.

"In a bar in London. Funny thing is they only live about ten minutes from me, in Selly Oak. They said I was looking miserable."

"Were you?"

"Probably. You know how it can be."

Emma did.

"I didn't think couples spoke to anyone but each other," she remarked, relishing the forthright way Kate looked at her.

"Jill and Wendy have been together for ever," Kate replied with a half smile. "They want to get married. For some reason, they feel they need to look after me. They're keen to see me end up like them - "

"Fat and ugly," thought Emma.

"- engaged," finished Kate. "They are always teasing me about outing me to Aneesha, she's my landlady. My parents, the people I work with, the people from my sports club. Anyone who doesn't know I'm gay. That's everyone, I guess."

"Wow!" exclaimed Emma, "do you let your lovers know you're gay?"

Kate smiled.

"I don't really have lovers. It isn't a frequent thing. When it happens, it's more like a meaningful one night stand."

Emma's green eyes met Kate's brown ones.

"That will do nicely," thought Emma.

"Aneesha's in Doncaster this week. She's going to her sister's wedding," explained Kate, driving through the unusually quiet city streets. Emma accepted the information without comment, though she would never have stopped to wonder what her own landlord was doing this festive season.

"You said you belong to a sports club," she asked. "What sport do you do?"

"Karate."

"Yeah? Black belt?"

"Yes. We train twice a week, more if there's a competition coming up. We have one in Denmark in April."

Emma was intrigued.

"How long have you been doing it?" she asked.

"Sixteen years. Sounds a long time, doesn't it?" Kate glanced Emma's way as she drove. "In a way, the people at the club are more my friends than say, Jill and Wendy, even though I only see them on club nights."

"They're still your friends after you've battered them to a pulp?" Emma asked.

"You can only hit someone if they allow you to," Kate assured her, "but really, there are more subtle ways of overcoming an opponent. Timing, speed and balance count for more than raw strength or aggression. Patience, too, is a virtue."

Arriving at Kate's flat a short time later, Emma discovered why her landlady seemed so important to her. Kate and Aneesha were flatmates. A far cry from the kind of long distance landlord Emma was accustomed to dealing with. Aneesha was buying the flat. Kate was helping ease the burden of the mortgage for her, something she was evidently happy to do. Emma learned these things over a cup of tea in the kitchen. Emma wondered briefly about Kate: Getting by on the occasional one night stand, hiding her sexuality from all and sundry, working year after year in a bank. Stultifyingly dull, it would never do for Emma. But right now, as quiet, self-contained Kate took Emma's cup and washed it up, she was everything Emma needed.

After taking her second shower in less than four hours, Emma made her way to Kate's bedroom. On the wall were certificates attesting to Kate's success in Karate. She was Kathryn Porter, Emma noted, a competitor in the under sixty kilo class.

Emma took off the towel she was wearing, hanging it over a radiator to dry, then slipped into bed, sliding over towards the wall. When Kate came in shortly afterwards, she turned off the overhead light, leaving the pink-shaded lamp to cast a soft glow from the bedside. Disgarding her dressing gown, Kate snuggled into Emma's arms. She smelled of shower gel and body lotion, and they clung together like drowning children.

It seemed an age since Emma last lay like this, in Trish's tiny attic flat, or at Emma's old place, under the airport flightpath. Emma stroked Kate's hair and back, feeling the skin still hot from the shower. She wanted to tell Kate of her gratitude in allowing her to hold her. To breathe in her fragrance, her closeness. The relief of being naked and soft in a woman's arms. How to have waited even until the weekend, might have been too much for Emma's tightly stretched nerves. The words left Emma's heart then jammed in her throat. Wordless, she hugged Kate close, her feelings remaining unexpressed behind closed eyelids. Kate lay quiescent, her breath tickling the fine hairs on Emma's neck, one hand resting low down on her back.

Slowly Kate opened her eyes, then moved. Propping herself on an elbow, she looked down at Emma. Emma's eyes fluttered open and a tiny tear escaped the corner of one eye. It ran along her cheekbone to her ear. She hoped that it was too small and quick for Kate to notice. Emma rolled on to her back, and Kate leaned over, delivering the lightest of kisses to Emma's lips.

"Thank you," she said, so quietly that had there been so much as a clock ticking in the room, Emma would never have heard.

"What are you doing?" Kate asked, waking up.

"I'm going to work," whispered Emma, getting dressed in light seeping through closed curtains.

"It's the middle of the night," Kate pointed out.

"I know. I'm going to be late. Go back to sleep. I'll lock the door as I go out, post the key back through the letter box."

"I'll get up," Kate decided, rolling out of bed and slipping on her dressing gown.

Kate had a supple athlete's body. Emma paused in her dressing for one final look at her, her feel and taste a reminder of all that was pleasant in Emma's life.

They had not rushed into love making last night, being content for momentum to build slowly. Emma purposefully held back, wishing to prolong and savour the encounter. When they did make love, the experience had been comforting and satisfying for them both. Kate had remained enigmatically silent throughout, allowing her body and responses to tell of the joy she felt with Emma. When physical relief had burst from Kate the first time, Emma held her shuddering body, until youthful relaxation filled her face and her breathing returned to normal.

Emma could not guess how long it had been since Kate last slept with anyone, but she felt that Kate, like herself, had been drinking at an oasis in an otherwise arid desert.

"Would you like me to drive you?" Kate asked, switching on the kitchen light.

"No thanks," Emma replied. "Just tell me where I catch the bus for town. You go back to bed. Enjoy your rest, this is pay back time for going out in the week."

Kate brought a coffee to Emma, which she drank quickly, adding plenty of milk straight from the fridge.

"I have to go now," she said, putting down her mug.

"I know," said Kate.

Kate followed her down the passageway to the door. There was a whiteboard on the wall. On impulse, Emma picked up a marker to write the payphone number, underlining it with a flourish. At the door she turned to embrace Kate, laying her head against the shoulder of the taller woman. Kate turned her face to Emma's and Emma opened her mouth to a long, lingering kiss, which only made her more late for work. Minutes later, Emma pulled on her gloves, readying herself for the freezing dawn.

"Happy Christmas, Emma," Kate said quietly, opening the door.

"Thank you, Kate."

10

Cuthbert, Dibble and Grubb

The New Year arrived, bringing with it a spell of damp, cloudy weather, and Emma's rendezvous with Nick. They arranged to meet at his local library. She spotted Nick at the far end of the children's book corner. His chair was rocked back on two legs and he was leaning against a long radiator, soaking up British Thermal Units. He stared blankly at his notebook computer, as if it contained script from the Rosetta Stone, rather than the lucid, razor sharp insights of a maturing mind, soon to be let loose upon the world.

"Oh hello, Emma," he said dismally. "I'm looking for a single word to encapsulate all of Dickens's novels."

"Long," she suggested.

"Epic," said Nick. "Anything else?"

"Another single word? How about a cast of thousands? Or Dickensian?"

"Character driven and atmospheric," said Nick, giving his nails a thoughtful chew before pecking two fingers at the keyboard.

"Here's your stuff," he said, fishing a carrier bag from under the table. "There isn't much."

The sum total of over two weeks of mail was indeed a meagre one. Seemingly, even the junk mail barons had largely failed to remark Emma's brief sojourn in Richmond Road. She thanked Nick then hurried out into the high street for her bus. Once seated, she opened the only handwritten envelope in her small collection. Her heart beat a little faster when she realized that it was from Claire.

Claire's apology was full and unreserved. Emma was pleased to see that despite what she believed, Claire had seen through Ian's intimidatory tactics, realizing these tactics amounted to an all out campaign to drive a wedge between the women. Written over a fortnight ago, it was surprisingly perceptive, a term Emma would never have thought to apply to Claire. Reflecting Emma's feelings at that time, it attempted to rescue their friendship from longterm harm.

"I will confront Ian over his behaviour towards you. I shall make clear that I will not accept it," she wrote, adding, "Please contact me as soon as possible. It would be tragic if our friendship became overshadowed by what happened last night."

The letter went on for a further page and a half in much the same vein, bringing a glow to Emma's heart, before Claire signed off affectionately.

Once home, Emma searched her room for Claire's phone number, but never came across it. She had not deliberately thrown away Claire's visiting card but, annoyed as she was after their last meeting, she must not have taken terribly good care of it in the move to Dartmouth Terrace. Fortunately, the envelope had a return address label. Emma sat down to pen a reply. She accepted Claire's apology, acknowledging that she had been hurt and angry but, with the passage of time, she no longer felt that way. She supplied her new address and phone number, guardedly happy at the prospect of knowing Claire again. Emma wondered with hindsight, if she might not have been hasty in blaming Claire for Ian's immature personality and appalling bad manners.

Claire telephoned the following evening. She was keen to see Emma again, but was about to start two weeks of work in Bristol, with plans to spend the intervening weekend in the south-west, too.

"The weekend I get back is my birthday though, Emma. I would love you to come to the party they're arranging. It's upstairs at The Sportsman's Arms. You know where I mean, it's near the station. You'll have passed The Sportsman's each time you came to dinner. Ian will be there, but not until late. I'm sure you can manage to avoid each other." Jotting down the details, Emma promised to be there.

"Hi, Claire. How was Christmas?" Jessica asked when they met for lunch at a convivial little bistro in the park near Claire's work. It was the day before her fortnight exile in Bristol was due to begin.

"Don't ask," Claire replied morosely. "I'm thinking now that the Christmas break is unhealthily long."

"Tell that to your friend Emma," grinned Jessica, "I don't suppose she had much time to ponder, up to her neck at the Royal Mail. Anyway, what's up?" she asked. "Are you still having problems with Birmingham's answer to Cuthbert, Dibble and Grubb?"

"Yes. The more time I spend with him, the more I see how Ian bullies me. He controls every aspect of our relationship. If I object, he just brazens things out, not giving an inch. Or he'll deliberately do something to provoke me, just to become the personification of charm itself. He sent this big bunch of flowers to me at work the other day. It sat two hours in reception while I was in a meeting. Near a week's wages to the girls working there, a bouquet like that. Now he's the dream man of every woman in admin. They won't hear a word said against him. It all goes back to the time he crashed in on Emma and me. He took that one game, set and match. Emma was gone, I was upset and Ian was smirking like the cat with the cream!"

"Things will probably settle down once you get back into your usual routine," advised Jessica.

"Maybe," sighed Claire, turning her attention to the menu.

"Did you ever hear anything from Emma, Claire? I know you were wracking your brains trying to work out how you might contact her."

"Yes, we're back in touch now. She finally did receive the letter I sent her. A fortnight late, but she got it. Passed on by Nick, the Scouse guy lives below Ian. It was a relief to hear from her, but it was a bigger relief

that the letter hadn't fallen into Ian's hands. I wouldn't have put it past him not to read mail addressed to Emma. He'd have learned then exactly what I thought of him after his little display. I've tried to get it over to him that I choose my friends, not him. He's jealous. He won't admit it, of course. Neither will he see that in going after Emma, he humiliated me. And because I was too drunk to fully appreciate what he was up to, it looked as though I condoned it. It's taken weeks for things to shake out, but everything is on an even keel again now that Christmas is out of the way. I made a fulsome apology to Emma, distanced myself as far as possible from Ian's antics, and now she's coming to my birthday party at the end of the month. It's a pity you can't be there, Jess."

"I know, but James works so hard around Christmas and New Year, he likes to get away for a holiday as soon as he can in January. The minute I get back, I'll take you for double chocolate gateau and a mountain of whipped cream. It won't affect my diet, as long as I eat nothing else before May."

11

That Car's a Dark Horse

"Hello, Emma, it's Kate," said the vaguely familiar voice on the telephone. "We met just after Christmas?"

"Yes, I remember," Emma replied, taken by surprise. Most incoming calls were for Gerry, though why she gave out the payphone number when she had a mobile phone was a mystery to Emma.

"How are you?" asked Emma, attempting to inject a friendlier tone into her voice, aware that her initial reply had been rather cool.

"Fine, thank you," said Kate. "I was wondering if you'd like to go paintballing tomorrow?"

"Paintballing?" repeated Emma, surprised for the second time in thirty seconds. "Crashing through a forest shooting paint at people?"

"Yes, that's about it," confirmed Kate.

"Crashing through a forest shooting paint at people in January?" Emma asked slowly, wondering if there was something she needed to understand about paintballing but had missed up until now.

"I'll take that as a no, then," said Kate, cheerfully. "I'm going next week with a few colleagues. I thought I'd get in some practise first. No problem, I'm used to going places alone."

"I didn't say no," said Emma hastily, putting aside massive climatic reservations. Speculating too on why she seemed destined to meet women with peculiar hobbies. "It was unexpected, that's all. I'd like to go with you tomorrow. I was only going grocery shopping. Shooting people sounds loads more fun."

"Great," replied Kate with pleasure. "Can you get to New Street? I'll pick you up from there."

Their assumptions proved wide of the mark when the paintballing took place, not in a forest as thought, but inside a huge metal hangar. The interior was an urban jungle of decaying buildings, abandoned vehicles, skips and refuse cans. Kate and Emma joined opposing forces, spending a happy afternoon stalking and shooting at each other. Emma took up an effective sniper position in the upstairs window of a pub from which she took out several of the opposition, before being shot in the back by a travel agent from King's Heath.

Hostilities concluded they returned to Emma's place where they sat drinking tea in the kitchen.

"I ache," groaned Emma, tentatively rotating a shoulder. "What I need is a long, hot bath. I wonder what my chances are of getting one?"

"I'll be getting along, then," Kate said, setting down her cup and rising to her feet. Emma stood too. To Kate's surprise, Emma embraced her, kissing her by the faux antique coffee grinder someone had once thought made a good birthday present. Gerry walked into the kitchen, pirouetted neatly then walked out again.

"Who was that?" asked Kate, her back to the door.

"Gerry. Geraldine," corrected Emma. "She has the big room at the front. Don't worry about Gerry, she's harmless."

Emma stood on the front step as Kate drove away, waving.

"Nice car that," said Gerry from behind Emma's elbow. "V6 Cosworth engine, tuned to perfection. Stiffened suspension, uprated disc brakes,

four wheel drive. ABS, EBD and traction control, of course. Six speed gear box, twin exhausts. Airbags galore. Did you notice the seats?"

"Firm," replied Emma, pleased to contribute an observation of her own to the conversation.

"Rally derived," said Gerry, knowingly. "Protect your spine over rough ground at speed. Just imagine what a car like that would cost with an Audi or BMW badge."

Emma had no idea, but she understood that Gerry was telling her that it would be no bargain.

"Where would a car like that fit into The Complete Theory of Car and Driver Psychology?" asked Emma, shutting out the night. She turned to face Gerry. "How would you categorize the owner of that car?"

Gerry drew herself up to her full height. Ecstatic at the prospect of sharing her field of expertise with a fellow enthusiast, she applied the full weight of her mind to Emma's query.

"Shrewd," she replied after due consideration, "Very shrewd. That is a supreme driver's car, but at less than twice the price of the basic family version of the same car. The driver of this car doesn't care about outward show or shiny badges. It's underneath that things matter for a person like this."

In spite of herself, Emma was pleased and impressed by Gerry's assessment of Kate, and of the car Emma thought was just a big saloon with hard seats.

"Trust me, I'm a dental receptionist," insisted Gerry. "That car's a dark horse. Doesn't say much, does she, your girlfriend?" she asked.

"She isn't my girlfriend," replied Emma. "Anyway, Kate is probably the strong, silent type."

"Hidden depths, like her car," suggested Gerry.

"Must be," replied Emma, asking,

"How about you, Gerry, what kind of car would reflect your personality?"

"Oh I don't drive, Emma. Never found the time to learn. And the traffic. Where's the romance in a tailback from the airport to junction ten? I hanker for the Golden Age of Motoring, and it isn't now."

"Hypothetically, then?" probed Emma.

Gerry frowned, thinking furiously.

"Alfa Romeo," she replied at last. "Sleek, sexy, stylish and not in the least bit common."

12

The Sportsman's Arms

Emma entered the noisy upstairs function room of the Sportsman's Arms.

"There must be seventy people here," she thought, as she looked for, but failed to spot Claire. Crossing to the bar, she ordered a drink. When she turned around, Claire was standing beside her.

"Emma, how nice to see you," she shouted above the music, kissing Emma's cheek.

"Happy birthday," Emma yelled back, handing Claire her card and gift.

"Thank you. It's actually my birthday tomorrow, I'm saving my presents till then. Tonight I'm celebrating my last day of being twenty seven. Let's go outside, I can't hear myself think in here."

Claire took Emma from the function room to the storeroom next door. It was full of chairs and tables, and a red draylon Chesterfield that had seen better days.

"Tell me," said Claire, settling herself for a good chat, fingers clasped around her knee, "what have you been up to since I saw you last? Are you still with the Royal Mail?"

"No, I'm working for Heart of England University now. I started a week last Monday. Nothing grand, receiving and distributing art supplies. Ordering. I spend a lot of time in stockrooms. But I like it. I work with a nice bunch of people and it's where I did my own degree. I'm daily amazed how young eighteen year olds can be, though. Was I really as green as they seem?"

"Probably," smiled Claire, "I know I was. Anyway, I'm glad you've found a job that suits you. I've been going through the evening paper recently, looking out for jobs you might enjoy."

"Thanks, Claire, that was kind of you. I had a few interviews set up for the New Year, but this one was always my first choice." Emma took a drink before continuing. "Then, as you know, I moved house. Now I live with a trainee silversmith, a couple of social workers, a freelance, that is to say, an unemployed photographer, plus a car crazed dental receptionist from the Emerald Isle."

"It sounds as if you've been busy," remarked Claire.

Emma agreed saying,

"Plus I've been having odd days out and amiable nights in with Kate, a nice girl from Edgbaston."

"You're seeing someone?" Claire was surprised. In the space of one sentence and less minutes, Emma moved in Claire's unconscious mind from being a theoretical lesbian to a genuine one, actively involved with another woman.

"Yes, kind of," Emma replied vaguely. "It's pretty informal. Something like a serial one night stand. Kate doesn't do relationships. We seem to have drifted into an arrangement whereby she scans What's On and the Internet for an oddball Saturday out, then it's my job to agree to it. Afterwards we go back to mine for the night. I think she likes the company, I enjoy it too. I like her, she seems a good sort. Quiet, speaks when she's spoken to. It's indoor karting tomorrow, white water canoeing last weekend. Mind you, that was a cruel and unusual punishment in January."

"I'm sure it was."

There was a pause then Claire said,

"I had words with Ian. About him bursting in on our evening like that. I am sorry."

"Don't apologize, it doesn't matter," shrugged Emma. "I was upset at the time, but everything has moved on since then."

Claire saw that for Emma everything had moved on, with a new home, a new job and a new love. Claire could feel Emma slipping inexorably from her grasp. After a shaky start, Emma was finally getting more of what she wanted from life. Annoyingly, it was happening independent of her friendship with Claire. Claire longed for things to return to the way they were. How it had been in the hour before Ian walked in on them: light, fun and physically close. She reached for Emma's hand and was pleased to feel Emma squeeze her fingers in return.

"How was Bristol?" asked Emma.

"Enjoyable. I like the variety my work affords. The bosses appreciate the work I do down there and I get put in a nice hotel with an excellent restaurant, which is all very pleasant. This time there was a trade show on nearby. Office equipment I think it was. A load of salesmen and managers, all staying at the same hotel. They were a lively group too, not above a spot of musical bedrooms. I had to keep mentioning Ian in conversation. As a way of cooling their ardour."

Claire suddenly, seemingly from nowhere, wanted Emma to understand that men found her attractive. She *was* desirable and, acknowledging it for the first time, she wanted to be attractive to Emma.

"Don't women go to these things?" queried Emma.

"Oh sure, but women aren't friendly to other women as a rule. So it's down to the bar, keep careful watch what's being added to your pre-dinner cocktail, then lock yourself in your room for a long soak followed by a cable tv movie. Actually, it wasn't as bad as all that. Some of the office equipment guys could be quite charming and I had work to do most evenings. The fortnight passed quickly."

"Where did you go for the weekend?" Emma enquired.

"Glastonbury. Do you know it?"

"Yes, I know it. It offers a fair living for anyone that can draw a unicorn under a silvery moon. It's a nice town, I've been a few times, camping in an old van."

"We should go there together sometime," said Claire.

"That would be nice," Emma replied, imagining what Ian would have to say about that.

"Emma, why don't you come to mine for dinner next week?" Claire asked.

But Emma's reply was to disappoint her. Wary of the emotional mess she'd become embroiled in last time, she suggested instead that they meet somewhere in town. A bar, a restaurant, a theatre... anywhere but Claire's sumptuous executive apartment.

The door flew open. Claire snatched her hand from Emma's as Hannah, ace party organizer and equal opportunities matchmaker, filled the doorway.

"Claire! Darling!" she boomed. "We've been searching for you everywhere. What *are* you doing in a cupboard? We need you, it's time to bring in the cake."

Claire rose submissively, a mite flustered. Chivvied along by Hannah, she left to fulfil her mingling duties.

"We must arrange something before you go," Claire called over her shoulder to Emma. "Don't go leaving before we do."

Emma trailed her across the threshold, back to the party.

13

A Typical Ian Surprise

Ian switched on front fog lamps, slicing a wedge of visibility through the gloomy night. Claire relaxed into the leather seat, snug and sleepy in the warm cab. The city receded into the fog. Ian rubbed his eyes, throttling back to just within the speed limit, en route to a quality hotel in the Peak District. It was a typical Ian surprise treat. Big and generous, but presupposing that Claire would fall in with his plans, having nothing of her own arranged that she was not prepared either to postpone or cancel outright. Claire closed her eyes. Opening them sometime later, she found the fog gone, replaced by gently falling snow and the welcoming façade of a country house hotel. The journey had taken longer than expected and so, after a cursory examination of room facilities, they went straight to dinner. Dinner was a fine meal, well served in the charming restaurant, boding well for the weekend ahead.

Claire had come to the two nights away, keen to put behind them the emotional dramas of the past few weeks. Niggles and misunderstandings, Ian called them, but they had badly upset her. Claire knew their problems dated to before Christmas, but this was another fact she had failed to persuade Ian to admit. She watched him for signs that he recognized the difficulties they had been through recently, but Ian seemed always to be his usual blithe self. He talked of going off hiking, though Claire, who had looked out a local weather forecast before leaving home, doubted this would be possible. From her point of view, it did not matter whether they went hill walking or not. Claire's interest lay in the emotional quality of their first weekend away since Christmas, regardless of any programme of outdoor activities. If it snowed up to their window, it would not upset Claire, as long as all was well within.

Restored, Claire and Ian returned to their room. It was a beautifully presented room displaying an attention to detail that was second to none. Ian bathed then lay on the bed. He was asleep by the time Claire came out of the shower. He never made a comfortable transition between night and day shifts, this week's changeover being no exception. Claire looked on as he slept. "A familiar stranger," she thought.

Sitting quietly with nothing better to do, she began to enumerate the things she liked best about him. There was his kindness and his warmth. His odd moments of sensitivity and understanding. His affection. Yet Claire, who had been an intelligent girl for almost thirty years, had not the sense to quit while she was ahead. Foolishly, she tallied the things that annoyed her. There was his arrogance and conceit. His outrageous domination of her and his ongoing campaign to manipulate every aspect of her life. Everything had to be on his terms. She sighed, recalling words from a musical.

"Why can't a woman be more like a man?"

"Why can't a man be more like a woman?" she wondered, frustrated.

She lay beside him, picking up her book to read. When Ian awoke, he wanted to make love. They did, despite Claire secretly preferring to read on.

The following morning they drove up to a local beauty spot. Snow had fallen steadily all night, blurring earth and sky. Everywhere was blinding, soft edged whiteness. They had a snowball fight on the car park overlooking the valley. It ended abruptly when Ian stuffed snow down

the back of Claire's thick woollen sweater and she screamed at him to take her back to the hotel to change.

In the afternoon they visited a "Typical Derbyshire Market Town." Claire relished browsing the arty gift shops and visiting the picturesque old church. She inspected its weathered stone memorials, brass plaques and Victorian stained glass. Ian sulked as he trailed along behind, impatient to go driving the snowy lanes in his go anywhere, drive up walls, annihilate all lesser vehicles, four wheel drive.

Saturday evening was almost a carbon copy of Friday. They enjoyed another exceptional dinner in the restaurant, before retiring to their room for the night. This time however, Ian did not sleep before sex as he wanted this accomplished before settling back to watch football.

Claire looked at the clock. It was 2:39am. She was unsure whether she had slept yet tonight. Ian was sleeping, turned on his side facing away from her. She lay, hardly breathing, the hotel silent about her. Moments ticked by, then into Claire's wakefulness came clarity. An understanding dawned. Questions that have perplexed scholars and mystics for millennia remained beyond her grasp, but life and the small part she played in it stood out in sharp relief, beautiful in its starkness.

Seeing the muscles at the top of his back, Claire reached out stealthily, tracing their contour with a fingertip. Ice cold and clear, she was sad that she felt nothing but his flesh now. No vestige remained of the love she once knew. Love that had made her giddy and ecstatic. Now she liked him best when he was asleep, because that was when she felt most in control of her life. Silent and in darkness, unable to move lest she wake him, she was her own person again. Claire mourned the end of loving Ian. A relationship that at one time seemed destined to lead to marriage had culminated instead in her preferring him asleep rather than awake, there rather than here. Claire wept silently in the dark. Careful not to wake him.

Claire sat beside Ian, absorbed and uncommunicative for much of their journey back to Birmingham.

"Ian," she said suddenly, jolting him from his own reverie. "I've given it a great deal of thought recently. I don't think that this relationship is working any more. I don't think we're at all well suited," she continued, only her third sentence since leaving the hotel. "I want to end it. Now."

Ian snapped on an indicator, bringing the big car to a crunching stop in the access road of a bakery.

"What's brought this on?" he asked, turning to her, concern and confusion etching his face. "Was it me watching the football? You said you weren't really bothered about the film, and anyway, you wanted to finish your book."

Claire shook her head, praying for inner reserves. For the strength to carry through what she had started.

"It wasn't the football or the film, or any other single thing. It's everything together. We are just too different. We see things differently. We want different things. I don't want to continue with our relationship. It's over."

"Tell me what it is that's upset you, I will make sure it never happens again," Ian replied gravely. "There's no need to end it. Things can change, we can work on it together."

Claire shook her head dully.

"No Ian, it's over. I'm sad about it, but I don't want to go on. Let's just leave it."

"Leave it!" he exclaimed, bringing his hand down heavily on the steering wheel. "I can't just leave it, Claire. Be reasonable. We've had a lovely weekend. OK, we couldn't get out to hike, but we always knew the weather could be a problem. Now out of the blue, you decide to put an end to us. At least tell me why. Is there someone else?"

Claire looked up, surprised.

"Of course there's no one else," she said scornfully.

"When you were in Bristol for a fortnight, staying in that hotel. You didn't...?"

"No I didn't!" she replied, shocked and horrified that he could think that of her.

"Emma then, filling your head with anti male garbage. I know what she needs, the disgusting little pervert. If she had a man of her own, she wouldn't need to go round pretending to be one."

"Take me home please, Ian," she said, tight lipped and furious.

"We haven't finished discussing this," he objected.

"Take me home, or give me my bag from the back. I will call a cab from here."

Restarting the engine, Ian eased back into the traffic. Once home, Claire refused to let him upstairs to the flat. He did his best to get her to change her mind, but she stood firm. She had discussed the matter as much as she ever would. She ascended the stairs to begin life as a single girl.

By the time Ian rejoined the motorway, his telephone number and email address had been barred. Ian's erstwhile girlfriend then unbarred them again, because how else would she know if he tried to contact her? Claire, in her stylish apartment fortress set about enjoying her newly reclaimed freedom. She cleared his razors and manly deodorant, socks and underpants into a box, which she hid in a cupboard until the Royal Mail rid her of its unwelcome presence the following day.

A few days later, a parcel arrived in the hallway of the shared house containing the few items Ian used to keep at Claire's.

A week after Claire had cancelled her relationship with Ian, she switched off the engine and applied the handbrake in the driveway of Jessica's semi-detached house, the modern-day vicarage. She was greeted effusively by Barney, the former Birmingham Dogs' Home foundling. Barney was brighter than he looked, recognizing a good billet and a soft hearted human when they came his way.

"Barney, no not my skirt. Behave! Barney!" shrieked Claire.

Jessica dashed out to rescue Claire, taking her safely through into the living room, traditionally a Barney-free zone. She left her there for a moment collecting her wits, reappearing shortly afterwards with a tray of tea and biscuits.

"How are you, chuck?" Jessica asked, pouring tea. "Not still upset are you?"

"No, Jessica, I'm fine now," Claire replied, accepting a cup of strong tea.

"Did Ian try to contact you in the end?"

"No," Claire answered, helping herself to a custard cream. "I thought at first that he would. Then I realized that would be completely out of character for him. He isn't going to ask me to go back to him, his self esteem wouldn't allow it. He will wait for me to ask. In which case, I hope he doesn't hold his breath. I'm glad it's worked out like this, I couldn't stand it if he was whining and cajoling, trying to get me to go

back on my decision. I didn't go to Derbyshire intending to end our relationship, Jess. It just became glaringly obvious while we were there. We were totally mismatched. He will be ideal for some woman, perhaps one that likes to have all the decisions made for her, but not for me. There was no point trying to work things out, there was nothing I wanted to salvage from our time together."

Claire stirred her tea, preoccupied.

"I'd been thinking about it all the night before. I knew it was no good. Whatever we had was at an end. I knew I'd have to find a way of telling him. But then it suddenly started saying itself as we were nearing home. I just sat there, listening to myself putting an end to Ian and me. I was almost as surprised as Ian to hear it said out loud."

"Did you never regret it at all later?" Jessica asked.

"No, not at all. I wondered for a few days if I'd done the right thing, but yes, Jessica, it was the right thing for me. The best decision I've made in a long time. The situation did not improve after Christmas, in fact it got progressively worse."

Claire smiled.

"So here I am. Without a boyfriend for the first time since I was at school. I've come off the pill too, after almost ten years of pharmaceutical mayhem."

"What if you meet someone new?" asked Jessica, broaching a delicate subject.

"I have a few emergency condoms in a drawer by the bed, but quite frankly Jessica, I want a complete break from all of that. I'd be quite happy for them to reach their expiry date unopened. I feel better, my body feels better, and all because I've taken the decision to be man-free for a while. Give a chance for the real Claire Mortimer to step forward."

"Would the real Claire Mortimer like some extra rich chocolate cream cake?" Jessica asked.

Claire stared at her in horror.

"Surely not here, Jessica. Not chocolate cake? I thought that James was very supportive of your new diet?"

"He is, that's why I had to keep this in a cool box in the shed. The fridge is full of salad and low fat this and that which James is really pleased about. Now do you want some or not?"

"I couldn't possibly collude with you in deceiving James," said Claire piously.

"Suit yourself," Jessica replied, unabashed.

"Did Emma turn up to your party?" Jessica asked, returning from the kitchen with a plate heaped with contraband.

"Yes, she came and I've seen her again since. We met in town last week. I did think that she would be more pleased now that Ian is out of my life, but she didn't seem to care. He said some pretty harsh things about her, I'm sure she must have known that. Anyway, she took the news without any reaction I could see. All she said was "Really?" I'm not even certain she believed me. Then I suggested we went to the cinema, and she gave me such a peculiar look when I told her the film I wanted to see had Julia Roberts in it."

"Perhaps she doesn't like Julia Roberts?" suggested Jessica.

"No, that wasn't it. It was a comedy. The one where Julia is fat and frumpy. Overshadowed by her glamorous sister. An ugly duckling story. Emma liked it well enough. Anything she doesn't like, she condemns as Boring Heterosexual Garbage, and this was spared that particular accolade. Then later, when I asked her over to mine, she came up with a counter offer, something she wants to see at the NEC. I don't know why she's unwilling to come to the flat nowadays, it isn't as though Ian is going to barge in and spoil everything ever again."

"Are you still close and cuddlesome with Emma?" enquired Jessica, catching sight of Barney peeing up Claire's car tyre.

Claire was defensive.

"We held hands in the cinema. It was nothing. She always said that she wanted me to be affectionate with her. That she'd be hurt if I was not. It's the way she wants us to relate. I'm comfortable with it. Everything is perfectly clear and well understood."

"Is she still seeing the woman from Edgbaston?" asked Jessica, rising to shoo away Barney, staring lopsidedly in at them, his big, dirty paws on the windowsill.

"Kate. Yes, she's still seeing her. She plays down their relationship. She doesn't even call it a relationship, though that is clearly what it is. You can see that she is content with it, all the same. Fair play to her. I'm glad she's happy. But she is not the girl she was in December," Claire finished, wistfully.

For once, Jessica had no ready comment to make on what she'd heard. She had a shrewd idea why Emma would avoid going to Claire's flat, stylish and elegant though it was. Filled with all the luxuries and treats a handsome regular salary could provide. Jessica saw that Emma would be reluctant to be trapped on Claire's territory. Fearful perhaps of what Claire was liable to suggest next, in her quest for innocent new ways of relating to her gay friend. Ways that friend was unlikely to find innocent. Jessica could imagine Claire offering to exchange sensual massage with Emma. Or suggesting that she stay over, pulling back the duvet on the far side of her own bed in the mistaken belief that it was a friendly or sisterly thing to do. A kind hearted woman, Jessica never liked to see anybody get hurt. She wished that there was something she might suggest to help Claire avoid the problems she saw looming ahead for her. And for Emma. But Claire had already disregarded Jessica's advice over her blasé treatment of Emma, she was unlikely to accept it if offered for a second time. Troubled but helpless, Jessica passed on to other topics and more tea.

Meanwhile, Barney completed the tunnel he had been digging all week. Once inside the garden shed, he proceeded stealthily. Guided by his broad nose, he joyously tore into an inconspicuous hessian sack, thus unearthing Jessica's carefully hidden stash of pure butter shortbread.

14

Missed it with a Vengeance

Another Saturday rolled along for Claire, the third in a row where nothing much was planned. She parked her car in the quiet lay-by, then took the steps down to the canal towpath. It was a bright, blustery day, but one that had remained dry so far. She walked briskly away from the city. She liked to walk when there were things on her mind. Today it was Emma that occupied her attention. Other topics to have had her walking single-mindedly in the direction of Liverpool: board meetings where she must give a complex presentation. Her mother's sudden bout of ill health last year. Or the time she thought that she might be pregnant, had all been more tangible. This time there was nothing specific on which to hang her concerns. Not concerns about Emma. Emma was doing just fine. Her life had stabilized since “Crash-landing in Birmingham,” as she referred to November and December, when she had been working in a 24 hour supermarket while living in the Richmond Road house with Ian.

Emma was now happily established in the south of the city, handy for her work, and the place she entertained her girlfriend Kate at the weekend. No, the problem, if there was a problem, lay with Claire.

Claire had expected to see more of Emma once Ian had exited her life, but this had not proven to be the case. Emma had not been to her flat since before Christmas, and although they had met a few times in town, it had not afforded the opportunity for closeness that Claire would have liked. Claire was no fool, she knew she was being kept at a distance. The more she tried to engineer situations of closeness, the more Emma manoeuvred to bring about only highly public meetings, seemingly wanting to include half of Birmingham in their evenings out. They would go to see the latest “must see” film, standing in cinema queues that snaked halfway down New Street, or pick their way through crowds of diners to reach the last vacant table in a restaurant. No one who knew her would have guessed Emma could be so enamoured of crowds.

It annoyed Claire that she was relegated to a midweek evening when she had entire weekends standing empty. It vexed her that Emma always wanted to meet in town and it frustrated her that Emma could remain indifferent to the friendship she offered.

She loved to be with Emma, though what they did together was not so remarkable. The usual round of bars, restaurants and entertainments in town. Pleasant, but in no way unique. She could do the same things with Jessica or with Hazel, her last remaining unmarried friend from her university days. She thought again.

She loved to be with Emma. Yes, naturally.

She loved Emma. Well, of course she did.

She was in love with Emma!

The lightning realization brought her to an abrupt halt. A lone jogger gave her a searching stare as she stood transfixed in the middle of the towpath. She was in love with Emma... it was the only explanation to fit the facts. The absurd amount of time she'd devoted to thinking about Emma recently. The distress she felt over Emma refusing to visit her home, and lastly, the increasingly erotic fantasies Claire had been having of late. This fact if nothing else should have given her a hint. Claire, who prided herself on her incisive thinking, whose analytical mind so often cut through to the essence of a problem, conspicuously failed to spot this coming. She'd missed it with a vengeance.

15

Déjà Vu All Over Again

It was a dreary midweek evening in March when Emma next cooked a dinner for Claire. She made the offer after Claire had repeatedly invited her to dine at the flat. The offering and declining was becoming embarrassing. Emma grasped the nettle.

"It's about time I cooked for you," she said firmly, preferring a home venue for any impending encounter.

The irony was, Emma would have dearly loved to go to Claire's to be pampered by a beautiful woman. If only her emotions were more resilient.

The expected time for Claire's arrival came and went, Emma waiting nervously in the kitchen, the meal kept warm over a low light. The payphone rang, but she made no move to answer it. Gerry had already warned her that she was expecting a few calls tonight. Emma caught

snatches of Gerry's end of the conversation, including, in a tone of disgust,

"Well, what do you expect from a man who drives a Renault?"
and later,

"Red Gti's are so 1980's, Kylie. Find a man who isn't trying to relive a bygone era."

At long last, the door bell rang. Emma hastened to admit her guest. She took her straight through to the kitchen, Gerry waving as they passed by the telephone alcove. Emma shut the door and offered to take Claire's coat. Claire shrugged it off her shoulders, revealing a figure-hugging red dress with plunge neckline. Emma was momentarily wrong-footed. She was glad to take the coat and busy herself, hanging it behind the door of the utility room. She leaned breathlessly against the washing machine, fighting to pull herself together. After counting to ten, she cleared her throat, wiped her sweaty palms, then strode determinedly back to the kitchen, ready to pretend that women dressed like supermodels all the time in her experience, and it was just another Wednesday night for this resident of Dartmouth Terrace.

"That's a pretty frock," she said, averting her eyes from Claire's superb cleavage.

Claire gave her the name of the designer but it meant nothing to Emma, whose favourite labels included "Reduced to Clear" and "Massive Sale - Silly Prices."

"I was getting dressed in the ladies' restroom when one of the cleaning staff came in," said Claire. "She saw the dress and wanted to know who the lucky fellow was."

"Me too," thought Emma, saying, "This kitchen's useless for entertaining, so dinner will be in my room tonight. If you'd like to take your drink upstairs, I'll serve this up and be with you very shortly."

Claire offered to help. Emma declined, sending her upstairs with a bottle of wine and a carton of fruit juice. Minutes later, Emma arrived carrying a tray. She pushed open the bedroom door with her foot.

Emma had set up a small table and chairs in the middle of the room. Gerry lent her a clean white tablecloth. In the centre was a tea light, burning spiritedly in a red glass holder. The small electric heater clicked on and off at intervals to maintain a comfortable temperature. With a colourful array of candles burning on the mantelpiece, the room was as

inviting as Emma could make it. Claire poured Emma a glass of red wine and the two women embarked upon their evening meal. Claire tasted just enough of the wine to be polite, before switching to fruit juice. She chatted about her day, lamenting how roadworks on the motorway had sabotaged her plan to arrive much earlier.

Emma stole a look at Claire's breasts, and was overwhelmingly depressed. A lifetime of emotional suppression acted as a snare crippling Emma's mind. Her natural instinct was to touch those breasts, to kiss and to love them. She did nothing and would have continued to do nothing until hell froze over. Growing up a lesbian had served to endow Emma with prodigious quantities of will power and self denial. She could Do Nothing for Great Britain. However, these were qualities she was neither proud of nor happy to cultivate.

“What is she playing at?” Emma wondered, annoyed. “Why come here in a dress like that? We are not even going out to eat, where such a dazzling creation would be seen and appreciated by a grateful audience.”

It was wholly inappropriate to dress provocatively in this upstairs room of this shared house, where Claire was invited in all innocence to partake of vegetarian chicken in black bean sauce with a terminally exasperated lesbian, one who felt she had dealt with quite enough challenges recently. Emma could do without a beautiful, unattainable vamp, flaunting her charms across the dinner table. Not for the first time the words “Thoughtless and insensitive” arose in Emma's mind.

Emma could hear Gerry's TV below. The now familiar theme tune to Spare Wheel. By concentrating on Claire's words rather than her appearance, Emma survived to the end of the meal without betraying her disquiet. She offered dessert, but Claire refused politely, saying that she always felt full after a rice meal. They discussed books and favourite holiday destinations until Emma judged that the time had come to clear away the meal. Claire offered to help, but was told to take it easy. Emma would take care of everything. All would be cleared away in no time at all. First she carried plates and cutlery down to the kitchen. She then took apart the picnic table, tripping back downstairs to stow it in the cupboard beneath the stairs. Returning to her room, her mind straying to the day out she had yet to agree with Kate for the weekend, Emma walked straight into Claire's arms.

For months Emma had dreamed of kissing Claire. She had imagined it under every conceivable circumstance and in myriad locations. Yet now that it was happening for real, she hardly took part in it at all. She stood

dumbly at first, her mind at a standstill. Claire pressed hot, fierce kisses on to her lips, caressing her breast through her clothing. With a strength Emma would never have credited her, Claire all but picked her up, dumping her unceremoniously on to the bed. The elderly springs protested as Claire lay half on top of Emma, her hands moving feverishly over her body. Belatedly up to speed with events, her body responding ferociously, Emma yanked Claire on top of her, kissing her with the force of long pent up hunger. Claire's intent was crystal clear, Emma's months of frustration at an end.

Then without warning, Claire's body stiffened and she freed herself from Emma's embrace.

"Sorry, I have to go," she said breathlessly.

By the time Emma sat up, Claire had raced down the stairs and was on her way out through the front door. It banged noisily behind her. Perplexed and bewildered, Emma reached the window in time to see the tail lights of Claire's car in the street below. She willed the car to stop, but it accelerated smoothly out of sight. Emma slumped down on to the bed. Drawing her knees up under her chin, she wondered what the hell happened tonight. Claire was mad, she decided, though name calling was scant consolation in the circumstances.

Fully fifteen minutes Emma stared fixedly at a patch of worn carpet, then snatching up a tissue, she stood four-square in front of the old mirror. She was pale, her eyes glistening with unshed tears, her breath still shallow, rapid and ragged. Angrily, she scrubbed away Claire's lipstick from round her mouth. Tossing the screwed up tissue into the bin, she slipped downstairs to clean up after the meal.

Gerry was watching an old edition of Engine Nuts from the Geneva Motor Show. Emma was glad there was no one about to see her upset. She washed up then went to the utility room for a clean tea towel. Claire's coat still hung behind the door. Guiltily, Emma checked the pockets. She found nothing. No cash, keys nor mobile phone. Nothing to bring her back for it tonight. She took the coat upstairs and put it in the wardrobe. Hours later, and still listening for the phone to ring, she fell asleep, no closer to comprehension than when Claire had first caused torment and confusion months before.

"It's déjà vu all over again," she thought unhappily. "There really is no accounting for women."

"Emma... Phone!" Gerry called up the stairs. Emma did not rush to take the call, coming at exactly the time Kate rang every Thursday. She'd be parked on the road outside the karate club, making the call after an evening training session. Emma had been prowling around all evening hoping to hear from Claire. Now picking up the receiver she prepared to speak to Kate.

"Hello," she said, warily.

"Hi, how are you?" came Kate's breezy reply.

"Oh fine," Emma lied.

"Good. Now would you be interested in a trip to The Potteries on Saturday? We can take a factory tour - find out how it's done, though I expect you know all about that already. We can have a go ourselves, making or decorating pots, bowls, different things. I've got a leaflet on it, you can take a look for yourself. Then there's a restaurant and the inevitable factory shop. Huge discounts on high street prices apparently. That's just one, but there are any number of famous old potteries we can visit. So what do you say, anything here appeal to you?"

Emma was pleased and grateful to Kate. The trip would take her out of herself at a time when she was still painfully churned up over Claire. Kate did not know it, but there was nothing Emma liked better than finely crafted pottery and sensuous art glass.

"I would love to," she said, genuinely happy to be seeing Kate at the weekend. Happy too that when they went upstairs on Saturday night, Kate would not leap to her feet and dash out into the night, frightened away by the touch of a woman's kiss.

Kate and Emma thoroughly enjoyed their day in Stoke-on-Trent. As Emma skilfully applied enamel to pottery blanks, she felt soothed, lost in a world of colour and form. They travelled from factory to factory, showroom to showroom, admiring the expertise and dexterity of painters, the imagination of designers. They returned at the end of a long and satisfying day to collect their freshly fired pieces. Kate also bought a Moorcroft lamp to add to a collection Emma had no idea she possessed. Contented, they made their way back to Emma's for the night.

Emma was not usually demonstrative with Kate, not even when alone, but she took Kate's hand as they drove down the motorway, then sought it again before going to bed. Wrapped in her warm embrace Emma felt indebted to Kate, for holding and bringing comfort to her. Just for being

there, dispelling some of the anguish and agitation felt after Wednesday's dinner debacle with Claire.

Emma gave her newly decorated pot to Kate before she left for home the next morning. She said nothing about why she made the gift, but it was in recognition of the soothing effect Kate had upon her scattered senses. She felt at ease with Kate. If only Claire had not been so beautiful, Emma would naturally have knuckled down and fallen in love with Kate. But to be soothing and enigmatic was not nearly enough in view of the competition. Kate left early on Sunday with nothing but a strikingly decorated pot by way of memento, though one, it must be said, considerably better executed than her own attempt.

16

The Other Woman

The beginning of April was interminably rainy, challenging Kate to find more indoor events to enjoy at the weekend. In line with the new policy, they drove over to a Dr Who exhibition that was taking place near Wolverhampton.

"Kate I was thinking," Emma began, then paused.

Kate turned to regard her.

"It's fine, our staying at mine on a Saturday night. No problem at all," Emma added hastily. "But I was wondering, why is it we never stay at yours? Well, not since the first time? Are you ashamed of me or something?"

She asked her question part joking, but also part in earnest. From the outset Emma had found Kate's reticence difficult to comprehend.

"Never that," Kate replied firmly, stepping aside for a green wobbly alien with bulging eyes. "Of course Aneesha knows I'm gay, she isn't stupid. It's simply not something I discuss. Not with anyone. Neither do I want her to disclose her private life to me. The reason I don't take you home is not that I am ashamed of you, or ashamed of myself for that matter. My sexuality is important, but it isn't how I define myself. I don't ordinarily draw attention to it. I couldn't give a fig who knows, but they'll not hear it from me. Know me better and you'd see that I'll talk on any subject you care to mention, but I hate having to talk about myself. I can't think of anything I'd enjoy less. Honestly, I'd be the same if I were straight."

Kate reached the end of what for her was a marathon speech. She reached for Emma's hand and they held hands for the rest of the afternoon. Emma was uncomfortable with this public display of affection with Kate, but she could not disengage. She was after all, the trendy young lesbian, out loud and proud.

Two weeks later, their hard won rock climbing awards tucked securely away in the glove compartment of the car, Kate took Emma home to the flat she shared with Aneesha. Emma was given no advance warning of the visit, though Aneesha had clearly been forewarned of the visit. Emma had wanted only to understand why Kate never took her home. It had not been a hint that she wanted to go there. Nevertheless, months after first hearing Aneesha's name, Emma finally met the other woman in Kate's life.

Aneesha, ebullient and outgoing was a counterpoint to Kate's quiet thoughtfulness. She ordered Kate and Emma to sit down with a glass of wine, while she went to the kitchen. She unpacked a host of exotic ready to cook meals, which disappeared into the oven, the microwave or a saucepan, as appropriate. She then mixed two packs of salad in a large glass bowl, adding a home-made garlic and herb dressing. Dessert was fresh fruit salad and cream. Aneesha's labour saving approach to cooking meant that she was soon back in the living room, tucking into an eclectic meal with Kate and her guest. The conversation over dinner ranged far and wide, with Aneesha, the stage manager of an alternative theatre company, proving herself a gifted storyteller and mimic. Acutely observant, she had missed her vocation in satirical sketches.

"What about a suitable boy for you, Aneesha?" Emma asked, after she had regaled them with the hilarious goings on at her sister's wedding. Aneesha glanced furtively over her shoulder, saying in a stage whisper,

"I think I'm in the clear for a while. My parents are still in shock over Nandita's wedding. Being in Birmingham helps me stay below the radar too. I'm not sure my mum knows precisely where it is. She wanted to know about Spaghetti Junction. I told her it was an Italian fast food restaurant. She rings me every week, but she has stopped asking if I am seeing anyone nice. I've been living with Kate for two and a half years, perhaps she is coming to terms with me being gay. The truth is more mundane, as is so often the case. I haven't met a nice boy. I don't expect to meet a nice boy. I know a few very bad ones, but I'm not fool enough to go marrying one."

The wine bottle made another generous round of the coffee table. Emma relaxed in a haze of geniality and full bodied South African Shiraz, reflecting that Kate's approach of "I know that you know, but I'm not going to talk about it," had its merits. Not discussing one's sexuality had the advantage of freeing up time for other, more wide ranging topics. To Emma, who had never toured a supermarket without feeling that her sexuality marked her out from the vast majority of shoppers in the store, this was a novelty. She was hindered in her conversation though, since she could not speak of herself without discussing her relationship with her lover. It was, as Kate had identified, a matter of definitions. Emma defined herself by her sexuality. Kate did not. But if Emma was a little tongue-tied, nobody seemed to notice. The evening breezed along without a hitch.

Global issues piqued Kate's attention. She had a clear understanding of current affairs, commenting insightfully on world events, the arts and changes in society. Hers was a more humane outlook than that of Aneesha, whose summing up of a situation, though usually amusingly shrewd, was seldom gentle. Kate was also well read with near perfect recall of everything she had read. She had a quirky sense of humour and a reluctance to be cynical that Aneesha branded naïve, but which Emma found refreshing. Emma felt a touch of pride in her association with Kate. It was something she had not felt before as they went about their offbeat ritual of pre-arranged weekly outings and casual sex. It was a fact that in the months they had known each other, they had shared more extreme days out than in-depth conversations. Intimacy too had been largely devoid of post intimacy exchange or discussion. It ranked as

probably the quietest affair Emma had known. Intruding on Kate's reserve was not something one did lightly.

Emma contemplated her surroundings. Aneesha's flat had a distinct 1960s feel. A larger than life size mural of a sweating Jimi Hendrix occupied one wall of the living room. The image was raw energy, a man possessed by the power of his music. Emma marvelled at the quality of brushwork that made the iconic guitarist a very real presence in the room. Emma had not seen the mural before. Indeed, she had not been in the living room before. Kitchen, bathroom and bedroom had been all she had needed that Thursday night sandwiched between Christmas and New Year.

Kate took another drink from her wine glass causing Emma to wonder about sleeping arrangements for the night. They were not going to Emma's, Kate would never drink drive. But what of Kate's reticence around Aneesha? Would tonight mark the beginning of a platonic phase with Kate? Emma hoped not. Sex with Kate was as pleasant as it was uncomplicated. The question was resolved when Aneesha went to her room to change, re-emerging a half hour later dressed to party. She left in a taxi shortly afterwards, wishing the two women a great evening. It was a sentiment with which they were only too pleased to comply. They savoured the luxury of time alone in Aneesha's boldly decorated flat. An evening deliciously free of the restrictions of space and privacy of Emma's shared house, with its revolving population, swollen each weekend by visiting friends and lovers.

The next morning early, with everything a variation on a theme of grey, Emma lay in bed thinking. Kate was sleeping, turned towards the wall. Emma's thoughts turned to Kate. She was immediately enveloped in a wave of warm affection. Kate was a very dear little person. Emma thought of her as little, despite Kate being both taller and older than Emma. With her heart bent all out of shape by beautiful, spoiled, capricious Claire, Emma was not going to fall in love with Kate, but then Kate had never asked her to. In return, Kate had never offered to share her feelings for Emma. But they were good friends, Emma was certain of that. It meant a lot to her that this was so. In the past, Emma regularly had the feeling that she was sleeping with the enemy. There were relationships which would have been better left as one night stands and some one night stands best avoided altogether. Emma rolled on to her side. She kissed Kate lightly on the shoulder. Not for Kate's sake, but for

her own. A vain attempt to dislodge the gnawing, destructive feeling of guilt: when making love with Kate, Emma was thinking of Claire.

17

Uncharted Waters

"What time do you call this?" mocked Gerry, when Emma walked in next morning.

Twisting Gerry's wrist until she could see her watch face, Emma told her that it was 11:48.

"And where is your girlfriend today?"

"Home. Why?" replied Emma.

"Every Sunday for ages, I've been woken by the sound of her leaving. This morning I lay waiting for hours, but nothing."

"Does she leave with her tyres smoking?" laughed Emma. "No mystery. We stayed at Kate's last night."

"Your other floozy rang yesterday," said Gerry.

"Which other floozy?"

Emma filled the kettle, then checked the fridge for what might constitute lunch later.

"Heck, Emma, how many do you have?" demanded Gerry.

"Who rang, Gerry?" Emma growled, threateningly.

"Claire."

Emma's blood froze.

"Did she say why she rang?" Emma asked, nonchalantly.

"Not to me. Said to ring her back."

Gerry slid her phone across the table with an air of expectancy.

"Thanks, Gerry, I'll do it later. I need to look up the number first."

Emma dumped boiling water on to a tea bag, then hurried upstairs to think about Claire.

There had been no word from Claire in over three weeks. Not since the evening they'd embraced on Emma's bed, Claire fleeing Cinderella-style at the stroke of midnight. Emma had thought about phoning Claire, but had not known what to say. Moreover, it seemed to Emma that Claire owed her an explanation for her behaviour and summary departure after first raising then dashing Emma's hopes. Even an apology would not be expecting too much. She had checked her emails repeatedly at first for word from Claire, but as week had followed week, Emma concluded that she'd probably seen the last of her. Emma was sad and disappointed, but came to think it probably for the best. Knowing Claire had never been easy.

To avoid the ever curious Gerry, Emma left the house quietly through the back door, stopping to buy a phone card from a corner shop. The weather had deteriorated since Kate dropped her at New Street station. She knew she'd be lucky to complete the errand without getting wet. She dialed, hoping not to run into the answerphone.

"Hello," said Claire.

"Hello. Claire. It's me... Emma." Emma's voice lacked resonance in the sound distorting glass booth. "Gerry said to call."

"Emma... I wanted to talk to you. Say sorry for not having been in touch for so long. I needed time to think things over."

Emma held her breath, wondering if Claire intended to claim that she had drunk too much that night, (singularly untrue as only Emma had touched more than a thimbleful of the wine) and could they still be

friends? Emma would of course agree. No one with a pulse ever turned down the chance of being near Claire. But Emma did not need a friend. She needed a girlfriend to grow old with. She knew that thinking of Claire in these terms would lead to a whole raft of problems, primarily for herself. Unfortunately for Emma, her feelings for Claire had always been way beyond her control. Claire had led her a merry emotional dance for months on end. She had picked her up, appeared to offer what she wanted, then had dropped her from a great height. Yet despite a catalogue of disasters that would have sent most sane people running for safety, Claire remained unchallenged at the top of Emma's wish list.

"Are you seeing anyone?" Claire asked, jerking Emma from her thoughts.

"Only Kate," replied Emma, instantly regretting her choice of phrase. Why say "Only Kate," not "Yes. Kate," or simply "Yes?"

And what business was it of Claire's anyway? Yet as the seconds ticked by in that freezing phonebox Kate, whose friendship had filled her with warmth and contentment that very morning, seemed ever more distant and insignificant. Inconvenient and regrettable.

Claire said,

"I know it's a lot to ask, but could you meet me in town this afternoon? Maybe have some lunch together? We need to talk. I've missed you so much."

Emma's heart was a painful lump in her throat, but she agreed to Claire's suggestion, as she always knew she would. It was drizzling heavily by the time Emma pushed open the call box door. She went home to change, and to look out a carrier bag large enough for Claire's abandoned coat.

"How have you been?" Claire asked, toying with the takeaway menu. She avoided meeting Emma's gaze.

"OK," replied Emma, non-committally.

Their rendezvous was at a busy city centre coffeehouse. The noisy, Sunday lunchtime crowd was just beginning to thin out. Emma pretended to study the reproduction advertising posters decorating the walls. A waiter served their milky coffees.

Claire was grateful for the privacy their alcove afforded them. She was nervous, fiddling with a sugar packet she did not intend to use. Looking up, she spoke quietly, painfully.

"I did want to contact you. To phone or write, or something. I didn't want to run away. I was completely unprepared for how I felt after... after kissing you. I needed time to think. Such an overwhelming feeling... I had no words."

"And you do now?" Emma asked coolly, afraid of drawing close to Claire. She wrapped both hands round her coffee mug to stop them shaking. When Claire did not reply, Emma demanded desperately,

"What happened three weeks ago, Claire? What made you take off like a scalded cat? Tell me, because I can't figure you out on my own."

Claire replied with a question of her own.

"How does Kate feel about you, Emma?"

Uncertain of where Claire was going with this, Emma shrugged.

"Kate? She likes me. We're friends," she replied.

"Does she love you?"

"I don't know. I hope not."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't love her," Emma replied. "Not the keep-you-awake-at-night, screw-up-your-work-during-the-day kind of love."

"Like a friend?" Claire offered.

"Yes, we are friends."

Claire took a drink of her coffee, pondering Emma's relationship with Kate. Struggling to match words to feelings, Claire sought to answer Emma's question.

"Why did I run away that night? Because I could not handle the intensity of my feelings. I had never felt like that before. I wanted you so badly, it frightened me. You probably think I'm a terrible wimp, you being used to loving women. But when I kissed you, it was as if a powerful current jolted my entire body." She looked appealingly at Emma, but Emma remained unmoved, unwilling to help Claire with what she had to say.

"It didn't take me twenty five days to know how I felt about you," continued Claire, "I had some vague idea of that before I came to dinner

that night. It took me twenty five days to fully understand what was happening to me, then decide if I should tell you about it. Particularly since you're already involved with someone. Hence all the questions about you and Kate."

Claire smiled wanly, recalling the turmoil of the past weeks.

"Whether I should tell you that I'm in love with you. That I have been for some time. I needed to know how you felt... About me. About us. If you could see us... together," Claire trailed off unhappily.

There was a pause, then Emma, regarding Claire without expression, asked,

"The keep you awake at night kind of love?"

"Oh, all night," agreed Claire, ruefully.

"And screws up your work during the day?"

"Completely screwed up, you have my word."

"Then join the club," said Emma, finally taking a drink from her mug.

Thus an astonished, though outwardly unruffled Emma learned that the thing she wanted most and for so long, was now being offered to her on a plate. More than this, Claire was meekly begging Emma to consider her for a lover. Emma couldn't believe her luck. While dreams are free and available to everyone wholesale, Emma was in uncharted waters when it came to having a dream come true. Deciding to behave as though having a gorgeous straight woman throw herself at her was all too common an occurrence in the life of this gay gal about town, she quickly accepted Claire's proposal, before she could change her mind and withdraw it. This had an instantly cheering effect upon Claire, who had seemed close to tears.

"What will you do about Kate?" Claire asked.

This was tricky. Emma did not want to do anything about Kate, though that she would have to do something seemed inevitable. Emma had grown fond of Kate, but Claire was a vociferous champion of that single virtue: fidelity. Emma, on the other hand, generally acquired lovers until some kind of critical mass was reached. If at this point, one or two were to wander off to do other things, that was usually fine with Emma. She would still maintain her one hundred percent record of never having finished with anyone.

"You will have to stop seeing her, you know," said Claire.

A dull, lone, ember of rebellion was fanned to a vivid flame somewhere deep within Emma. She did not like being told what to do, not even by Claire. Stung, she retaliated with,

"And you Claire, no more blokes, eh? This should cut both ways. If I'm to see no one else, I will expect the same from you."

Claire saw straight away that she had made a mistake in trying to push Emma at this crucial stage. Despite getting what she wanted, Emma was borderline hostile. Unwilling to trust Claire, Emma was not yet ready to forgive and forget. Claire was forced to use her skills as a mediator to placate her. Once placated, and using more of her training, Claire moved to establish (with Emma's full participation and agreement, as set out in the textbook) the ground rules of their fledgling relationship. They soon agreed on the option favoured by Claire. Absolute emotional and physical fidelity. Claire gave Emma a dazzling smile, saying,

"You won't believe how I will love you, Emma. Life will be so good, just you and me."

Emma did not doubt it.

"I know it will," she smiled, her Christmas wish granted.

"This *is* the usual way of doing things," pointed out Claire. "One usually commits to one person at a time."

"I know," sighed Emma. "I'm really happy. Honestly I am. It's just that I've never left anyone before. That's all. I don't really know how it's done. But people do it all the time, it can't be so difficult. I'll figure it out. I've wanted you for so long, Claire, I'd give away a kidney if it meant getting you."

Now that the payphone in the hallway no longer served her needs, Emma became the last person in the Western world to own a mobile phone. Battery life was pushed to the limit as Birmingham's newest lesbian couple bridged working week separation with romantic calls, voicemail, pictures and near non-stop text messaging.

Through all of the excitement and self congratulation, a niggles of disquiet persisted deep within Emma's psyche. She was not entirely at ease, trading her friendship with Kate for her new love. It had been a low thing to do, she thought. But fantasizing about Claire while making love with Kate had also been low. There was also something shameful in yielding to the demands of another person, however much adored. Emma began to see herself in a far from complimentary light. Her

honour was tarnished by her dismissal of Kate, whose only failing lay in not being Claire. Yet despite her disquiet, Emma never felt sufficiently strongly to challenge the new order, never voicing her misgivings, either to Claire or to Kate. She nimbly sidestepped feelings of unease in favour of the unfettered enjoyment of some extraordinary good fortune.

Emma put off writing her goodbye note to Kate, hoping for inspiration. None came. Eventually disciplining herself just to get it done, she produced draft after draft until finally settling on the finished article. "A shabby document," she admonished herself despondently, sealing it into an envelope. It dropped through Kate's letterbox two hours after she arrived at the airport, meeting her team mates for their martial arts tour of Denmark. Kate read the note when she got home on Sunday night.

"Dear Kate,

I am writing to say that I am unable to continue seeing you. I have begun a relationship with someone who has been on my mind for some time. Someone I had thought was straight.

Thank you for the fun times we had together, and I wish you well for the future.

Emma."

Kate put the gift she had brought back for Emma into a drawer. Later in the week, when Aneesha asked Kate if she and Emma were doing anything special on Saturday, Kate answered simply,

"We shan't be doing that any more."

Precisely why, Kate kept to herself.

She continued to socialize with Jill and Wendy, going to pubs and clubs every now and then. The two women were appalled at Emma's treatment of her, but Kate shrugged, saying that they had not been married. Emma was free to do as she pleased. Occasionally Kate's evening out evolved into a meaningful one night stand. Life went on, though Kate's feelings about any of it were never clear, not even to her friends.

18

You Believe Her?

"Alright, Emma? Go on through... drink?"

"Beer please, Pete."

Pete brought in two beers. After giving a bottle to Emma, he set about evicting toys and magazines from the threadbare old sofa.

"Rosie and Simone are at Simone's mum's," he explained, completing his excavations. "Jerome's taking everyone up the multiplex after lunch."

"You didn't feel like going?" asked Emma.

"Nah, her family are all right, but we don't have much in common, so we don't have that much to say to one another. I've helped to perpetuate a pretty formidable female line, but I know they think Simone could have done better for herself than a broken down old crock like me. I know I

would in their place. Y'know I was in bed for a fortnight with bronchitis a while back. I thought I was coughing my last."

"I didn't know," said Emma. "It's all that hanging around in subways. Busking's a summer sport."

"Too true it is," agreed Pete, making a joint, light on tobacco because Emma wasn't keen on tobacco. He pushed a cigarette lighter towards her and she lit it for them. Passing it back and forth across the coffee table, they savoured it in silence.

"I never smoke in front of Rosie," said Pete thoughtfully, the heat from the stumpy joint threatening to singe his fingers. "She's still at an age where she adores her daddy. How long does that last do you think?"

"Beats me," replied Emma sombrely. "I always adored my dad. I was in an adult cinema in London the day he died. I was trying to persuade a woman I barely knew to invite me back to her place. She lived above a bar in Earl's Court. Unfortunately I did go back with her. There was her boyfriend sat watching TV in the living room. So down I went to the tube for another long ride back across the city. What a stupid way to spend the last day of someone's life," she finished bitterly.

"You weren't to know," Pete said softly.

"No," said Emma, despondently, "I could still have done something better."

Pete made another joint while Emma sat lost in thought.

"What are you up to now, Em?" he asked.

"The same," she replied, brought back with a start. "Working at the university, still living in the same place. Seeing Claire."

"Claire... ? Which one is Claire? Is she the one you were sleeping with, or the one doing your head in?"

"The latter," said Emma ruefully. "It was emotionally a bit fraught for a while after we first met, but everything worked out beautifully in the end."

"Fraught?" repeated Pete, passing her the newly made joint. "Is that some kind of code for she was straight and had a boyfriend?"

"Yes, she did have a boyfriend, but she got rid of him quite some time ago. Long before we got together."

Pete took this in, pulling on his beer for inspiration.

"And now she's gay?" he asked, taking possession of the joint.

"Apparently."

"And you believe her?"

"I have to, don't I?" Emma challenged. "No, I think she is gay, just slow on the uptake. I'll tell you what though Pete, it would really knock me for six if she ever went back to sleeping with men."

"That bad, huh?" asked Pete.

"Yeah, really."

"Mind you," he continued, "you were never that happy around bisexual women, were you, Em? What was that theory you had? About a person's sexuality being their best guess at the time?"

"That's right. I wish I'd had a coin of the realm for every time a person who thought they were straight ended up gay, or said they were gay then ended up straight. It's such a fundamental thing, I don't know why it should cause so much confusion, but it does. Claire swears that she is gay. Says she can't explain the lost decades. I just have to trust her."

"Does this theory extend to you," Pete asked, "or are you somehow exempt?"

"It's my theory, of course it doesn't apply to me," smiled Emma. "I for one, possibly the only one, know which side my bread is buttered. Let's face it, women can be so beautiful and so appealing. I'm amazed there are any heterosexual women left, poor souls, having to put up with men."

"I won't argue with you," said Pete, "I think women are wonderful. With you not liking Black Sabbath, women are about the only thing you and me can agree on. How has Claire being with you gone down with her friends and family?"

"It hasn't," she answered. "She won't tell them. Says it's nothing to do with them. She's there today as a matter of fact. Sunday lunch and all the trimmings. She keeps me well away from them."

Pete was looking very relaxed, his stockinged feet on the arm of the sofa. Emma wasn't sure whether he was awake or sleeping. The joint had gone out, a symptom of minimal tobacco. She removed it from his inert fingers, relighting what remained.

Pete, reanimated after a period of gentle reflection or more likely, sleep, asked,

"What about the other one? What's-her-name?"

"Kate."

"How does she fit in to all of this?"

Emma hesitated.

"She's... not included."

"She ditched you?" asked Pete, seeing how it must have been.

"No... the other way round," admitted Emma. "I stopped seeing her. Claire wanted it that way. Claire's an all or nothing kind of girl, but it's what I want too nowadays. That sleeping around stuff, it never did me any good. When I was here at Christmas and we toasted one hundred and four good things for the coming year, that was the hundred and fifth wish. The one I kept to myself because I couldn't see how it might possibly come true."

Pete gave this some thought.

"I remember the summer I thought I was gonna have to get you a laptop to keep track of your love life," he said. "Never thought I'd hear you say you'd given anyone the old heave-ho."

"Yes, it did rankle some. I wasn't altogether happy about it. Kate was a good person. She was calm and easy to get along with."

"Then why wasn't that enough for you?" asked Pete. "Good, calm, easy to get along with, most people would give an arm to have that."

"But Claire is something else, Pete. She's absolutely gorgeous. There really was no contest. How could there be, when you're suddenly offered something you've yearned for your whole life?" Emma sighed. "It's done now."

"I bet Kate came after you with a machete, pulling a trick like that," said Pete. "Simone would have my testicles for earrings if I tried that one on her."

Emma laughed,

"I don't think that would be her style. Kate doesn't do knee jerk. She's too composed. It's different for you anyway. You can't go with anyone else, you're practically a married man. You've got responsibilities. Kate is probably enjoying her weekends perfectly well without me."

"Sounds like you've had a personality transplant. You've been brought to heel by this Claire. Go on, admit it. Your tom-cating days are over for good."

"That's not fair!" protested Emma. "I've slept with two people in the last twelve months. Who in Great Britain hasn't done that, I'd like to know?"

Pete sheepishly raised a hand, causing Emma to mime dangly earrings.

19

Lady Lovelace

Relaxing in the afternoon after making love, Claire returned to a favourite topic when she asked,

"What did you think, the first time we kissed?"

"I didn't know what to think," replied Emma. "I was staggered, stunned, any other word that means you can't believe what is happening to you. It was incredible. Knock me down with a feather, you'd had your dinner, then just started molesting me. It was textured soya protein not rhinoceros horn. It was inconceivable that this should be happening. I know I just stood there like a dummy. It took a minute for it to sink in. Thing was, I'd always thought of you in terms of Ian. You know, Ian's girlfriend, or Ian's ex-girlfriend. Then wham! There she was, Ian's former girlfriend, a sweaty paw on my breast, gripped in a frenzy of uncontrollable desire."

"I'm sorry you didn't think of me as a person in my own right," teased Claire, idly stroking Emma's arm.

"It was easier for me that way," Emma replied, snuggling happily into Claire's shoulder. "My friend, but someone else's girlfriend. Desired but unattainable. Of course I'd wanted you from the beginning, but it was like wanting world peace or an end to poverty. I never seriously thought that it would happen. Could happen. You were straight, remember? Then when we did kiss, and you took off like a frightened greyhound, I hoped it wasn't the end, but as time went by I thought that it probably was."

Claire smiled.

"I can't believe how good it feels to hold you," she said contentedly. "You're so light and soft and lovely. It's absolutely natural to love you. How did it take me so long to realize what I wanted? Why I was never really happy with the men I went out with. It never felt quite right, yet for years I kept trying. For years. I break out in a big grin whenever I think of you at work. I'll end up sectioned for being unreasonably happy around the office."

Emma smiled, brushing Claire's cheek with the backs of her fingers.

"I want to know what I did so right, to end up getting you. You're a gift, nothing less."

Sitting up, she bent forward, smiling into Claire's deep blue eyes. Claire kissed her playfully on the tip of her nose. While they were getting dressed later, Claire asked Emma what she thought was the worst thing that could possibly happen between them. Emma knew it would be Claire going back to men, but instead she said something gallant about not being able to imagine anything ever coming between them to spoil their happiness.

When Claire and Emma went nightclubbing, Emma was delighted to see that her lover was the sexiest woman there, and by a considerable degree. She was amused too, when Claire indulged in a little playful flirting with women from a nearby table. They were confused, seeing two women, apparently a couple, yet who were also both wearing skirts. They were still confused four hours later, when Claire and her sweetheart left hand in hand for Claire's flat. Claire liked gay clubs, and wondered why she never thought to go to any when she was straight.

Emma was ecstatic in her relationship with Claire. She was by far the most attractive woman Emma had ever known, much less slept with.

Emma's mind was a whirl with wonder at her amazing good luck. She had hit the jackpot without ever realizing there was a game to be played.

Away from the pubs and clubs Claire was less at ease, and the list of those she trusted with the changes in her life was very short and select. So short and so select, Emma offered to get her a "Nobody knows I'm a lesbian" tee shirt to go to work in. Their romance was in its early days, yet Claire's secretiveness over her new lifestyle was an issue, at least as far as Emma was concerned. Outwardly it was treated as a joke between them, though privately Emma remained troubled. Claire was unmoved. She did not see why she should be compelled to behave in any particular way, simply because this time around her lover was a woman.

Claire threw herself wholeheartedly into her first lesbian affair, adding to Emma's already overflowing happiness. In bed too, Claire seemed to be making up for lost time, missing no opportunity to expand and refine their lovemaking repertoire.

"Emma," she asked, "is there anything you would like to do, or think you might like to do in bed, that we don't do already?"

Emma was taken a little off guard by the question, asked as it was in the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery shop, where she had been flipping through a picture book on 19th Century Pre-Raphaelite art.

"Since you ask," she said, drawing close to Claire and taking her arm, "there might be a few things. Got a notepad?"

Claire looked up from her notepad, then ran through the list for Emma, sitting spellbound on the far side of the dining room table.

"So that's some new lingerie, always guaranteed to make a girl feel good. Assorted sex toys of the battery operated variety, hands free whenever possible. Oh, and a snazzy little camcorder."

"With stand," suggested Emma.

"With stand," repeated Claire, adding to the list.

"And costumes," said Emma, "You would look ravishing dressed as a Victorian parlour maid. Don't forget to bob and curtsy, and call me Ma'am."

Claire laughed.

"And who are you, Emma?"

"Lady Lovelace. Mysterious, rich young mistress of the manor, who surprisingly, has turned down several very good offers of marriage, preferring to spend her days in the company of her cat Sir Percy and a few close women friends."

"Let me guess," said Claire, who had grown accustomed to the motifs running through Emma's stories. "Beautiful, talented, rich young women friends, with a tender concern for Lady Lovelace?"

"Very tender," agreed Emma.

"I know a costume hire shop," said Claire, "I'll call in on my way home one day next week to have a look. Now is there anything else I can do for your gratification and entertainment, Emma?"

"Weeeell," said Emma, doubtfully, "there is something."

"Speak," commanded Claire, expansively, "I have plenty of paper."

"Weeeell," said Emma again, "it's like this... That is to say... we could... if you like, that is... I'm only making a suggestion, you understand. Ever thought about... erm."

"Come now, Lady Lovelace, it is not like you to be reticent in asking for what you want."

"No it's not," agreed her Ladyship, "but I'm not sure how you might view this gem of creative thinking."

Claire waited with studied patience. When Emma still did not elaborate on said gem of creative thinking, Claire lost patience.

"Let's hear your deepest, wickedest desire," she urged. "The toys and the play-acting, the movie camera and the lingerie; this is all regular stuff. Tell me what you really want to do. I'll tell you if I'm minx enough to do it with you."

Emma hesitated so long Claire wondered if she would ever get a reply.

"Well, what I'd like to do," said Emma cautiously, yet to be convinced of Claire's openness. She began again. "What I'd really like to do, since you ask... is... is. Watch while a sexy looking woman makes love to you." There, she had said it. In a bit of a rush perhaps, but still intelligible. Emma waited uncertainly as Claire considered.

"And this other woman," said Claire thoughtfully, "would you like to watch while I made love to her?"

"Oh yes," replied Emma warmly, "I'd like that very much."

Claire put down her pen, staring hard at Emma.

"So would I," she said.

"You would?" Emma said, surprised. "What about this thing about us having no other lovers?"

"That's right," said Claire, "I don't want us having affairs with other people. But this would be different. We would choose the woman together and enjoy the experience together. It would broaden the scope of our relationship, allowing us to explore a voyeuristic streak I think we both share."

"Oh," said Emma, enlightened, "what you meant was we shouldn't do any private adventuring, I see. But collectively, it's OK."

"I wouldn't have put it quite that way myself, Emma, but I suppose that is what it amounts to. Like our other schemes for enhancing playtime, I think it would be very exciting to have another woman in bed with us."

"Is that why you objected to Kate, Claire? Because we didn't choose her together? I could have asked her if - "

"I didn't want to sleep with Kate," cut in Claire, "but this idea, I like. What do we do now - go to more pubs and clubs?"

Emma shook her head.

"No, that would take for ever. Magazines and newspapers. We'll go through the personal columns -"

"Advertisements!" cried Claire, horrified. "You want us to reply to adverts? Oh Emma, no. Isn't that all rather tacky and sleazy?"

"Yes it is, but it is also eminently practical. Just think how many dry white wines you're going to have to sip, waiting to run into a woman or women, that might want to do this with us."

"Women?" queried Claire.

"Yes, couples quite often look for other couples. Face it, darling, we're a minority to start off with. What we have in mind is a minority interest within that small group. Probability just isn't on our side. We need to be pragmatic if we genuinely want to do this."

"Yes, I can see that now," said Claire, thinking and reaching a decision in rapid succession. "Well, I vote we do it. Phone or letter?"

"Letter," replied Emma. "We can come up with a general reply, customize it a bit so that it looks individual, then print off whatever we need when the time comes."

Claire added “Magazines/papers – personal ads” to her list, then sat back happy. Her eyes sparkled: a kitten contemplating cream.

20

Applied Vulcan Philosophy

"Sorry I'm late," said Jessica, dropping heavily into a chair at Gretta's Austrian Patisserie. "James has had two bereavements and an unplanned pregnancy. It plays havoc with your schedule."

She pulled off her hat, trying ineffectually to tame her hair in the expanse of faux antique mirror. Giving up, she turned to Claire and demanded,

"OK, Claire, it's been a nightmare getting here, now spill the beans. What's new your side of the ring road? Make it good now, I'm in no mood for second rate tittle-tattle."

"Well, there's a plan for a new supermarket down by the football stadium, and the swimming baths are to undergo a major refit. Oh, and they're still hunting the Night Bus Mugger."

"Yes, very amusing," said Jessica. "Now tell me something I won't read in the evening paper. How's the lovely Emma, for instance?"

"Still lovely," said Claire, skittishly.

"Behave will you," Jessica said, rubbing her temples, "I can't stand difficult kids at the best of times, and definitely not today."

"Sorry, Jessica. But really, it's a revelation. Finally I've found someone with whom I can be truly happy."

Claire beamed at Jessica.

"I'm so pleased for you," Jessica replied encouragingly. "Has she met your folks yet?"

"No. I don't see the point of it," Claire replied, her smile fading fast. "She's offered for us to go down to Oxfordshire to visit her mum and brother, but I don't see much point in that either. We are having a relationship. It's private. I'm not looking for any kind of communal blessing or recognition. I won't behave as though there has been a seismic upheaval in my life, just because there's been one in my heart. Let's not make this a drama."

Claire looked defiantly at her friend, daring her to argue.

"How is your library coming along?" Jessica asked in a characteristically rapid change of subject. Claire looked at her blankly.

"Last time I saw you, you were laying siege to Waterstone's, buying up all the lesbian fiction you could get your hands on."

"Oh, I remember," recalled Claire. "Well, I ploughed my way through some pretty poor and miserable stuff. There is quality to be had, sensitive love stories and cleverly plotted mysteries. But mostly it is dismal, turgid biography or absurd detective novels. I'll keep the better ones, but I have a carrier bag of barely used books to drop into a charity shop when I can find the time."

"I'll take them," offered Jessica. "They can go in the church fete in July."

"Sure, whatever," replied Claire, little interested in a pile of books which had failed dismally to either entertain or educate. Claire was an avid reader when she found the time. She had read every item in an extensive and wide ranging collection, but never kept anything she would not consider reading again.

"Does Emma read them?" Jessica asked.

"She glances at them, but only reads the ones I recommend to her, and there are precious few of those. Plus we don't always agree on what is worth reading. Emma likes nineteenth century novels. She reads them for the charming young maidens with their confidential friend on whose bosom they will always throw themselves in times of tribulation."

"Indeed?" smiled Jessica.

"Oh yes, she reads them forensically, dissecting them for lesbian overtones, picking up on tiny hints and nuances. I can't read like that, if someone wants to tell me something, let them tell me. But Emma is different. She can come over as a bit of a ladette on occasion, but really she is very sensitive. Too sensitive sometimes. She can be as delicate and easily hurt as anyone else."

"She doesn't make things easy for herself, does she?" asked Jessica.

"No, Emma spends quite a lot of her life swimming against the current."

"Is there any point reading nineteenth century novels for their lesbian content?" Jessica asked. "Don't all the heroines play piano and draw, teach school for a while and then get married?"

"Emma is eternally disappointed with the behaviour of these females," Claire answered, fondly. "She has to take a break from them at regular intervals, detoxing after an overdose of earnestness and self-sacrifice. She admits that these books don't really hold much for her, but she says that they are well written and enduring. If she can't have a satisfying gay storyline, she will settle for quality writing instead."

Jessica smiled dutifully, then looked Claire in the eye.

"I have been concerned for you, Claire. Straight to gay with never a backward glance. When you first told me, you put it something like a mission statement. "Accepting all aspects of your personality. Exploring who you really are," blah, blah, blah. But I know you too well. What happens when you get bored? When you feel like something with big feet and excess body hair again? What about the lovely Emma then?"

"Oh Jess, there's no need to worry. I was slow to understand what was dawning in me. Blind doesn't even begin to cover it, but now that I realize who and what I am, there *is* no going back. This is the authentic me, forget what went before. Loving Emma is the most marvellous thing I've ever experienced. I cherish and adore her, she's perfectly safe."

"I am glad," said Jessica, relieved to know Emma was not simply the passing fancy of her often impetuous friend.

"I do care about you, Claire. I don't want the whole thing ending in tears and unhappiness. Not for either of you."

Claire reached across the table to squeeze Jessica's hand.

"You won't," she said firmly. "It's time you met Emma, Jessica. You need to see why I love her and could never do anything to hurt her."

Before leaving the patisserie, Claire and Jessica made arrangements to meet the following weekend for dinner at a pizzeria in the city centre. Emma was pleased when she heard, eager to meet a friend of Claire's at last.

The night of the meal rolled round in due course. Once seated, they studied the menu. After much debate they plumped for the large three-way pizza. Vegetarian for Emma, omnivorous for Claire. Jessica caused consternation in the kitchen when she ordered her third without tomato.

"They bring me out in hives," she told the waiter.

As their starters were cleared away, the conversation turned to Emma's week at work.

"Not bad," she said. "Tuesday there was a notice on the board advertising for people to get involved in making banners and costumes for Birmingham Pride. So I went to the meeting and came away with a job. There's not much of a budget. Enough for printing a few leaflets, but that's about all. I've spent the week sketching cheap costumes like my life depended on it."

"When is the parade?" asked Jessica.

"The end of next month. We're meeting again on Monday to select the designs we'll turn into costumes."

"Will you be wearing one?" Jessica enquired.

"Not me," laughed Emma. "I couldn't dance along the street for six miles wearing stilettos. I leave that to the guys."

"More men in frocks than a Church of England Synod," joked Jessica.

Emma smiled. She liked Jessica.

"What's it like being gay nowadays?" Jessica asked.

"Wonderful" replied Emma, smiling over at Claire, who blushed becomingly. "No, really, it's getting better, bit by bit," Emma became serious. "Though it has often taken a trip to the European Court to bring about change. That's one of the reasons I'll be on the march. In appreciation of the people who put their heads above the parapet and drew fire, allowing the likes of me an easier ride."

"Campaigning for fairer employment law, that kind of thing?" asked Jessica.

Emma nodded.

"Employment, pension rights, next of kin, tenancy law. They've all had to be fought out, some are still on-going. It's right to take to the streets one weekend a year. Have some fun, be a little offensive maybe... well, because we can."

"Phew," said Jessica, "a political firebrand."

"Not me," denied Emma. "In fact quite the opposite. My usual contribution is a modest amount to the Pink Economy. Across the bar for the most part. I'm something of a coward. I choose a quiet life whenever I can. I seldom stand up to be counted."

"A university must be a fairly enlightened place to work," ventured Jessica. "I mean, better than the armed forces or the Anglican Church, for instance?"

"I used to think so," replied Emma, "until this afternoon. The powers that be are considering letting some pond life play a gig at the university. Called Scuzzball Hip Daddy or something. Real name probably Colin or Nigel. Anyway, this charmer is known for his homophobic lyrics, not to mention incitement to bodily violence against gays. If it is allowed, it will be on free speech grounds. His right to spout moronic, anti social drivel, coupled with the right of other morons to join in the chorus."

"How many people work or study at the university?" Jessica asked.

"Thousands. Heaps of part-time staff and students as well as the full-timers. I don't know the exact number, but it's a big operation."

"Then what they need," said Jessica, thoughtfully, "is a little Applied Vulcan Philosophy. 'The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few.' The many are the gay staff and students and their right not to be threatened or assaulted. The few is one person's right to an audience for his ignorance and hatred. The choice should be obvious, even to a liberal academic."

"Well, let's hope the Head of the Vulcan Philosophy Department turns up to put a stop to it," said Emma. "But at least it's a point to be debated nowadays. Whether it is OK to beat gays to a pulp. Or incite murder. But having said how bad it can get, unless someone *does* come after me with a baseball bat, I would definitely say that the tide has turned. Most fair minded people are against discrimination and second-class citizenship for gays. There is more live and let live than there used to be. Even in my lifetime I've seen changes, with positive steps being made towards equality."

"You are right, of course," said Jessica, "things have been changing for a long time now. 'Take Claire's works' do at the Meadows Country Club next week. Staff and partners. In the 1970's that meant married couples, plus the occasional pair living together. Living in sin it was known as back then. Even in the 80s, it would have been a pretty courageous member of staff who brought their same sex partner to the office party. But nowadays... who cares?"

"Err," said Emma, "which works' do are we talking about?"

Claire gave Jessica a pained look and said nothing.

"Are you angry with me?" asked Claire, sitting Emma on the sofa and taking both her hands. "You hardly said a word on the way home."

"Not angry," murmured Emma, "disappointed."

"You must see how it is for me," Claire pleaded. "These people knew Ian. They know I've broken up with him. If I turn up with you on Friday, I'll disappear beneath an avalanche of gossip. My authority will be completely undermined. Can you see me trying to run a seminar in effective leadership techniques, knowing all the time those degenerates are imagining us in bed together? We can go to Meadows. We can stay a whole weekend, not just one night. We can have a lovely time there. Some other time. But please don't ask to come next Friday. It's a director's retirement; I barely know the man myself. I'm not like you, Emma, I can't bounce into a place, my sexuality blazing like a six-gun, and anyone who objects you simply write off as an imbecile. I'm sure there are professions where a person's sexuality could make a difference to their work. Artists or writers maybe. But not in most and certainly not in mine. We make aircraft control systems. My life and my work are separate entities. There's no earthly reason why one should spill over into the other. Try to understand."

Claire came to a stop, her heart thumping in her chest. The room fell silent except for the pounding of Claire's heart, which must surely have been audible on the roof. Emma reached for Claire's hand, kissing her fingers solemnly before replying.

"I do understand your situation, Claire, and in an ideal world your sexuality would be nobody's business but your own. This is not an ideal world. We don't have equal status with heterosexuals despite a few recent gains. When you start from so low a base, parity can be a long time coming. We're attacked by bigots and fundamentalists on all sides. It's not easy. You've joined the ranks of a tiny minority, but Claire, if you start lying now, you will have to keep on lying, avoiding and deflecting. There'll be no end to it. Next year you will still be lying. Another office party, you still pretending to be single. And "Oh, who's this woman you go on holiday with, Claire?" "No one, just a friend." You're a career-minded person who likes to behave professionally at work. But at what cost to your professional pride is ten or twenty years of lies and cover-up? If you really can't be honest where you are, then darling, think about finding another job. Arrive there as a gay woman. I don't mean badges and tee shirts or any of that nonsense. Try it. With a little low key honesty you might find you don't have to sacrifice your integrity for your career. Think. Would you honestly want to work with people who would not accept you if they knew you as you really are? Is this how you want to live the rest of your life?"

Her monologue concluded, Emma looked anxiously into the face of her lover. Claire returned her gaze with a grim half-smile.

"I'll think about it," she said.

Claire closed the lid on her computer as soon as the phone began to ring. She had been reviewing recruitment data prepared for her by Human Resources, though she was not displeased at the interruption, preferring to limit the amount of work she did at home. After all, she drew only one salary, theoretically for thirty-five hours' work a week. Besides, she always had time for Jessica.

"Hello, Jessica. Good to hear from you. How are you?"

"I'm fine, thanks. Listen, this is the first chance I've had to call and say sorry about Friday night. I messed it up, didn't I? Emma deflated just like the air had been let out of her. Did it cause a row when you got home?"

"No, Jess, it was all right. In the end it was, anyway. Emma doesn't argue, she agrees with you, then systematically points out all the reasons why you're wrong. It's an effective technique, I use it myself. She thinks I should find another job, or I'll be lying and deceiving at work for the duration of my career with Weller's."

"I thought you were very happy in you job." said Jessica.

"I love my job, but Emma thinks that I should change employer. Let it be known from the outset that I'm gay. That way I'll have an easier time of things."

"I didn't realize that you were having a hard time of things."

"Well, take this event at the Meadows. I've let everyone I work with believe that I'm going alone because I'm no longer with Ian. But the truth is, I'm going alone because I don't have the courage to take Emma with me. I have colleagues sympathizing with me, hoping that I don't pine my life away over Ian. Every day, some misguided fool expresses the hope that I will soon have a new man in my life. I thought I could handle the changes in my life by carrying on as though nothing was different. Well, everything is different, I see that now. Emma's right, but dammit Jessica, I'm right too. Why is it that my private life isn't private any more?"

"It never was," said Jessica, "it's simply that in the past yours was pretty much like everyone else's. Talking about partners and spouses is so much part of background office babble that nobody notices they're talking about their private lives. They'd notice now though, Claire."

"I know. That's why Emma thinks that maybe I should start afresh at a new place. "Arrive as a gay woman." I'm confused, Jessica. I like my job, but I'm becoming isolated from my colleagues. Every day I encourage them to believe things which aren't true. My life is so compartmentalized nowadays I might as well be two people. Meanwhile in my other life, my girlfriend thinks I'm ashamed of her, and who could blame her?"

"I doubt she feels that," said Jessica, "she appears deeply fond of you."

"Yes, she is. I'm winding myself up here, Jess. Emma was very patient and caring, leading me gently by the hand to recognize realities. To face up to a difficult but inescapable choice. You did me a favour, mentioning the Meadows, really you did."

"There must be another way," Jessica said, thinking through Claire's predicament. "A way in which you can stay at Weller's but feel less isolated. Is there anyone at work who could be your ally? Who do you work most closely with?"

"That would be Sarah, my PA."

"Could she be your friend, ally, confidante?"

"It's possible," replied Claire, "I do feel rather bottled up a lot of the time nowadays. I'll try sounding her out when the opportunity arises. Thanks Jessica, you might have hit on something there."

21

Left with My Girlfriend

Ian spotted Nick outside in the garden. He was sitting on the grass, his back to a tumbledown shed. Ian made himself a cup of tea, then went outside to find out what he was up to.

"Right, Nick?"

"Yeah, yourself?"

"Can't complain."

Nick was shirtless, squinting into the brittle April sunshine.

"Are you warm enough like that?" Ian asked, mildly concerned for Nick's welfare.

Nick replied through gritted teeth.

"It's not too bad if you can stay out of the wind. I reckon that if I can put down the basis of a tan now, I'll be nicely primed and undercoated for when the weather picks up."

Ian sat down on the rickety garden bench, launching his teabag into a nearby bed of nettles.

"Is tanning in again?" he asked, critically inspecting the back of his own pallid wrist.

"Dunno if it is," answered Nick, "but being pale and interesting never got me anywhere. I see you did all right for yourself though, after Claire I mean. Your Michelle seems a nice girl."

"She is," agreed Ian.

"You don't mind me mentioning Claire, do you? I should've asked," said Nick anxiously, the junior partner to the conversation.

"No, I don't mind, Nick. Water under the bridge. Mind you, the whole thing with Claire came as a hell of a shock. One day I'm thinking maybe I'd marry her, the next she's giving me the "I don't think we're really suited" routine. That was some New Year's present, I can tell you."

"I bet," agreed Nick. "When did you meet this Michelle then, Ian?"

"February. Remember that week of heavy rain? Well, her basement flooded, so we went round to pump it out for her. I went back later to see if there was any structural damage, once it began to dry out. Then I went back three more times to make sure. See if there was anything else in need of expert inspection."

Nick gave his man-of-the-world laugh. Ian grinned.

"Michelle's basement OK?" Nick asked.

"I'll tell you when you're old enough to know," promised Ian, who drank more tea before adding,

"She doesn't like coming here, you know."

"No?" asked Nick, feigning astonishment. "I think the place has a certain faded charm myself. Chipped paintwork and month old cooking smells, right enough, but this is a blokes' place, and this is how we blokes like to live. We band of heroic brothers, slowly sinking under the junk mail of people who haven't lived here in years. This is real life, raw and uncompromising. Inner city chic for the third millennium."

"Can't say Michelle sees it that way," said Ian. "She wants us to go and see the new flats going up at the back of the hypermarket. Lifestyle

apartments these flats are called. I know what kind of lifestyle. A lifetime of overtime, trying to get it paid off, that's what kind of lifestyle."

"They're not finished," pointed out Nick.

"The show flat is. She wants to go over on Sunday to see it," Ian said, without enthusiasm. "I'll give Claire her due, she never objected to me living with a load of whingeing student low life."

"I never knew you cared," said Nick, "I'm touched."

Ian drank another mouthful of tea.

"I saw her the other day," he said.

"Michelle?" asked Nick.

"Claire. You'll never guess who she was with."

Nick shrugged.

"Emma."

Nick was none the wiser.

"Emma," insisted Ian. "The skinny dyke with the daft accent. Turned up here just before Christmas."

Enlightened, Nick said

"Oh yeah, I remember. Left all of a sudden."

"Yeah, well, it looks like she left with my girlfriend. When I saw them, they were holding hands."

Nick's eyes boggled.

"Where?"

"In the Bull Ring, last Saturday."

"Hell, Ian. Emma and Claire... together?" Nick asked breathlessly.

"Down, boy," ordered Ian. "That's how it looked to me. Holding hands in the shopping centre."

"What did you say to them?" asked Nick.

"Nothing. I didn't get a chance to. They were on the next level down, heading for the exit. Claire looked tense though."

"I'm not surprised," spluttered Nick. "Probably scared that someone was going to say something or have a go at them. It can be a rough place, the Bull Ring on a Saturday. A real bear pit."

"I got to thinking," Ian went on pensively, "That was close, Ian my boy. Imagine being married to a lesbian."

Nick could not, but decided the concept deserved further attention later.

"No wonder she didn't think we were suited, if what she really wanted was a woman. I mean, what man would be?"

"Looks like you had a lucky escape there, mate," sympathized Nick. "Mind you, I don't think she left here with Claire. Emma was gone before Christmas, but Claire sent a letter here for her. I saw the return address. I wondered at the time if it might be your Claire. She must not have known she'd gone, or why send it here? I didn't think anything of it at the time. When Emma got in touch for her mail, I gave her the one from Claire along with the other stuff. I wouldn't've done it if I'd known what was going to happen. Y'know, to you and Claire. Sorry about that."

"It wasn't your fault. Claire was determined to know that little trollop. I could do nothing to stop her. Always banging on about how Emma was different to other people she knew. Y'know, I never suspected a thing. Not about Claire. If she'd tried it, I never would have expected her to like it. She loved the way we did it. Couldn't get enough. But I always knew, that Emma was trouble."

"It must be a funny thing," mused Nick, "getting into what, your late twenties? Then discovering you're gay. Suddenly your whole world is different to how you thought it was. Or maybe it isn't sudden but gradual?"

"Beats me," Ian replied bitterly. "She never thought to tell me about a little thing like preferring women. I wonder if that was one of the midweek activities that were supposed to keep us interesting for one another of a weekend?"

Nick was musing again.

"It's like Gulliver waking up in Lilliput. Or Alice following the White Rabbit down into Wonderland. It's Kafkaesque, innit? A surreal parody of their previous lives. Is it a parody or is it a complete dissociation of what went before – discuss. Then there's Charlton Heston, crash landing his spaceship on Earth, only to find that the people in charge are talking apes."

Ian looked down at Nick in disgust.

"You do come out with some rubbish, Nick. Did you talk this much tripe before you went to university?"

"Possibly," conceded Nick, "talking rubbish runs in our family. It's a tradition. Me uncle, he can talk rubbish for hours without drawing breath, and that's before he's had a drink."

"Far be it for me to get in the way of tradition," Ian said drily, "but I'd be violently aggrieved if I thought my taxes were subsidizing your sham of an education."

Nick grinned.

"I'll recap the reservation for you, Madam. It's for one double room with balcony and luxury spa, on Friday twenty-fifth and Saturday twenty-sixth of April. To be charged to your Visa credit card. You are Miss C Mortimer. The name of the second guest please. Title, initial and surname."

"Miss. E. Jarvis," replied Claire, blushing scarlet.

There was an infinitesimal pause.

"Thank you, Miss Mortimer. We look forward to welcoming you to the Meadows Country Club Hotel. We hope you have a pleasant stay. Goodbye."

Claire switched off the phone, balancing it on the arm of her chair. She had expected to feel joyful or triumphant at having made the booking, but for the most part, she felt merely tired. With this stay at the luxurious Meadows Hotel Claire hoped to pacify Emma for missing out on the retirement celebration, though she knew the issue ran deeper than a few missed canapés. She picked up the phone again and dialed.

"Hi, Jessica," said Claire, when she got through. "It's done, Friday and Saturday, like we discussed. There was no problem."

"Good for you, girl," replied Jessica. "I told you they're far too expensive to be fazed by two women in a double room. You did book a double, didn't you?"

"Of course I did. That was the whole point. A little present for Emma. I still feel bad refusing to let her come with me last week."

"Well I hope you have a lovely time."

"Jess?"

"Yes, Pet?"

"I saw Ian a few days ago. In the Bull Ring. I was out shopping with Emma. We'd just come out of Blue Planet Books, and there he was, leaning over the handrail on the floor above. I grabbed Emma, dragged her outside before he could cause a scene. She must have thought that I was utterly desperate to get to Selfridge's."

"He's not stalking you, is he?" asked Jessica.

"Oh no, I don't even think he saw us. Recently though, I have been trying to be more open with Emma when we're out in public. But absolutely the last thing I want is to go walking hand in hand into my old boyfriend. It would not be pretty."

22

Make a Pornographer Blush

Rebecca, Claire's older sister by two years, and her husband Tony were spending the evening at Claire's. After finishing dinner, Tony stole away quietly to watch TV in the living room. The women lingered in the dining room with a bottle of coffee liqueur.

"Out with it Claire, what's this thing you want to tell me so urgently?"

"Well, it's very personal," said Claire, glancing nervously towards the living room.

"Oh, don't worry about Tony," said Rebecca, dismissively. "He's watching American College Basketball. You could amputate a leg and Tony would never notice. He's got into watching golf recently. Now, I can just about see the point of playing golf, but watching it?"

"Good television spoiled?" asked Claire.

Rebecca nodded.

"Anyway, Tony wouldn't be interested in women's gossip. Tell you what, I'll trade you my news for yours."

"OK," said Claire, "you first."

"Right. Well, Tony and I are hoping to start a family by the end of the summer. Ideally we'd aim for a Gemini, there's a chance it should get on well with both of us. We need to time conception carefully, a Cancerian baby would be disastrous, though we could muddle along if it came a little later and was a Leo. It isn't as though Tony is a typical Virgo."

"That's great!" exclaimed Claire. "A lovely little niece or nephew to spoil. Do you have a preference?"

"Tony wants a son and I want a daughter. One of us is going to be over the moon."

"Mum too," Claire said. "Have you told them yet?"

"Give us a chance, we've only recently decided. Besides, we could just as easily un-decide by the summer. All being well though, you'll be an auntie next year. There, that's mine. Now let's hear yours."

Claire bit her bottom lip. Rebecca was exasperated.

"What is it Claire, for crying out loud? Have you become a Moonie? Are you marrying a man you've never met before? Or turned to prostitution to make the payments on your flat? Tell me, Claire."

"Come with me," said Claire, leading them through the living room to the bedroom where she handed her sister a photograph of herself with Emma. The one she kept on the bedside table.

Rebecca studied it intently.

"What is this?" she asked. "Is this photograph enhanced? Your boobs look bigger. You don't need more, you're endowed for two as it is. Is that it, Claire? You've had a boob job?"

"No I have not!" shrieked Claire, slapping Rebecca. "Look again."

"All I see is you with some friend of yours," protested Rebecca. "Stop playing games. Would you please tell me what this is all about?"

"That's it. That's my news."

"Nice one, Claire," Rebecca said, sarcastically. "You drag me away from an evening of indolence to tell me you've got a new friend. Well

congratulations, darling, and dinner was delicious, but couldn't you have told me your news over the phone?"

"She's not my friend," hissed Claire, urgently. "She's my lover. We're having a relationship."

"Now that is a juicy titbit. A full ten on the Richter scale," replied Rebecca, appreciating quality gossip when it came her way. She studied her sister closely.

"How long?" she asked.

"Not long. Less than a month."

"First time?"

Claire nodded.

"Are you shocked, Becca?"

"Shocked, no. Surprised, yes. You never seemed to have many female friends when we were growing up. At school and the like. I used to hate you when we were kids. I've told you that before. You always got the best looking boys, and you had the brains in our family. It was always certain *you'd* go to university. By the time you reached your teens, I knew it had been a mistake not to have smothered you in your pram."

"Thanks, Becca, that means a lot to me. What you say about growing up is true," said Claire, "I didn't tend to have close girlfriends when I was young. But there were always boys. If I'd looked up from my school work one day when I was about fourteen, there they would have been. An unbroken line of spotty youths, stretching uninterrupted for the next dozen plus years. Not a new man between them. I never went looking for them, Becca. They were just there, waiting for me to finish with the current one so that they could step in and take over."

"Must have been awful for you," Rebecca remarked, disingenuously.

"I mean," said Claire, "I never chose heterosexuality. It chose me. I never had breathing space to think 'Is this what I really want, or am I simply going along with it?' I see now I was under subtle pressure to be what others expected me to be. Even my own sister was jealous of the boyfriends I had and mum and dad have been planning my wedding since I was fifteen."

Rebecca returned to the photograph saying,

"She is nice looking and the two of you do look happy together."

"She's an artist. She painted this," Claire said eagerly, pointing to the Rhodes harbour painting.

"Oh nice," replied Rebecca, unable to see that far without glasses, but unwilling to wear them for vanity's sake. "Have you told mum and dad yet?" Rebecca tossed Claire's question back at her.

"Not yet. Emma - that's Emma," she said, tapping the photograph. "She wants me to tell them."

"But you don't want to?"

Claire was silent for a while, before replying,

"Did you tell them you were straight, Bex? No, me neither. I don't see why I should have to tell them that I'm not straight after all. Come to think of it, they've never confided their most intimate feelings and experiences to me."

"Well it's just assumed, isn't it? And be fair, Sprog," Rebecca patted her sister's hand, "it is all a bit sudden."

"I suppose it is," conceded Claire, "though it must have been there all along, mustn't it? It couldn't have come from nowhere."

"Is this the reason you split up from that delicious hunk of a fireman?" Rebecca asked.

"I suppose it must have been, though I didn't understand any of it at the time. It was confusing. I met Emma in early December. By mid January I'd totally lost interest in Ian and the relationship we were supposed to be having. I was finding him utterly irritating."

"Oh, they can be that," agreed Rebecca.

"I didn't know what I wanted then," Claire continued. "But I was slowly getting clues about what I didn't want any more. Maybe never had wanted all along. Around Christmas time, I lost contact with Emma. I felt it worse than I would ever have believed possible. Ian played more than a passing role in her decision to vanish and all in all, I was miserable, missing Emma, but seeing far too much of Ian. Don't get me wrong, I fell in love with Emma in her own right, it was not just a backlash against Ian. It didn't even happen at the same time. But it happened, and I'm glad it happened."

A curtain came down in the silence that followed, to be broken in time by the elder of the sisters.

"I won't say I share your point of view," said Rebecca, "because I don't. I could not imagine having sexual feelings for another woman. I don't understand how you can and I have certainly never felt the desire myself. I think that anyone who can be straight, should be. Not because there's anything wrong with the alternative, but because of the difficulties that exist. Straight has to be easier if only because it is so common. Ultimately I think it a big mistake, but if this is what you have decided to do, I won't criticize."

This was a surprise to Claire, who thought that criticism was exactly what she was hearing. If not outright condemnation, then at least an underwhelming vote of support.

"I've long ago forgiven you for being more popular than me," continued Rebecca, "and for having better boyfriends, all except for that tall, handsome boy that went into the army - what was his name?"

"Martin."

"Except for him. You know I love you to bits and want you to be happy. Why don't you take Emma to Worcester one of the days? Mum will think that she's terribly clever being able to draw and paint. Does she know much about cricket?"

"I don't think so."

"Then dad is going to have endless hours of pleasure teaching her. Don't worry about the ancestors, Claire, after all, Emma doesn't look like a lesbian, does she?"

"No, but she is, and so am I. I can't go on having them believe that I'm simply between boyfriends. Still likely to be married by the time I'm thirty. Have you ever spoken to mum about anything... anything really private?"

"No, I think she thought that schools dealt with that nowadays."

"But they don't, do they?" asked Claire. "Not at our old school, anyway, and especially not in regard to gay relationships."

"They weren't much help with straight ones either," complained Rebecca. "Speak to the folks," she urged, "it's high time they got to know their blue eyed little girl."

Rebecca caught Claire's wrist as she aimed a slap at her, twisting it up her back until she said she was sorry.

"Tell you what," laughed Rebecca, "I'll tell them for you."

"No you will not," spluttered Claire indignantly. "Look at all the trouble you caused for me when you told them I was going to elope with that boy from the council estate. I had just turned fifteen. I had mum going everywhere with me for weeks after that. It was so embarrassing."

"Yeah, I should have told the boy it was his sister you were after."

"Don't tease me, Becca," warned Claire. "You know I'll get you back. However long it takes."

She cast about her for a weapon, menacing Rebecca with a silver backed hairbrush.

"Don't be childish," ordered Rebecca, preparing to defend herself with a pillow. "Brat!" she yelled. "Stop it!"

"Childish, me?" asked Claire surprised. "You started it."

Claire calmed down nevertheless. Replacing the hairbrush on the dressing table, she sat in a bentwood chair, staring out on to the darkened terrace.

"You said you're a lesbian now. Don't you mean that you're bisexual?" asked Rebecca.

"No. Lesbian. Gay, if you prefer," Claire replied firmly. "I have no desire for men or their bodies. It's amazing that I ever did."

"I can't believe you'll be off men for long, Claire, you were always the flighty one. Always impulsive. Off with old, on with the new, that's Claire. I'll wager you'll be back."

"You'll lose."

"Maybe," said Rebecca, sizing up her sister. "So where did it happen, this monumental change of direction? The road to Damascus?"

Claire smiled.

"I wish it had been like that. Zap, a flash of light, and done with. This was more like trudging through fog and every now and then, coming across a lamp post that would shed a little light on the landscape. First there was liking Emma - well, that's no big deal, she's likeable and fun to be with. Then there was loving Emma. Again, natural enough. But by the time I got to the last lamp post, I was thinking about her all the time. Couldn't keep my mind on my work. And the night times: exquisitely unsettling, taken up with erotic fantasies. What I wanted Emma to do to me, but more particularly, what I wanted to do to Emma. I'd been at fever pitch for weeks by the time we went to bed together."

Rebecca fidgeted uneasily.

"But Claire, lots of women fantasize about sex with other women, it's just a way of heightening the orgasm. Whatever it takes, you know that. Good Lord, I've done it myself. It doesn't mean a thing. You can't go building your life around it. Where would we be if everyone lived out their fantasies?"

"I know about those kinds of fantasy," said Claire, unimpressed. "They have no emotional content. No purpose beyond keeping you turned on. It wasn't like that. I was drawn to Emma from the first. Not physically then, but emotionally and intellectually. Now I've come to know the physical side too. I can't regret that. Be happy for me, Bex. Please. I'm happy, truly content. I was so scared of telling you, terrified how you might react. You've taken it quite well. I'm grateful for that, but Rebecca, sister of mine, don't belittle it. Don't underestimate what it means to me. It is very, very important."

Rebecca studied her sister.

"Well," she said, "I really am disgusted with you."

Anguished and dismayed, sure she had accomplished a difficult task successfully, Claire now braced herself for censure from the person whose opinion she most valued.

Rebecca looked her squarely in the eye.

"All the years I gave you hand-me-down clothes and last year's cosmetics, yet you didn't even have the decency to offer me Ian when you'd finished with him. Discard them if you like, but you must recycle. For the sake of those less fortunate than yourself. Spoilt and ungrateful, that's always been your trouble."

"What about Tony?" asked a relieved Claire. "Surely he would have something to say about keeping my old boyfriend gainfully employed?"

"February, did you say?" pondered Rebecca. "That would have been the Rugby World Cup or possibly the cricket from Sharjah. There are three rules for a successful extra marital affair around Tony." She ticked them off on her fingers. "Don't block the screen. Don't be louder than the commentary. Don't knock against his drinking arm. Obey these simple rules and I could entertain the entire West Midlands Fire Service with impunity."

"Now that would get the curtains twitching in your upper middle income suburban avenue," smiled Claire.

"That would be nothing... Nothing. You wouldn't believe the things we under-employed wives discuss when the Volvos have gone to work. Neither is it all theoretical."

"I do know," said Claire, "that if you assemble a group of women, it takes about thirty seconds for the conversation to turn to sex."

"Assemble?" teased Rebecca. "These women of yours come flat packed with instructions?"

"You know what I mean, Becca, so don't wind me up. It's awful at work. The women, all congregated round the water cooler, talking about their husbands and boyfriends. Or both in at least two cases. Lurid descriptions of... really I don't know what. Hard core documentaries."

"What do you contribute to this ribald feminine debate?" asked Rebecca.

"Well, nothing. What could I say?"

"You don't regale them with your nights of passion with attractive young Emma? Is she young?"

"Twenty six"

"You cradle-snatcher."

A thought suddenly struck Rebecca.

"I guess ... I guess you don't have to beg for foreplay."

"Becca!"

"Oh come off it, Claire. You never used to be such a prude. You've told me things that would make a pornographer blush. All the ins and outs, as it were."

Claire frowned at her.

"OK," she said cautiously. "What is it you want to know?"

"What everyone always wants to know," replied Rebecca.

"What do lesbians do in bed?" chorused the sisters, falling about laughing.

23

The Ayatollah Sarah

Sarah, Claire's secretary, brought in her mid morning cup of coffee, together with the day's applications for vacancies advertised last week in the local press. Claire thanked her, then asked if she could spare a few minutes. Sarah sat down, ready to do Claire's bidding.

Claire began,

"I've been looking through the company's Equal Opportunities Policy, or Diversity Policy, if you like. It doesn't specifically state that we go beyond legal requirements when employing workers. It's hazy on the lengths we'll go to facilitate the employment of disabled workers, for instance, and it barely touches on the question of sexual orientation. I'm thinking of amending it. I'd value your opinion."

Sarah was thirty two and sported a glossy, elfin hairstyle. She had been buying a cramped studio apartment with Simon, her long term boyfriend,

for the past five years. She had worked alongside Claire for over a year. Sarah had quickly adapted herself to Claire's requirements and the placement had panned out well for all concerned. Reading quickly through the document, her forehead creased in concentration, Sarah glanced at Claire.

"I guess it could be made clearer," agreed the PA, flipping the page over to check for more. "The punctuation is sloppy, making it slightly ambiguous, though the catch-all statement at the bottom goes some way towards clarifying the company's overall position. Personally I wonder why we need an Equal Opportunities Policy. Aren't we obliged to employ just about everyone who applies nowadays, however unsuitable they may be?"

"It's not quite like that," laughed Claire, "we do have some say in who we employ. If we're employing unsuitable people, it's down to me and to Derek from Human Resources. We do the interviews, the buck stops with us. Besides Sarah, there is no reason why a gay person for example, would be unsuitable for any job here. We're talking sexuality not severe physical or mental disability. After a careful audit of the workplace, we might occasionally have to conclude that it is impossible to accommodate a severely handicapped candidate, but we can usually demonstrate considerable flexibility, even to the point of reorganizing the entire workspace. An outright rejection is almost unheard of. Even a criminal past is not necessarily a bar to employment. We assess every application on its merits. No one is ever discounted out of hand."

"Yes, but would you want to employ someone you knew was queer?" demanded Sarah. "I mean, would you really, Claire? Someone you knew for certain was bent?"

"How would I know?" asked Claire. "There's nowhere on the application form that asks about sexual preference."

"You might get a feeling about them in the interview. Or you might find out later, after you'd taken them on. When it was too late then to do anything about it. It would upset some members of staff too. Not me, but I know of some who'd feel uncomfortable."

"In what way?" asked Claire.

"In case they try to touch them or ask them out or something," said Sarah, adding vaguely, "You know, try to persuade them ... to do things."

"Sarah, do you know any gay people, male or female?" demanded Claire, becoming annoyed with her bigoted assistant.

"Not know, exactly," said Sarah, "I don't suppose they're interested in engineering. Probably too dirty and dangerous."

"What about accounts, finance, dispatch, IT support?" challenged Claire. "All squeaky clean, utterly safe places to work,"

Sarah thought a while before admitting,

"Haven't noticed any as such. I'm not prejudiced, if that's what you're thinking. Of course gay people have a right to work. I just think that they would be happier working elsewhere. Weller's is a rough and tumble kind of place. You have to be able to take a joke. Anyway, how would you feel if some woman started making advances to you at work?"

"That would depend on the woman," replied Claire. "Every application assessed on its merits."

Sarah looked up sharply, then smiled uncertainly.

"OK, Sarah!" said Claire, sitting forward abruptly, her elbows thudding into the desktop. "I'm gay. A lesbian. I'm having an intensely fulfilling relationship with a wonderful, loving woman. So what do you do? Get a transfer? Sue for harassment? Complain to the Daily Mail? What, Sarah?"

Sarah laughed.

"Oh, Claire, I've heard about your style from people who've attended your seminars. You get everyone to express their opinions. Give them plenty of rope. Then you pull hard, leaving your victims dangling stupidly in mid air. But if you're done making a fool of me, my coffee's on my desk going cold."

Left alone, Claire stared thoughtfully out of the window, deeply dissatisfied with the exchanges of the past few minutes. Picking up her pen, she began to alter the wording of the Diversity Policy, positive that she for one would welcome gays to Weller Precision Components. With or without the support of the Ayatollah Sarah.

"I'm off to see Pygmalion," was Emma's reply to Gerry as she descended the stairs, her jacket slung over one arm.

"He was Irish, you know," said Gerry, pausing by the newel post on the way back to her room with her dinner.

"I know."

"If you don't mind me saying, I'm surprised you're going to see such a dated play."

"Since when did you care whether I mind what you say?" asked Emma.

"I just thought something modern would be more your kind of thing," said Gerry.

"You have a point. I wouldn't have chosen it myself, but at least it isn't a musical. I haven't thought about George Bernard Shaw since I had to at school. It was a committee decision. From now on, every two weeks, a group of us from the university will have a cultural evening in Birmingham. Theatre, music, something of that kind."

"Is Claire going with you?"

"I don't usually see her in the week," replied Emma. "It's the Integrated Transport Policy."

"What Integrated Transport Policy?" Gerry asked, on cue.

"Precisely. By the time she could get over here, it would be time to go back. It isn't worth it. Better to save it all for the weekend. She drops me back here on a Sunday. Traffic isn't a problem then. Why don't you come, Gerry? At least you knew GBS was Irish. That's one up on half the Faculty of Art and a fair few of the English Department."

"No thanks, Emma. Maybe another time. If you go to something a bit more controversial. Evita, or something else political."

"I'll let you know what's on next," said Emma, moving towards the door.

"Nice colour that; your girlfriend's car," Gerry remarked, her mind never more than a nanosecond from automobiles. "Metallic sapphire blue. I saw it in the hall light when you came in last week."

Emma turned.

"You like the colour, what is your professional opinion of the car?"

Gerry considered.

"A comfortable, quality saloon, integrating state of the art technology," she said. "A good looking, substantial motor car with a distinguished pedigree."

"You don't like it, do you?"

"I would be more enthusiastic if she'd gone for the V8 or the coupé," confessed Gerry. "Also, as a company car, it brings up issues around taking and using something which isn't yours. Then a few months later, taking and using another one. Power without responsibility in a morally bankrupt society. The emotional link between user and owner is severed, you see. I could tell you more if I knew that she had chosen the car or the colour herself."

In a pause-less change of direction, Gerry asked,

"Emma. I was wondering. Would you like to get married?"

Emma stared at her, replying,

"Gerry, this is so sudden, what can I say? But yes, absolutely. I have ten minutes before my train, I would be delighted to marry you. We can live off the proceeds of your book and I need never work again."

"Yes, very funny Emma. But really, would you like to marry?" persisted Gerry.

Emma considered.

"So far I've not met anyone I wanted to marry. And it's too soon to say with Claire. But yes, I would like to marry. Possibly. It's the same emotion, the same desire for everyone. It could happen to me. It might be quite nice actually. If things don't work out with Claire, Gerry, I'll be asking you to make good your offer."

"Don't be daft, Emma, I can't marry you - I'm saving myself for someone with a 1968 Lamborghini Miura."

"I could get one of those," offered Emma.

"They cost a fortune."

"What? Even an old one?"

"There are only old ones."

"Well, if I got one anyway, could we get married?"

"If it was the '68, I'd marry you, Emma. But not if it's the '71. I do have my standards, you know."

Part Two

An Unholy Mess

24

Can Accommodate/Travel

True to her word, Claire diligently trawled through the personal columns of gay magazines and web sites. Responding to several advertisements, she had then waited in eager anticipation for replies to drop through the letterbox. Now on their first evening at the Meadows Country Club Hotel, Claire was anxious for Emma to assess their first reply.

"Which ad was this then?" asked Emma, taking the envelope.

"This one," Claire replied, passing her a magazine clipping.

"Committed lesbian couple, both 33, seek single female, or female couple for adult fun. Can accommodate/travel," read Emma.

Taking the letter from the envelope, she read it through silently before commenting,

"Maz and Lesley, eh? I wonder what Maz is short for?"

"Madeleine. Mary," guessed Claire.

"Could be Margaret," said Emma, shuddering. "I'm game for most things, but I'm not sleeping with anyone called Margaret. OK?"

"Whatever you say, darling," said Claire, flopping languorously on to the bed. She leaned over to kiss her, saying,

"No Margarets, promise."

"A solicitor and a landscape gardener," continued Emma. "Any photos?"

"No."

"Says here they live in a quiet country village - "

"Yes, I know it," interrupted Claire, "it's just off the M54."

"Well, it won't be quiet much longer. Not if we're going down there," said Emma.

"You agree we should go?" asked Claire.

"Sounds good to me" Emma replied enthusiastically. "Older women have a definite appeal. I could be their toy girl. Shame there's no photo, though."

Claire leaned across to pick up her phone.

"What are you doing?" asked Emma.

"Calling them to make arrangements. Read me the number, will you?"

Claire failed to make contact, no one was home. Instead she left a voicemail message, suggesting that she and Emma might pay them a visit the following Friday.

"There," said Claire, snapping shut the phone. "That's put the ball in their court. Hopefully they will get back to us before much longer, then we can take it from there. So Emma, what are you wearing to dinner tonight?"

"Black strappy dress and heels."

"Stockings? Suspenders?"

Emma nodded.

"Black."

Claire inhaled deeply as the thought of a braless Emma in cocktail dress and black stockings circulated her body. She let the feeling build for a time, then slid a hand up inside Emma's tee shirt, pausing to caress a silky warm breast.

"Hey, we'll miss dinner," protested Emma.

"There's room service," Claire said huskily, fiddling one handed with the front fastener of Emma's bra. Emma undid it for her, then pulled the tee shirt over her head, revealing firm, rounded breasts.

"This better?" she asked.

"Mmmm," said Claire, taking a breast in her mouth and biting down gently.

Emma groaned, pushing herself hard into Claire's mouth. She manoeuvred carefully to sit astride Claire, her skirt up round her waist. She leaned forward, tracing the shape of Claire's ear and lobe with her tongue. Claire kneaded the smooth flesh inside Emma's micro briefs. Quickly, Emma sent both briefs and skirt to join the growing pile of clothing on the floor. By now Emma was naked, though Claire was still lamentably overdressed. But not for long. The women combined to bring about a speedy undressing. Claire lay full length on top of Emma, her breasts flattening against Emma's chest. Emma lifted her face to be kissed. She stroked Claire's back, running her hand down to her buttocks, fingering the creamy, soft flesh. Breathing rapidly, Claire began to move her hips.

Faster and faster Claire rocked, until stopping abruptly, she pulled away from Emma's kisses.

"Not again," thought Emma in dismay, in a sudden flashback to the last time Claire pulled out of love making.

Supporting herself on locked forearms, Claire towered above her wet and vulnerable lover. Emma suddenly looked very young. A saucy urchin, Claire decided. Planning her imminent transition to womanhood, Claire's excitement mounted. Reaching into the bedside table drawer, she removed a maroon velvet bag. Using one hand and her teeth, she opened the drawstring, shaking a pale blue latex vibrator on to the coverlet. Wrapping her hand around the cool, smooth shaft, she slid the length of Emma's torso.

Claire switched on the vibrator, selecting a low, rumbling note, then prepared to do what she had been dreaming of all week. Rolling the toy across Emma's stomach, through her pubic hair, she ran the vibrator first down and then up the inside of Emma's thigh, teasing her beyond endurance. Emma grabbed Claire's wrist, because some things just will not wait while Claire plays the vamp. Claire thinks about resisting this show of independence, but then allows her hand to be drawn between Emma's legs.

Brring Brring

Brring Brring

The antique hotel phone was ringing. They ignored it. It persisted. Emma opened her eyes, looking wryly at Claire. Momentum lost, the spell broken, Claire capitulated, picking up the receiver with a heavy heart.

"Hello?"

"Ah, Miss Mortimer?"

"Speaking."

"It's Paul from the Lakeside Restaurant. Will you and your guest be joining us for dinner tonight? Your reservation was for eight. Would you like to change it?"

"Yes, yes do that," replied Claire, defeated. "We'll be down in half an hour. Will that be OK?"

"That will be fine. Thank you, Miss Mortimer."

Replacing the receiver, she looked round at Emma. Sweat sheened Emma's body, strands of hair lying damp against her forehead. Claire took Emma's hand. They smiled ruefully at one another.

"Don't worry," smiled Emma, quickest to recover her good humour. "We'll still have this beautiful room and I'll still love you, after three wonderful courses and wine."

"Come on then," sighed Claire, "into your strappy dress and heels. I'll soon have you out of them again when I get you back upstairs."

25

Maz at Your Service

"We will only stay if everyone is in agreement," Claire said, pulling out of the underground parking area three floors below her flat. "If even one person is unhappy, nothing will happen. I'll have us home within half an hour if things don't work out as planned."

She swung on to the motorway, accelerating briskly. Placing her hand on Emma's thigh, she felt Emma move quickly to cover it with her own hand. Instantly Claire was turned on. In fact, turned on was how Claire had felt for the past month. Had she ever felt like this in the past? She could not be sure. Life pre-Emma was something of a blur to her already. She had never enjoyed a physical relationship so much before, of that she

was certain. Emma was lovely, the thought alone bringing a smile to Claire's lips. Just short of their destination, they stop for dinner.

"I do hope tonight goes well," said Claire, arranging her knife and fork on the empty plate. "I've been looking forward to it all week."

"How did she sound, this Lesley woman?" Emma asked.

"Nice. Normal. Like it was ordinary to be arranging a thing like this. I suppose they must do it a lot. It's nearly ten to, we must get going."

After making a quick telephone call for final directions once they'd entered the village, Claire and Emma arrived at the home of their hosts for the evening. The house was large; modern, occupying a corner plot set apart from its neighbours. Claire pulled on to the drive in front of the double garage and switched off the engine.

"Right," she said, taking a long breath, squeezing tight Emma's hand, "this is it."

A blonde haired woman came out of the porch into the beam of Claire's headlights. She was casually dressed in well cut pants and pale blouse, a Fair Isle sweater draped across her slim shoulders.

"Welcome. I'm Lesley," she smiled confidently. "Come in out of the cold."

She ushers them into a warm hallway dotted about with prolifically healthy house plants in bright ceramic pots. The visitors introduce themselves before they all shake hands. Lesley said,

"Maz is still in the bath, I'm afraid. Really, she has the time keeping of a Venezuelan."

"No I'm not!" cried Maz, clattering down stairs, skilfully skidding to a halt on polished floorboards.

Seeing Maz for the first time, Emma was reminded of a Cabbage Patch Doll she'd seen in a toy museum, one Saturday while out with Kate. Maz had a speckling of pale freckles and a big, cheeky grin. Clear blue eyes looked out from beneath a wayward shock of curly red brown hair.

"Maz at your service."

She bowed extravagantly, precipitating another round of introductions.

"Maz, will you take the ladies through into the lounge? Now to drink - we have most things - wine, spirits, beer, tea and coffee of course. Juice if you'd like it."

Claire chose coffee, while Emma opted for red wine. Maz showed them into a comfortable room, lit by identical brass table lamps. Warmth came from a wrought iron basket piled high with logs in the broad, open hearth. It was gas fired, though it appeared genuine enough to Claire and Emma, sat side by side on the teal coloured sofa. Maz took an armchair by the fire. Lesley arrived with three red wines and a filter coffee. Cream was accepted, sugar declined. Everyone had her drink, and each surreptitiously scrutinized the others.

Lesley's blonde hair was pulled back behind her ears, secured by a wooden comb. She had a smile that could light up a room. She unleashed it from time to time during the evening, but for the most part, she watched proceedings coolly from the far side of the fireplace.

Despite leaving much of the talk to Maz, the visitors were left with the firm impression that Lesley possessed a keen mind. All to the good, Emma thought; she liked clever women. Claire admired Lesley's cream silk blouse, which she noted absently, was an exact match for the lampshades.

Maz wore light coloured pants and a dark green tee shirt with **Organic Gardeners Do It In All Weathers** emblazoned in gold lettering.

"We were wondering what Maz is short for," Claire opened the conversation.

"Maria," said Maz. "Except people have a nasty habit of shortening it to Ma. Well, I'm nobody's mother and the other mar is to spoil something. So Maz or Maria, if you please."

"Not Margaret then?" said Emma, apparently apropos of nothing.

"How long have you been together?" asked Claire, sipping her coffee.

"Thirteen years," Maz replied.

Emma gave a long, low whistle.

"Wow!" she exclaimed, "that's half my lifetime."

"We met at university," said Maz, as if this fact alone accounted for the longevity of their affair.

"Can you study landscape gardening at university?" asked Emma.

"Not then," replied Maz, "but you could read politics and philosophy."

"Maz was quite normal in those days,," explained Lesley from her fireside retreat. "The gardening thing came later."

"I come from a long line of Hampshire farmers," Maz said, proudly. "Genes will always out."

"How long have you two been together?" Lesley addressed Claire.

"A month."

"A month!" exploded Maz in amazement. "You're doing the small ads after one, did I hear right? One single, solitary month? Thirty days? 720 hours? Young people today never heard of honeymoons?"

"This is the honeymoon," Emma explained patiently, "but who said that honeymoons were only for two?"

"Most people, I'd have thought," said Maz.

"Well, we're looking to share ours," said Emma.

"We discussed it at length," added Claire, "and this was something we both wanted to do. We've done other fantasy things -"

"Like what?" Maz interrupted, fixing Claire with an unwaveringly direct gaze.

"Like videoing our love making. Using sex toys, dressing up to play out the stories we invent. This seemed a natural extension," Claire replied, holding Maz's gaze.

"Hey, Les," Maz called. "That's something we could do. Videoing. I could be the camerawoman."

"Wouldn't you want to join in?" asked Emma.

Maz was dismissive.

"Everyone makes a beeline for Lesley. She always has been too attractive by three quarters. I might just as well record events for posterity, then post them on the Internet. Give me a hobby."

"You'll do no such thing," warned Lesley.

Maz rolled her eyes in disgust at Lesley's lack of enthusiasm for her big new idea.

"Everyone?" asked Emma. "Have their been many?"

Maz and Lesley exchanged glances.

"A few," replied Maz, "we've been putting in ads for more than a year now."

"We had to modify our ad," put in Lesley. "At first it read "Committed lesbian couple seek single female/couples." But the replies came mostly from straight couples."

"Can you imagine it?" Maz took up the tale with gusto. "Some bloke thinking he's going to turn up here to partake of me and Lesley, throwing in his crabby old wife as part exchange. Well, I told them where to get off in no uncertain terms."

"Maz gets upset about these things," Lesley pointed out unnecessarily.

"My body," said Maz, striking a dramatic pose, her hands clutched to her heart, "is a temple. Only Vestal Virgins may enter therein."

"That's me scuppered then," said Emma.

Maz, still holding her pose, opened one eye, saying,

"Vestal Virgins and honorary Vestal Virgins only."

Lesley held her glass to the fire, watching the light reflect in its facets.

"We have had some nice people come here, haven't we, Maz?"

"Oh yes, smashing," Maz agreed.

"There was one couple," Lesley continued, "they were lovely. We thought it might have led to some kind of ongoing thing. But in the end, it was just the once."

"Lots of people think they can handle it, but they can't," warned Maz.

"Why did you start putting in ads?" asked Claire.

Maz glanced at Lesley, before replying,

"Lesley thought our lives were getting rather dull. Here in the village, there isn't much to do - walk along the towpath, go to the pub... "

Lesley took over saying,

"After almost a dozen years, we'd turned into very dear and loving friends. There wasn't much happening in the bedroom department though."

"Ah, lesbian bed death," supplied Emma.

"It wasn't dead," protested Maz, "just... very relaxed. I didn't think it mattered that much."

"But I did," said Lesley. "Maz was the first woman I'd ever slept with. I was twenty. I had not even begun to live my life, when suddenly I was

all but married. I certainly was not ready to retire to twin beds after a milky drink and a peck on the cheek."

"So we decided to advertise," chimed in Maz, "Lesley wasn't happy so we had to do something. It's worked quite well too, spiced things up, given us a shared interest. The main thing is, Lesley is happier now."

Claire asked,

"Have you ever met up with new people, but then decided not to go through with things after all?"

"Only once," replied Lesley. "We went down to Northampton. This couple had a beautiful flat. Stunning it was, but we just didn't hit it off. Not on any level. It is one thing to have sex with people I don't know, it's quite another to do it with people I don't like. It's important to understand your goals when doing this, and to get out if these goals are not being met."

"Are they always couples?" asked Claire.

"So far," Lesley replied.

"I've been with couples," chipped in Emma with her usual candour. "It's like being the filling in a sandwich. You're very popular all of a sudden."

For the third time that evening, a look passed between Maz and Lesley. Lesley raised an eyebrow, Maz inclined her head in response.

"We'd like to invite you to stay over," said Lesley, "if you'd like to, that is."

Claire looked at Emma. Emma grinned.

"Yes, we would," said Claire.

"It's the door on the right," said Lesley, reaching the top of the second flight of stairs. Claire opened the door into a large room fashioned in the attic space. More paired table lamps illuminated cream and pale jade coloured walls and ivory bedroom furniture. The room was comfortably warm, the air imbued with the subtle aroma of jasmine oil, but it was not the aroma nor the pale jade walls which drew the strangers' attention. It was the king sized double bed in the centre of the room.

Claire and Emma stepped cautiously into the room.

"There is a shower through there," said Lesley, indicating a door at the far end of the room. "You should find everything you need. There are robes on the bed for you both. We'll see you in what - twenty minutes?"

They agree on twenty minutes. Left alone, Claire and Emma took showers then set about frantically tooth brushing, flossing and mouth washing for extreme oral hygiene.

"Which one would you like first?" asked Claire, sixteen minutes later. She was sitting demurely on the colossal bed, twisting the belt of her robe between her fingers. Emma had been thinking about this very question. She wanted Lesley, but figured that Claire would want her too. Rather than risk conflict, she had decided to offer Lesley to Claire. But Claire had not finished speaking.

"Because if you want Lesley, Emma, I don't mind going with Maz. She's cute in a boyish kind of way. Besides, it won't be for the whole night. Lesley has such unusual eyes, doesn't she? Palest blue around the pupil, with a deep blue, almost black outer ring. Most arresting."

Emma agreed, surprised. Gratified that life was evolving exactly as she would wish. For Lesley, being both elegant and feminine, would steal Emma's attention every time.

"Maz sweetie, which of the ladies do you like best?" Lesley asked, stepping from the en suite shower. She vigorously towelled herself dry, only five minutes remaining before they must present themselves to their guests.

"I think they're both nice," Maz replied.

"Yes, but which one would you like first? We must decide this, you know how embarrassing it is if anyone is left out."

"You choose," said Maz, "I'll just be pleased if I'm included. You know how it always is. Everyone instantly makes a grab for you."

Lesley kissed Maz's cheek.

"Oh sweetheart, don't undervalue yourself. You're lovely, anyone can see that. I know, why don't you take Claire? She's tall like you. I think you would like that, wouldn't you?"

"I would if I'm given the chance," replied Maz, far from happily.

When Maz and Lesley re-entered the attic bedroom, the lights had already been dimmed. Two tea lights burned brightly, reflected in the dressing table mirror. The visitors stood. Emma was pleased when Lesley came directly to her, sliding a cool hand inside Emma's borrowed robe. Maz could have jumped for joy when Claire smiled straight at her, opening her arms to embrace her without any obvious reluctance. Everyone suitably paired for the moment, they exchanged kisses and caresses.

Soon four fluffy white robes were discarded on the floor, while four naked women lay entangled upon the bed. Maz and Claire made riotous, noisy, ecstatic love together, which threatened to breach the peace and quiet of the sleepy cul-de-sac. Meanwhile, across the gargantuan mattress, Emma and Lesley were taking a more leisurely approach to intimacy. Ignoring the bucking bed as best they could, each delighted in the unrushed exploration of the other. Slow and sensual in contrast to Maz and Claire's euphoric abandon.

Later, when even Maz and Claire were reduced to a panting standstill, Maz extracted herself from Claire's embrace, padding over to a small refrigerator. She took out a jug of orange juice, removing tall glasses from a bedside cabinet.

"Can you do this?" asked Maz, glass in hand, flexing shoulder and chest muscles to move her breasts, first individually and then in unison.

"No, Maz, don't," pleaded Lesley, stricken. But Maz continued regardless.

Emma was fascinated.

"How do you do that?"

Maz demonstrated, but Emma couldn't do it, not even after intensive one to one coaching.

"How about you?" Maz asked Claire, keeping up the cabaret.

Claire smiled, shaking her head.

"This is what happens when you rake hundreds of tonnes of gravel," said Maz. "Maz's Amazing Mammaries. They're booked at Caesar's Palace for six weeks in the summer."

When Emma put her mouth to Maz's mobile nipple, Maz slid down the headboard on to the pillow, and Clare and Emma's night of passion in South Staffordshire recommenced.

Unseen by anyone, the tea lights crackled, flared, then went out. Emma and Maz were lying on their sides, Emma's arm round Maz's waist. They were watching as Claire and Lesley made love. Normally one of Emma's favourite entertainments, on this occasion, her mind drifting with fatigue, her eyes closed unbidden. In her relaxed and drowsy state Emma felt Maz's love for Lesley flowing warmly from her belly. Emma opened her eyes, brought back by the sound of Lesley's orgasm.

Desire stirred in Emma. She pulled Maz hard against her, thinking about another session, but then drowsiness changed her mind. She was just too tired tonight. As Lesley's cries died away, Emma lay her head on the pillow and slept.

She woke a short time later. Alone. Maz had moved over to be with Claire and Lesley. Emma felt left out, miserable. Forgotten in the bed with the abnormally high body count. Cold and abandoned, she lay rigid in her corner, unable to move across to join the others. Dejected, Emma watched as Lesley cradled Maz's head to her breast. She was desolate. Fortunately, kindness was not far away.

Glancing up, Lesley saw Emma awake once more. With a smile that could have lit up the village, she held out her hand to her. Emma's own smile was full with gratitude, beholden to Lesley for rescuing her from atrophy. Emma crawled over to the others, kissing first Lesley and then Maz. Claire demanded to know where hers was. Emma kissed her, tasting Maz's extra minty toothpaste on her lips.

Later, when Emma was again with Lesley, Maz and Claire lay curled up like spoons, fast asleep. Emma took a deep breath, inhaling Lesley's scent. It was something elusively familiar. Heady and exotic, it teased at the edge of Emma's memory. What was it? Got it. Of course. It was sandalwood. And something else. Sandalwood and femininity. Lesley was a very womanly woman.

"Like Claire," she thought.

Claire and Lesley both had curves where Emma had angles. By contrast, Maz's body was sculpted by hard work and exercise. Firm and well muscled where Lesley was soft and yielding. Emma gently kissed Lesley's lips. Moist softness and openness. Lesley's femininity was a thing Emma rejoiced in, aware she not exude it to the same degree. Emma was a girl with an edge. Lesley sighed, closer to sleep than wakefulness.

Maz stirred and sat up, waking Claire.

"I'm starving," she announced. "Is anyone else hungry?"

There was general agreement that they were.

"Right then, I'll go down and get us something."

She sorted through the heap of robes until she found her own. In the pocket was her watch.

"Crikey, it's 3:50. No wonder we're hungry. Tea, Les?"

"If that is what everyone else wants."

They did. When Maz had gone, Lesley said,

"I wish she wouldn't call me Les."

"I can see how that could be unfortunate," agreed Emma.

"Lesley the Lesbian," mimicked Lesley, in a childish sing-song. "It reminds me of when we first got together. Maria went round campus with this daft soppy grin on her face. When someone asked why she was so happy, the fool told them." Lesley rolled her eyes. "What an idiot. There was I, outed within a week by my own lover."

"Tough," commiserated Emma.

"What happened?" asked Claire.

"We became the centre of a fair amount of gossip and the target of a few shouted comments, but Maz put a stop to a lot of it one evening in the Union bar. She got into an arm wrestling competition, soundly beating one of our fiercest male critics. There was a bit more nastiness, about Maz being more blokey than a bloke, but it was just his way of blustering through the humiliation. They left us alone after that. Shortly afterwards we moved into a flat together and lived happily ever after. Well, perhaps not quite ever after. It's harder than that, as you'll find out when you finish your honeymoon. But Maz has been sticking a finger up to the world ever since."

"I guess they can be pretty feisty, these Hampshire farm girls," said Emma.

"That's the truth," said Lesley. "Actually, living with Maz is a lot like having a Labrador puppy."

"What?" asked Emma, confused. "She chews the furniture then pees on the carpet?"

"No, I mean she is loyal and wet and nuzzly, but not in the least bit subtle. She's always, bluff, straightforward Maz. It's simply not in her nature to obfuscate."

Out on the landing, the Labrador struggled to operate the door handle with her elbow. Succeeding at last, she carried in a tray with teapot, cups, milk, sugar, chocolate biscuits and a pile of buttered toast spread with mushroom pâté.

"We need a bigger tray, Lesley," she said, setting it down on the dressing table.

The four ad hoc lovers fell on the overdue midnight feast. When the tea was finished, Lesley trotted downstairs for a refill.

"It's a nice room you've made up here," said Emma, twitching back the curtain from the dormer window. She could see the glow of light from the distant motorway, but all else was inky blackness.

"Maz calls it our Rumpus Room" said Lesley, returning with more tea. "We think it's important to keep what goes on up here separate from our rooms downstairs."

"She means Satanic worship in the back bedroom and unspeakable deeds with human captives in the cellar," said Maz.

"Maz, we don't have a cellar," said Lesley.

"This is a quality bed," said Claire appreciatively, pressing her fingers experimentally into the mattress. "It stays firm instead of tumbling everybody into a heap in the middle."

"It should last a while," agreed Lesley, "it's guaranteed against sagging for ten years."

"I wish I was," said Maz, morosely.

"You, Maria," said Claire, running her hand through Maz's dark, unruly mane. "You will be the last of us to sag. You have *my* guarantee of that."

Claire was in the shower when Lesley said to Emma,

"We've enjoyed tonight. Do you think that you'd be interested in doing it again?"

"I would," said Emma. "I can't speak for Claire, but I think she might too."

"There's no rush. Take your time, discuss it. It's something you need to be in agreement over. When you've decided, let us know. You can get hold of us any time."

"Now that *is* a pleasant thought," said Emma.

By the time Claire made her way back to the big bed, Lesley and Maz had left to spend the remainder of the night in their bedroom below.

"What a night," said Emma, hunkering down beneath the crisp white duvet Lesley had given them.

"I could sleep for a week," yawned Claire, sliding gratefully into Emma's arms.

26

Blooming Fantastic

Later that morning, Lesley cooked breakfast for the happy household. Maz and Lesley were going out at about 10am. Lesley made sure Claire understood this clearly during the telephone negotiations leading up to last night's meeting. The visitors were ready to leave in good time. Fond farewells were exchanged with hugs all round. Half an hour later, Claire was slotting her car back into her space in the basement car park.

Claire went straight to bed. Emma joined her for a while, before getting up again. Claire slept on for a further two hours. When she emerged from the bedroom, Emma was lying on the sofa picking through one of Claire's glossy magazines.

"Feeling better?" Emma asked, sitting up.

"Much, thank you. Would you like coffee?"

"No, thanks, I've just had one," Emma replied, following Claire into the kitchen. She waited impatiently as Claire made a drink.

"What?" demanded Claire, catching Emma staring at her.

"Well?" asked Emma.

"Well, what?"

"Well, what did you think of last night?"

Claire slowly added milk to her cup, doing nothing to relieve Emma's impatience.

"I'm reminded," she said pensively, "of how my grandad described seeing Ian Botham almost single-handedly win the 1981 Test Match at Headingley."

"Who for?" asked Emma.

"England," answered Claire, shocked at the breadth of Emma's historical ignorance, not to mention her grammar.

"Oh good," said Emma.

"He was a mild man, my grandad. Not one for outbursts of emotion and he never swore. But of this he said, "It was blooming fantastic." That's what last night was, Emma. Blooming fantastic."

"Would you like to do it again?" asked Emma.

"Yes, in a few weeks maybe."

"Lesley was asking if we'd be up for a return fixture, as it were," said Emma.

"I'll ring them in the week to arrange something," promised Claire. "Unless you would care to do it," she offered.

"Oh no, you do these things so beautifully, dearest. Just tell me where and when and I'll be there."

Claire and Emma walked slowly along the east shore of the lake, focal point of the stately Victorian arboretum. The sun shone unconvincingly, gathering clouds holding the promise of showers before day's end. Hopeful youngsters fished from the muddy banks of the lake, while everywhere people did Sunday morning things. Feeding the ducks, jogging to music, strolling. They found a bench in sight of a little boy more interested in catching ducks than feeding them.

Claire threw back her head and laughed. Emma cast about for the source of Claire's sudden merriment, but could detect no change in the scene around them. She pressed a tissue to her mouth, lest a telltale trace of breakfast toast be the cause.

"What is it, sweetheart?" she asked, when the tissue came away free of crumbs.

Still laughing, Claire replied,

"I cannot believe that yesterday morning, I was in bed with three women."

"Speak up, Claire, why don't you? There's someone in Castle Bromwich didn't hear. It was good, though, wasn't it?"

"How did you feel, seeing me make love with another woman?" Claire asked, taking Emma's hand. She slid it into her coat pocket.

"Well," said Emma, "for the first two hours, I was simply praying that the floor would not give way, dumping us all in the room below. You really went for it, Claire, particularly with Maz."

"Did I make a pig of myself?" Claire asked anxiously. "Being with women is such a freedom after men, Em. You can't know if you haven't experienced it. Maz seemed so strong and vital I got carried away. I hope she didn't mind."

"I can't imagine that she did," laughed Emma, "but to answer your question, I thought you looked beautiful, making love with the other women. Your skin was glowing and I could see that you were enjoying yourself. You are a very sexy woman, I'm sure you know that."

"Did you feel jealous?"

"No. Maz and Lesley are great fun, but the main thing is you and me."

"When I saw you with Lesley," said Claire, "I loved you more than ever. I felt so happy you'd be coming home with me and I'd have you all to myself for another day and a half."

Taking her hand from her pocket, Claire put her arm through Emma's. Snuggling against her shoulder, she asked,

"What did you think of Lesley and Maz?"

"It's like I told you yesterday, I liked them both. Maz seems to inhabit a planet all of her own and Lesley is a very striking looking woman."

"Maz has a good body," defended Claire. "She's strong and supple."

"Yes, she is strong, like an athlete," agreed Emma, though tall, androgynous women were not her personal *raison d'être*. "We were very lucky. Meeting two people we liked first time out is amazing. You usually have to speculate to accumulate. Experience a few disappointments before you're successful, if you ever are."

Claire asked,

"If you could do it again with just one of them, which would it be?"

"Lesley. And you?"

"Oh, I don't know," Claire replied airily. "We will have to do it again, then I'll decide."

Resuming their walk round the lake, Claire said,

"I think that Maz and Lesley are really sweet, being together for thirteen years. Can you imagine that?"

"No," Emma replied, "but you can tell that Maz really loves Lesley. I think it's only for the love of Lesley that she gets involved with other couples. Left to herself, I don't think she'd bother. It's an outlet for Lesley's sexual energy rather than her own."

"That's an interesting idea," said Claire, "yet Maz had no shortage of sexual energy two nights ago. How do you account for that?"

"Novelty and opportunity. How often in a lifetime would Maz have the chance of going with someone like you, Claire?"

"Lesley is a very striking woman, you said so yourself."

"Striking isn't the same as beautiful. Maz was a very lucky bunny this weekend, and she'll know it. I'm not surprised she rose to the occasion."

"I did think it a little unkind of Lesley, calling Maz a Labrador, even if it was funny at the time," reflected Claire.

Emma shrugged.

"In thirteen years, you're going to know each other absolutely, warts and all. We can have no idea of the strains in their relationship. They are not about to parade them for us to see. Their affection for each other shines out, though. I wonder if it is hard for Maz to see Lesley with other women?"

"Maz, if your smile gets any bigger, it will meet around the back and the top of your head will drop off," said Lesley, when Maz arrived

bearing two steaming mugs and an ear to ear grin. She set down the drinks, then went to sit on Lesley's lap. Squirming to get comfy, she dangled her long legs over the arm of the chair.

"I'm happy, that's all. I can be happy, can't I, huh? Can't I? No law against being happy, is there? No? Good."

"I'm glad you're happy," said Lesley, hugging Maz to her.

Maz fidgeted some more, then climbed off the chair to bring Lesley her coffee, sitting on the floor at Lesley's feet to drink her own.

"Do you think that we will see them again? Claire and Emma?" asked Maz, craning round to look up at Lesley.

"I don't know," replied Lesley. "In a way, it doesn't matter if we don't. We have the memories. They are as important to us as anything we might do another time. These memories alone will keep us warm on cold winter evenings."

Maz nodded, beaming at Lesley.

"Maybe we should do the video thing," said Maz.

"Yes, maybe," agreed Lesley, leaning forward to stroke Maz's hair.

"I think we will see them again," Maz predicted confidently. "Who can resist toast and chocky biscuits at 4am? Besides, I'm sure that they will both have succumbed to my undeniable cuteness and charm."

On the way home from the park, Claire collected her service wash from the launderette. Ironing it in her bedroom, she put down the iron to speak to Emma.

"This is unreal," she complained, "I have to go to work tomorrow, pretending that everything is normal, when all I want to do is relive the weekend, dashing you off the odd risqué email."

"Odd and risqué? Watch your back, Claire. You'll have to sack yourself if you're caught."

"How can you have such a wonderful few days," Claire appealed to the world in general, "and then have to go back to being interested in precision engineered components?"

"Were you ever interested in precision engineered components?" asked Emma from the bed. "It's an age old problem, Claire. How to fake the week after the weekend."

"Especially since I can't tell anybody about it," agreed Claire. "How would Jessica react to this, I wonder?"

"Try her," suggested Emma with a shrug, adding, "Claire, I've always wondered. OK, for about a week I've wondered. In this business speak of yours, have you ever said Let's hoist it up the flagpole and see who salutes?"

"I have never said that."

"What about envelopes? Have you ever pushed one? Or boxes, do you think outside of them?"

Claire's expression said it all.

"You have, haven't you?" Emma clapped her hands jubilantly.

Claire put a skirt on to a hanger, the hanger into the wardrobe.

She crossed to the bed, looming over Emma.

"In view of the predominating local climate," she said, "as it relates to excessive misplaced mirth and general unfairness directed at the mortgage payer and chief executive officer, out-sourcing linked to strategic downsizing to alternative accommodation may be required in the short to medium term."

"What on earth does all that mean?" asked Emma.

"It means that unless you put a stop to this cheekiness, you will find yourself sleeping in the spare room next week. And," she added, "you can take the bus next time we go up to see Maz and Lesley. Now how's that for blue-sky thinking?"

27

Friday Night Debauchery

Claire sat composed at the dining table, diary and pen at the ready. She dialed Lesley and Maz's number. Lesley answered.

"Oh hello, Claire. Maz - it's Claire," she called.

Claire could clearly hear Maz's whoop of joy in the background. She wondered if they were using a speakerphone. If not, Maz's cry would have been deafening in Lesley's ear. Unperturbed, Lesley exchanged small talk with Claire until she was ready to discuss the date for a visit to the flat.

"Maria, sweetheart, could you bring the desk diary, please?" said Lesley.

Claire heard pages being turned.

"It's Wednesday now," she said, "how about a week on Friday?"

There was more page turning and hurried consultation.

"Not possible, sorry."

They couldn't make the Friday. The Saturday, then?

"Afraid not, no."

They moved on to the following weekend. Was that possible?

"That's Manchester," Claire heard Maz say. "More Friday night debauchery with unknown women from the ad. Saturday we're strutting our funky stuff in the clubs of the metropolis. Oh it must be the night feve-er -" Maz burst into song.

"Quiet, Maz."

Lesley came back on the line.

"Sorry, Claire, we're away all that weekend."

Turning to yet another page in her diary, it occurred to Claire that these women did more than walk the towpath or go to the pub in their quiet country village.

"We could do the end of the month," suggested Maz.

"Would the last Friday of the month suit?" Lesley asked.

They agreed on that, then said their farewells.

Pensive, Claire switched off the phone. She had not considered that Maz and Lesley might have received other responses to their advertisement. Or, having met herself and Emma, that they would be interested in following them up if they had. She had convinced herself that what had passed between the four women had been special, personal, and dependent upon her own and Emma's participation. She felt somehow betrayed.

"Irrational," she thought irritably, but still she was disappointed. She thought of Maz, who had seemed so eager, so pathetically pleased when Claire had made love with her less than a week ago.

"How could they move on so lightly, so heartlessly?" she thought. "Can it really mean so little to them?"

Claire's mood lifted considerably the next morning when she heard from another of the box numbered ads she'd replied to. This from a woman of twenty-four who "Would love to be the slave of two older

women." There was an eye-popping photograph. She would have printed it at home, Claire decided. No one would risk a picture like that passing through a print outlet. She would be grateful for its return, she wrote. Claire could understand why.

Claire was largely lost to her employer that day, devoting hours to the meticulous examination of the exciting new lifestyle she was cultivating, aided and abetted by Emma. Claire contrasted Emma's attitude to love making to that of some of her old boyfriends, who became jealous if she so much as looked at a photograph of a man in a magazine. From lingerie shopping to meeting Maz and Lesley, it was all working out even better than she imagined, which was saying a lot in view of the fecundity of Claire's erotic imagination. Key to it all was Emma, of course. Deriving pleasure from Claire's enjoyment, Emma was the ideal co-conspirator in their headlong pursuit of pleasure.

"Whereabouts?" asked Emma, when Claire told her about the letter in their regular evening phone call.

"Kent."

"Kent?" Emma repeated. "Do we want to go to Kent?"

"You might when you see the photograph," replied Claire. "Or she could come to us. I didn't know I was writing to Canterbury. It was the local edition of a magazine, I assumed the personals would be local too."

"Sounds interesting. I'll take a look at the letter and photo tomorrow," promised Emma. "What does a slave do, anyway?"

"Presumably they do as they are told," Claire replied.

"I guess so," said Emma, imagining having a slave to do her washing and ironing.

"Did you speak to Lesley and Maz?"

"Yes, we're on for Friday the 30th."

"Good choice," applauded Emma, "they can join us for Birmingham Pride on the Saturday."

As Emma sat in her small office the next day, her mind alighted upon a throwaway remark made at Claire's twenty-eighth birthday party, in the now dim and distant past. It revolved around a mutual liking for the town of Glastonbury in Somerset. They had agreed to take a trip there together. Unsurprisingly, nothing ever came of the idea.

Now Emma, conscious of having left all the organisation and administration in their relationship to Claire, made up her mind to present her with that trip to Glastonbury. Having discreetly ascertained when Claire had a weekend free, she'd searched the Internet for cosy, small hotels. Finding one to her liking, she telephoned to make a booking. Nowhere near as expensive as the Meadows, Emma had some difficulty persuading the receptionist that Miss Jarvis and Miss Mortimer really did want a double room, not a twin. Three times she was asked "Are you sure?" Three times she was sure, until Emma, finally victorious, succeeded in making a reservation for the weekend beginning the 23rd of May.

The month was passing blissfully for the honeymooning couple. Eagerly anticipated weekends brought visits to interesting places, romantic meals for two and long hours spent at trendy night spots. Weekdays were made tolerable by much phone calling and message leaving, and the promise of that coming weekend. Emma could barely believe that she was with Claire, her heart melting anew whenever Claire said she loved her. She could not have been happier, her fears over Claire's heterosexual past pushed to one side for the present.

While Emma tripped merrily along, Claire was entirely blown away by her new life. She was able to express her needs and desires, her fears and fantasies, to a lover who neither judged nor criticized. Their trust deepening as the weather improved, there seemed every prospect of summer being just as satisfying as the spring had been, their love affair stretching away golden and unclouded before them.

Against the splendour of what had gone before, the weekend in Glastonbury was less of a success. The weather was good, the hotel better than expected and the town much as each remembered, but whenever Emma suggested they might like to rest from pounding the arty streets and tucked away courtyards, she was assaulted by anecdotes of her girlfriend's weekend there with Ian. Though thought long gone, Ian Jeffrey Patterson was spread like a lingering rash across this Grail-seeking, wholegrain, holistic little town.

"We came here for lunch on the Saturday," Claire told her over coffee in a pricy organic restaurant. "He dropped pesto down his tee shirt then when my Zucchini Bake arrived, he said it looked just like courgette pie."

At another small café Emma learned that Ian recommended the fruits of the forest cheesecake, though Claire couldn't say, she'd had the sorbet.

Emma had bread and butter pudding and a bad case of indigestion. Just one more tale of Ian blithely told, Emma might not be responsible for her actions.

That Glastonbury should be haunted was a prospect Emma had not considered. She pledged to be more careful in future, only booking vacations to places new to them both. Like an idiot she had paid good money to be reminded that Claire was a girl with a heterosexual past.

Emma dealt with Claire's lack of tact in customary fashion: pretending to notice nothing amiss.

Returning home on the Sunday afternoon, Claire left the motorway at Worcester, taking first to the by-pass, then to a succession of suburban roads. They drew up outside an imposing detached house in a prosperous, leafy neighbourhood.

"We'll only stay an hour," she said. "I have to get home, there's something I need to prepare for work tomorrow. I just want my parents to meet you."

"Are you going to tell them who I am?" asked Emma.

Claire shook her head, repeating firmly,

"I just want them to meet you today. Treat this as a comfort stop."

An hour later, as predicted, they were making for the motorway once more. Claire was pleased.

"I thought that went well," she said.

"Mmm," said Emma, noncommittally.

"My mum likes you. I know her, she only takes people she likes on a tour of her garden."

"I wasn't happy deceiving her," said Emma.

"You weren't deceiving her." Claire was shocked.

"She thinks I'm your friend."

Claire frowned.

"You are my friend."

"No," replied Emma, "Jessica is your friend. I am your lover."

"If we argue about this Emma, do you realize it will be our first proper row? I said that I would tell them, now let me do it in my own way, in my own time."

"I'm sorry," said Emma, shying away from confrontation, "I didn't mean to annoy you."

Pulling on to the forecourt of a disused petrol station, Claire cut the engine. Releasing her safety belt, she twisted in her seat to consider Emma gravely. She leaned over to kiss her.

"I'm sorry too," she said, "but I do have a plan worked out. Now that my parents have met you, I can move on to phase two. But please be patient with me, Emma, this is not easy. They are used to me the way I was. All this is going to come as quite a shock."

28

Birmingham Pride

"Nothing moving out there," reported Emma, dropping the curtain back into place. "What time did you arrange?"

"7:30," replied Claire.

"Well, they're not late yet. They still have ten minutes. Even if Maz and Lesley use up every one, they'd still be on time, not late."

"I know, but we made the arrangement over three weeks ago. I've not heard a word since," Claire said anxiously. "Why haven't they called to reconfirm?"

Emma shrugged.

"It went into the diary, didn't it? I think they will come. Why wouldn't they?"

"What if they have something they would rather do tonight?" worried Claire.

"Better than coming here?" scoffed Emma. "There is nothing better than coming here."

"They were in Manchester last weekend meeting another couple. What if they decide to go back there?"

"They won't."

"Why not?"

"Birmingham's closer."

Returning to the window, Emma peered out again.

"I see a car... Oh no, it's gone past the turning. Why don't you ring them if you're concerned?"

"I couldn't!" cried Claire. "I'd be so embarrassed if they thought that I was worried they weren't coming."

"I'll do it," offered Emma, stepping over to the coffee table.

Claire's turn to shrug, she selected the number before giving the phone to Emma.

"No one home," said Emma after a moment. "Do you want to leave a message?"

Emma faced her nervous lover and smiled.

"It's all right, darling. Maz and Lesley are probably on their way over right now. And if they're not, well, you'll just have to make do with me on my own, won't you?"

Claire smiled for the first time in twenty minutes, saying archly,

"I'm sure we'd manage, we always have."

"Here's something," said Emma, back spying from the window. "It's turning in... It's slowed right down... Now it's speeding up again. It could be them."

Moments later the door bell rang and Claire hurried to admit her guests.

"Come in, come in. Did you find us easily?"

"We got a bit lost round the one-way system, where we were supposed to turn off for this development," said Maz. "We went round twice. We tried phoning, but it was engaged. Thought that we were going to be late,

so we stopped to ask at a pub. They put us right. It was 7:29 as we parked. You can't get any more on time than that."

Claire offered drinks. Everyone opted for hard liquor, certain that no one would be called on to drive tonight.

"I was thinking of getting this," said Maz, brandishing an album of dance music from Claire's collection.

Claire took it from her and, opening the player, evicted the soulful female vocalist.

"If we're going to play school disco, we will need more space," said Emma.

All four set about transforming the room. Emma and Maz shifted the heavy sofa, which unhelpfully, was not on castors.

"Won't your neighbours object to the noise?" asked Lesley, ever the solicitor.

"The only people who could hear anything are directly beneath and they're in Cyprus on holiday for the next month," Claire replied.

"How was Manchester?" asked Emma, consigning a small glass topped table to the edge of the room.

"It was fine," replied Lesley. "Maz and I were at university there. It's nice to go back every once in a while. Visit some old haunts. Check out any changes."

"I hear you were meeting another couple up there," Emma said.

Claire blanched. This was something she had overheard pass between the two of them, rather than information relayed for her specific consumption. Fortunately, Lesley seemed unconcerned by any breach of etiquette. She replied without missing a beat.

"That was fine too."

"Oh you little fibber," said Maz, scandalized. Hands on hips, she turned on Lesley.

"Now tell the truth, Lesley."

But Lesley was not given the chance, as Maz continued at full throttle.

"They weren't a patch on these lovely ladies here. Not half the fun. Nightclubbing, now that was great. Getting back to our little hotel hours after it was all locked up, then having to phone and apologize to be let in - that was a laugh too. But all the way home, we were saying how we

wished it had been you two we had been to see. Lesley came close to rear ending a Toyota when we got into detailed reminiscences."

Emma looked over at Claire, raised an eyebrow and smiled a "told you so" kind of smile.

Like teenagers home alone for the weekend, left in possession of the key to the drinks cabinet, Claire, her lover and their guests began to party. They opened all the windows, but the room remained warm. Clothing was discarded and soon everybody was dancing in their underwear. At the peak of this outpouring of energy and in complete defiance of the driving beat of the music, Maz took Claire in her arms in a slow, romantic embrace. Claire closed her eyes, burying her face in Maz's hair. Emma changed the music to fit the new mood.

With Gladys Knight taking the Midnight Train to Georgia, Maz and Claire were lost in a world of their own and so, hand in hand with Lesley, Emma led the way to the bedroom, where they lost no time in engaging in an ardent embrace of their own. They were joined later by Claire and Maz, arriving in boisterous spirits, demanding immediate admittance to Claire's regular sized double bed.

After a leisurely start to the day on Saturday, which included a marked reluctance by Emma and Lesley to get out of bed at all, the four women finally piled into Claire's car for the drive into the city. After searching for a while, they found a parking space part way along the route of the Birmingham Pride parade. Emma explained that only three of her designs came to be made after Laura from Art History's mum had balked at the idea of sewing five costumes in seven weeks. The workload on Mrs Stephens was further reduced when Emma lent a hand in making The Statue of Liberty from cardboard and painted fabric. She worked with Roger, the wearer of the costume, and a man with a vested interest in seeing that there were no rough edges to abrade his dignity.

Down the street they came: The Statue of Liberty, John Bull in his pink, white and blue waistcoat and Camptown, the gay Womble, distributing leaflets from his red leather satchel. The women joined the march, walking hand in hand in hand in hand, as it swaggered and cavorted through Birmingham's streets. Maz and Emma each took a turn carrying the Heart of England University banner, while Lesley fell into conversation with two men whose landlord had been trying to force them out of their flat. He'd employed some pretty dirty tactics since stumbling across indelible proof of the nature of their relationship. She gave them general guidance on actions they might take in order to block

him, impressing upon them the need to retain a solicitor of their own. Claire took a good look round at the other marchers, deciding that she was with the three best looking women on the parade.

In a cacophony of bells, whistles, competing music systems and cheering, the procession reached its final destination, where it broke up in search of a drink. Sinking down gratefully on to the grass in front of the stage, Claire and Emma, Maz and Lesley, rubbed the life back into aching feet. Partially restored, Maz and Emma left on a quest for refreshments for the weary walkers. Gone an impossibly long time, they returned with four wobbly plastic glasses of beer in a cardboard box.

"I didn't know there was any grass in the middle of Birmingham," Maz said in wonder.

"Yokel," accused Emma.

"Well, I didn't," she protested.

It was a warm, drowsy afternoon in the city. At length, the local radio djs gave way to a karaoke competition on the main stage. Emma did not see how this could be thought an improvement. A definite case of out of the frying pan... Before Lesley could stop her, Maz was up on stage, winning a festival tee shirt, singing Madonna's Like a Virgin to a growing throng of beery revellers. A geological age later, karaoke yielded to school sports day. During the second adult egg and spoon race, the four women ambled away in search of alternative amusements. They found plenty to eat and drink. Clothing, books, music, information, marital aids and an invitation to join West Midlands Police. Maz said that she would let them know. They dipped in and out of pubs and clubs, everywhere picking up leaflets and free papers.

Maz hinted and pestered until they steered for the small funfair. Emma took a ride on a Ferris wheel for a near bird's eye view of the city centre. Predictably, Maz headed straight for the dodgems. She called them the bumpers, but in Maz's case it was homicidal head-on ram raiding, practised in her own inimitable style. Lesley was surprisingly good on the rifle range, winning a prize. Claire toted a shiny Birmingham Pride helium balloon which she eventually gave to Maz. At the end of their meandering they returned to sit on the grass, this time away from the PA system.

"There are thousands of people here. They're not all gay are they?" asked Claire, tucking into a hot samosa

"By no means," Lesley replied, "but let's hope quite a few are. It is our festival, after all. The rest will be friends and family of gay people. Or people just caught up in the event. Probably had never heard of Birmingham Pride until today."

"It can be quite difficult to know who is gay, don't you think? Unless someone tells you, of course." said Claire.

Maz indicated a young couple lying on the grass.

"See those two over there? The blonde girl and the guy with the Whitesnake tee shirt? I'd bet my last rolo that she isn't gay. She's been doing some very rude things with him for the last fifteen minutes. Her dad is going to have to make him marry her at the rate they're going."

"There should be a law," said Emma, pontificating, "where everyone is obliged to tell everyone else if they're gay, even if they're only a little bit gay."

"You might have trouble with that one with the civil liberties lobby," pointed out Lesley.

"It would be handy though, don't you think?" Maz asked.

"There really should be some way of knowing if an attractive woman is gay," persisted Emma, unwilling to let go of a scheme to make life easier.

"I know," said Maz, drily. "She won't be. Present company excepted, of course."

"Maz, you old flatterer," laughed Lesley.

Emma lamented,

"You go to a gay bar, put your hard earned cash across the counter, but there's still no guarantee that you're sharing the evening with other lesbians and gay men. Straight people use our bars because they like the atmosphere. Transvestites and transsexuals go there in the hope that gays are more welcoming than the general population, which I doubt."

"Do you have something against straight people, Emma?" Lesley asked.

"Of course not. Live and let live. Some of my best friends, and all that. But don't they have enough bars and clubs without muddying the waters in ours?"

Maz turned to Claire.

"Did you guys meet on the scene?" she asked.

"No, we met in the kitchen of the house Emma was living in at the time. That was back in December, though it may as well have been another lifetime, with all that has happened since."

"Did you both know the other was gay when you met?" asked Lesley.

"Good lord, no," replied Claire, catching a wry look from Emma. "I didn't have the first idea that I was gay and it certainly never entered my mind to wonder about Emma's sexuality. In those days, I didn't. Everyone had the same one I did. All singing from the same hymn sheet."

"Well, paint me grey, fit knobbly tyres and call me a Landrover, Claire. Are you always this self-aware?" asked Maz.

"Maz!" hissed Lesley.

"What? I was only asking."

"Well, you shouldn't."

"It's a fair point," said Claire, raising a hand to call a truce.

"Surely you noticed how gorgeous women are," pressed Maz.

"Without a doubt I noticed. But going out romantically, getting married, having babies, these were all things one did with men. My sister did these things. My friends from university did them and in my turn, I would do them too."

Maz blew out her brains with two fingers. She keeled over slowly to lie, dead on the ground, eyes crossed, her features horribly contorted.

"That's what I thought," Emma told the deceased.

The corpse rallied, jerking upright.

Lesley brought the conversation back from this digression, asking,

"How did you find out that Emma was gay, Claire?"

Claire moved her gaze from Maz, who had a habit of dominating events without needing to say a word.

"She shared her dinner with me in the kitchen that night, and entertained me while I waited for my boyfriend. I thought she was a nice person and a good cook, but I didn't know that she was a lesbian until I cooked her a meal the following week."

"Then you guessed," said Maz.

"No, she told me. It made me more interested in her as a person and perhaps subconsciously challenged me to look at my own feelings and attitudes towards women. Realizing that I loved her came much later."

"It was quite convenient then, meeting Emma," ventured Lesley.

Claire paused.

"When Emma came into my life, it raised a lot of issues for me. But I was not looking to have any issues raised just then. At the end of last year, my future seemed clear. Sooner or later I would marry my boyfriend and have a child. These things are not going to happen now. Or at least, not in the way I thought they would. I'm not as open as Emma. I've been having problems integrating my new lifestyle into my work life. Telling my parents is still a work in progress, though my sister seems to think it should not be a problem because Emma can draw. The whole thing is irrational. Sometimes I wish that it could all be taken out of my hands, served up somehow as a *fait accompli*. I didn't go through the ten or fifteen years of confusion and heartache that seems common for emergent lesbians. But neither was it entirely straightforward or easy, despite Emma's love and support."

"What about this boyfriend Claire, is he still around?" asked Lesley, belatedly concerned over HIV/Aids.

Claire shook her head.

"He was gone some time before we became lovers. It's just as well, really, I wouldn't have enjoyed explaining it to him. He was pretty macho. He would never have understood a thing like this."

"Oh you don't want them understanding, Claire," Maz said sagely. "When they say they understand, what they really mean is they want to watch. Best to shoot them out of the way well beforehand."

"And what do you know about it, Maz?" teased Lesley. "When did you ever have a boyfriend?"

Maz was defiant.

"I might have. You don't know everything about me, Lesley Palmer. I could have slept with the entire Southampton football team and the reserves, and just not told you."

"Maz" said Lesley, taking her by the shoulders and looking into her face. "Have you ever been with a guy? No flights of imagination now. Just the truth. Have you?"

"No," said Maz sulkily.

"There," said Lesley, triumphantly.

Walking on her knees, Emma went over to Maz to give her a hug, planting a kiss on her cheek. A cheer went up from a nearby group of youths, accompanied by the suggestion,

"Go on, love, give 'er another un."

The women resolutely ignored them.

"I think that's really sweet, never having been with a bloke. There aren't many of us around," said Emma.

"Sweet? Sweet? Do I look sweet to you, Emma?" demanded Maz.

"Well, yes you do," said Claire, resisting the urge to hug her too. "You look completely adorable."

"That's even worse than sweet." complained Maz.

"Oh shut up," said Lesley, throwing Maz's new tee shirt at her. It missed.

"That was a rubbish throw, Lesley," said Maz. "Did you never play rounders at school?"

Claire intervened.

"Children, children," she admonished them both. "Play nicely or you'll have to go to your rooms."

"We'll have to be making tracks soon, anyway, Claire," Lesley replied.

"Yeah, we're off to see the outlaws," said Maz.

"Maria has a turbulent relationship with my parents," explained Lesley. "I usually go to see them on my own."

"I still go up there every once in a while, just to remind them how well their daughter has done for herself since leaving home," chipped in Maz. "Finding a dashing younger lover - three months and six days younger to be exact. A highly educated, successful business woman, with distinctive transport and a personalized number plate - that's me. Have you met my truck?"

They had not.

"We don't see it as often as we did," said Lesley. "It spends almost as much time in the local garage as it does in ours."

"Teething troubles," said Maz.

"It's nine years old," laughed Lesley.

"She's a late developer," said Maz, lying back complacently against Lesley.

Hours later, four tired festival goers took a black cab back across the city to pick up Claire's car from the car park. Emma sat next to Lesley. Unnoticed by the others they held hands beneath the folds of Lesley's skirt. Emma yawned massively, then apologized.

"Tired?" asked Lesley.

"Hmm," said Emma. "It's these sleepless Friday nights, they're killing me. I shall have to give them up."

"That would be such a pity," Lesley said quietly, squeezing Emma's hand, "I've become really quite used to you."

Emma returned the pressure, immediately reconsidering.

"Maybe I won't give them up just yet. Not for the sake of a few milligrams of caffeine and an afternoon nap."

"Good," said Lesley, "a cup of coffee will do the trick."

Back at Claire's flat, Emma and Lesley swapped contact numbers and email addresses, while Maz and Claire were in the kitchen sorting out dinner.

Before heading off to the North East, Lesley and Maz made sure to arrange another visit to Staffordshire for Claire and her girlfriend. When they had gone, Claire reclined in her chair.

"Do you think we're becoming staid. That we've fallen into a rut?" she asked.

"No, why?" asked Emma, bringing in two glasses of home-made pina colada.

"We have made another arrangement to see Maz and Lesley in four week's time. Why four, not three or five, or next weekend for that matter?"

Emma shrugged.

"There could be many reasons. I think a lot of the fun for them is the anticipation of meeting someone new. Then there is reliving the experience afterwards. That way they get a lot of value from each encounter, so don't need to repeat it too often. Lesley told me privately that Maz was very doubtful when the idea of meeting people for sex was first mooted. Maz was afraid that Lesley might leave her for one of the

others. That could be another reason they don't do it every week, to prevent Maz's feeling insecure. Then there's the fact that seeing each other every twenty eight days has so far avoided everyone's period."

"Assuming that everyone has a twenty eight day cycle," said Claire sceptically. "Would you want to do it more often?" she asked.

"I don't think so" replied Emma, judging that the cocktail was mixed to perfection. "Being involved with someone is something I haven't done for a while and I enjoy all the couplesy things we do together."

"You're not falling in love with Lesley, then?" teased Claire.

"Who, me?" asked Emma, startled, wondering whether her growing affection for Lesley had not gone unnoticed after all.

"You did spend quite a lot of last night with her," pointed out Claire.

"Pots and kettles come to mind there, Claire. It's just as well Lesley and I could find something to do together, after Maz had monopolized you for the evening. What did you expect us to do, play cards or try to figure out what to do with that synthesizer thing of yours?"

Righteous indignation vented, Emma became thoughtful.

"Pity the videoing didn't work out better. Eight arms, eight legs, it was like the inside of a rugby scrum."

"We will have to make individual movies next time," said Claire.

"How big is the hard drive in that video camera?"

"Big enough," Claire replied. "We could shoot War and Peace."

"That's big enough," agreed Emma. "Well Claribel, are you ready to tell me which one of them you prefer yet?. You did promise to tell me this time."

Claire pondered a while.

"I won't compete with you for Lesley," she said at last, "I know how you adore feminine women. You can have her. And I do quite like Maz, she reminds me of you in a way."

"I can see that Maz has taken to you," said Emma. "I wouldn't like to be the one to tell her she can't have you, either. Imagine the damage she could do if she put my head between her breasts then flexed her muscles."

"You're not afraid of her, are you?" Claire laughed. "She's just a big kid."

"Sure I'm a tad on the nervy side," shrugged Emma. "Maz is bigger and stronger than me. I positively owe it to myself to be afraid. Let's hope she never gets jealous of you or me with Lesley."

"Oh Emma, I never realized you were a scaredy cat, and over such a harmless sweetie too. Now Lesley *is* scary. Did you notice the skill with which she handled that gun?"

29

One More Step

Claire looked at her desk clock. It was coming up to 4:30. Having done all the work she intended to do for today, she was casting about for distractions to fill the last half hour. She had already called Jessica, chatting about this and that, but omitting to tell her about the activities of Friday night. She did tell her that she and Emma had been at Birmingham Pride with Maz and Lesley, "two friends of ours," which was true, as far as it went. She glanced again at the clock, deciding it would be fun to give them a call. She looked up their home number then dialed, intending to leave a message on the answerphone.

"Hello, Maria speaking," said Maz.

"Oh, Maz," cried Claire flustered, "I wasn't expecting anyone to be home yet. It's Claire."

"Hi, Claire. Sorry to disappoint. I completed a tricky job this afternoon, so I magnanimously gave myself the rest of the day off. Lesley won't be in till late today, so I'm scrubbed clean, luxuriating in the prospect of an early dinner on the terrace. Anyway, sweetness, what can I do for you?"

"Well, nothing really," admitted Claire. "I'm at work. I thought I'd leave a cheery greeting for you two to play when you got in. That's all."

"Oh," said Maz, "I thought you might be ringing to suggest that you and I met up for a drink. Now I'm mortally disappointed, terminally miffed in fact. Best if I don't have contact with any sharp implements tonight."

Claire decided quickly.

"Yes, we could go for a drink. When?"

"Tonight," replied Maz. "About 6:30."

They discussed various venues before settling on a pretty country pub known to them both.

"There won't be time for me to go home," explained Claire, "I'll have to come in my work clothes."

Maz laughed.

"Claire, you could wear my work clothes and still look fantastic."

Claire pulled on to the pub car park, slotting into a space next to a well used red pickup truck. In curly gold lettering was written:

M Dawson
Landscape Garden
and
Pool Services

She went inside, immediately spotting Maz in the otherwise empty window alcove. She mimed "would you like a drink?" but Maz raised her glass to show that she still had most of a glassful. Claire ordered a bar snack, then took her drink to join her companion. Maz stood as Claire approached. They greeted each other warmly, then sat side by side on the blue velvet banquette.

"Have you been here long?" Claire asked, sipping her drink.

"About forty minutes. I didn't want you arriving and thinking that I wasn't coming, so I got here early."

"That's sweet," said Claire, touching Maz's wrist.

Maz beamed.

"I avoided the motorways, so probably saved the best part of an hour getting here," said Claire. "Where is Lesley this evening? Is she going to join us?"

"Not tonight," Maz replied. "She's a volunteer with a free legal advice centre. She does until 9pm every Thursday. Says it's socially satisfying."

"What kind of work does she do there?"

"Oh, a range. Lots of custody and family stuff. Immigration, employment, consumer law. Different things. I tell you, to look at her she's all Scandinavian cool, but show her evidence of unfairness or injustice, she's Vinny the Rottweiler."

"Is she Scandinavian then?" asked Claire, curious.

"No," said Maz, "she's a Geordie."

"Oh," said Claire, confused.

Claire's food arrived just then. She offered some to Maz. She refused, but sneaked a prawn all the same.

"I saw your truck outside," Claire said, finishing her baguette.

"Mitzi," said Maz.

Claire looked at her.

"Mitzi Mazda," Maz explained. "She's been a good old truck, but she is beginning to give notice now. I shall have to give some thought to her successor. Without my truck, I'd have no business."

"Is she four wheel drive?" Claire asked.

Maz nodded.

"My last boyfriend had a 4x4."

"They can be useful," replied Maz. "4x4s I mean, not boyfriends."

Claire was tired. Stifling a yawn, she rubbed her temples, pinching the skin between her eyebrows. She had not done much at work today, but it had still taken all day.

"I've been stuck in a hermetically sealed office since nine o'clock this morning. Would you mind if we went for a drive, Maria? I'll bring you back for Mitzi."

Maz was all for the idea. They drank up swiftly.

Out on the car park, a beautiful evening was drawing to a close. Maz opened the cab of her truck, thrusting in a tanned arm to remove a thick white sweater.

"Is that a cricket sweater?" asked Claire, backing out of the parking space.

"Yes, Hampshire CCC. Given to me by my first boyfriend. Well, would-be boyfriend. He was obviously barking up the wrong tree with me."

"Was he a cricketer?"

"On the ground staff. This jumper is an enduring reminder of something never meant to be."

"Was this before you realized you were gay?" asked Claire.

"Oh no," said Maz, "I knew and he did, too. I thought that we were friends. That he respected me. It took a while for it to dawn, just exactly what he did want from me. I made sure I kept the sweater though."

Claire adjusted the air conditioner, cooling the warm interior.

"Can you believe that six months ago, I had no idea that I was gay? I can't, but it is true. I'd always known that women are in every way superior, but I'd never fallen in love with one before. I confused the life out of Emma all winter."

"I'm glad you're gay, Claire, I hope you are too. If you've travelled a rough road getting here, there are people who care that you've arrived."

"Thank you," said Claire, touched.

They drove on in silence until Claire asked suddenly,

"Have you heard of Ian Botham?"

"Beefy?" asked Maz, surprised. "Yes, I know of him. Somerset and England, wasn't it?"

"Worcestershire and Durham too," said Claire.

"Yes, I remember I.T. Botham. Why do you ask?"

"No particular reason," Claire replied lightly. "Just wondering."

To the strains of Beethoven's Ode to Joy, Claire powered the big car to the top of a Shropshire viewpoint. They got out of the car, standing alone on the deserted car park. It was considerably cooler up here than it had been outside the pub. A gusting wind blew dust and leaves across the forlorn parking area. The sun was sinking rapidly towards a bank of dense purple cloud. Claire shivered.

"Aren't you cold?" she asked, seeing the wind ripple Maz's shirt against her body.

"You can't be a gardener if you're worried about cold," Maz called back above the wind.

She opened the car door, taking out the thick woollen sweater. Wrapping it round Claire's shoulders, she folded the sleeves across her chest. Claire leaned against the car, regarding Maz. She was tall and athletic in the failing light, hair blowing across her face. Claire held out her arms, inviting her into her embrace. They kissed. Maz insinuated her fingers up inside Claire's blouse, stroking her warm back.

They held tight to one another and it was many minutes before Maz shifted in Claire's arms. Claire pulled the hair from Maz's face, fighting a losing battle as the wind plastered it against her cheek.

"What will you tell Lesley about tonight?" she asked.

Maz backed away to see Claire's face.

"That depends," she replied. "As things stand, I would tell her the truth. That you phoned. Got me by accident. We met for a drink, then went for a drive. That's if... "

"If," prompted Claire.

"If... things don't go any further between us", said Maz, endeavouring to discern Claire's expression in the gloom. "She might think it strange, me meeting you alone, but there would not be any real problem."

"And if things did go further?" asked Claire.

"Then be assured that I would be stepping outside of what is acceptable in our relationship. Lesley and I talked long and hard before we agreed to see other women. It was not an easy choice, not for me. I agreed for Lesley. We put together a set of rules. Ironically, they were there to protect me from getting hurt."

"Rules?" murmured Claire, her words almost lost in the gathering dark.

Maz shrugged.

"Rules. Rigid, non-negotiable guidelines. About not becoming emotionally attached to any of the others... Not developing feelings for anyone else. And it had to be as a couple and only as a couple, that we did these things. I used to think that these rules applied only to Lesley. I never thought that anything would ever happen to me."

Maz paused before continuing, the hill engulfed in premature darkness.

"Usually, you see, our foursomes were more like three with one remainder. With you, Claire, it was different. It was as if you actually wanted to make love with me."

"I did," said Claire, the white sweater glowing eerily against the dark bulk of the car. "I found you..." Claire searched for words. "Very appealing. From the first time I saw you, charging downstairs to greet us. I knew that Emma would want Lesley, but I wanted you."

"You did?" asked Maz.

Claire was barely audible above the wind.

"You had so much strength and energy, and you made everybody laugh. I thought ... I really like this Maz. I couldn't wait to go to bed with you and it was every bit as much fun as I thought it would be. I loved your vitality. Emma and I have much the same kind of rules when meeting other women as you have with Lesley. I even made Emma promise not to see other women while she was seeing me. That going with other couples was something we did together to enhance and explore our own relationship. It was never supposed to lead to us having feelings for any the others either. We thought that it would stop at sex."

Claire raised her voice.

"I can barely see you, Maria. Please come back, I need you to hold me."

Maz stepped forward, drawing Claire against her body.

"One more step and we break our own rules," said Claire. "Do we take it?"

"Yes," replied Maz, quietly, "we do. But not tonight. I need to leave now if I'm to get home ahead of Lesley."

Maz's ageing pickup soon became a familiar sight in the car park below Claire's apartment, accorded generous elbow room by the sleek saloons and coupés whose habitual haunt it was. Claire gave her a key to let herself in should she arrive first, which she often did in her keenness to be with Claire. Often they spent their Thursday night making love, but not always. Sometimes instead they watched a rented movie, ate out or went for a drink in a low key bar, wary of running into anyone they might recognize. Frequently Emma would ring to discuss the coming weekend or to say sweet nothings, the way lovers do. Unfailingly, Claire was as warm and loving to Emma as she was to Maz, waiting patiently in the living room or bedroom. After a while, Claire asked Emma to ring around 10pm, citing pressure of work for her request. When the two couples met again in Staffordshire as arranged, Maz and Claire went out of their way to include the others, almost to the point of excluding one another.

They were happy in their clandestine affair, a few snatched hours while Lesley was sorting out problems, free of charge. Maz, always back in time to welcome her home from her extended day, curling herself into Lesley's back to sleep, warm and familiar in their bed.

"Did you know," said Claire, paraphrasing an item she had read that morning in a newspaper, "the majority of British teenagers want stable, committed relationships, with a significant number wanting their first sexual experience to take place only after they're married."

"Yeah, who with?" asked Maz.

"Their husband or wife, you Nana," Claire smiled.

They were lying on a blanket, enjoying some warm Thursday evening sunshine in Claire's local park. Maz was flat on her back, contemplating the towering splendour of a majestic oak tree. She rolled over to face her illicit love.

"Who commissioned this survey, Claire, the Catholic Church?"

"It was done for the BBC."

"Actually, yes," decided Maz. "I did know that the youth of today are indescribably boring - I asked them."

"You did what?" asked Claire, puzzled. "When?"

"When I went to the high school to detox their swimming pool - I won the tender. I have to make sure the whole area is safe. I earwig the

little darlings talking in the changing rooms. They do seem terribly staid and conservative. I pop in the odd question for clarification."

"Maz, you can't go into schools, questioning children about their attitudes to sex. You'll end up in court!" cried Claire, fearful for Maz's livelihood, reputation and liberty.

"I suppose you're right," conceded Maz. "Anyway, do you want to know what I learned? They're only doing it to annoy their parents. Well, perhaps not annoy exactly. They're just being contrary. Contemptuous of their parents' more liberal attitudes, they plan to conduct themselves in a way that would make their Edwardian ancestors proud. It's what kids are bound to do. The opposite of what their parents did. Forget about this batch. It's this lot's kids I'm looking forward to -"

"Just a minute, Maz. When these teenagers have children of their own, and these children are old enough not to land you in gaol, how old will you be?"

Maz did the maths.

"About sixty, but I intend to be young for my age."

"You're incorrigible," said Claire, despairing of her reckless lover.

"I have an eye to the future," said Maz, unrepentant, returning to the contemplation of the majestic oak.

Emma put down Pete's pint in the darts and dominoes pub, his local. His lived in face lit up.

"Cheers, Emma, you're a good 'un," he said with feeling.

They went on to deal in depth with the health and happiness of loved ones, the weather and Birmingham City's chances of avoiding relegation this season. Moving on, Pete asked,

"Are you and Claire still doing that wife swapping thing?"

"We are continuing to see this other couple, if that's what you mean," Emma replied primly. "Just once a month, as it's worked out. We're doing plenty of other things besides. For the most part it's just Claire and me. I'm not sure that our days of seeing the others aren't numbered, though. Last time we got together, Claire and this woman, Maz, were very cool to one another. Well, that's no good. Everyone needs to get on with everyone else, at least a little bit, if it's going to work."

"I don't see how it can work, however you do it," said Pete, studying the head on his pint, his regular, slightly worried expression coming to the fore. "Three for god's sake! Seems to me it's taking a big risk to involve other people in your thing with your girlfriend. Why not just stick with Claire and be satisfied? Surely it's hard enough dealing with one person at a time without expanding it to three?"

"You'd think so," said Emma, "but we spend almost as much time clowning around or talking as we do making love. It's a lot lighter than you think, Pete. Everyone's in a stable relationship, thirteen years' worth in the case of Maz and Lesley. Nobody's making the mistake of taking it too seriously."

"Maybe you're right, Em, but it would only need one person to start taking things a bit too seriously for there to be ructions for all four. It doesn't seem worth it to me. Not just for sex."

"Pete, you gotta be there," said Emma, grinning.

"I don't want to be there, Em. I don't even want to think about it. I have enough trouble sleeping as it is."

30

So Many Women

"Claire, sweetheart, how do you feel about hiding our relationship from Emma?" asked Maz, turning down the music to hear her reply.

It was Thursday night and Maz was at Claire's flat as usual.

Claire considered.

"It's messy," she replied. "Although Emma agreed to a monogamous relationship, she would normally have assumed we were both free to see other people. In fact she was seeing someone, quite happily as I recall. Then I stumbled out of the closet, putting a stop to all that. Right from the beginning, I made it clear that I didn't want it to be like that, that we would be faithful to each other. When going with other couples came up, well it wouldn't be a problem. We thought that meeting you, or any other couple, would be perfectly safe. We'd be doing it together with all the

detailed safeguards we'd agreed upon. It should have been fine. We wrote it down and everything. As it turned out, we considered every dimension except the human one. That you were people who had jobs and made breakfasts and kept houseplants, every bit as worthy of love and respect as we were."

"Being treated like a sex object, damn near the story of my life," said Maz. "Will you to fess up to Emma?"

"No, definitely not. If I was going to try to renegotiate matters with Emma, I should have done it before starting to see you. I'm stuck now. Besides, I can't tell Emma without potentially exposing your duplicity to Lesley. Emma would think it wrong if three of us knew something, but Lesley was kept in the dark. As I say, all a bit of a mess."

"Do you think she's noticed anything?" asked Maz, sliding off the sofa on to the floor at Claire's feet. She leaned her head against Claire's knee, idly tracing along her foot with a fingernail.

"I'm sure she hasn't," replied Claire, moving her foot out of Maz's reach. "My relationship with you has changed nothing between Emma and me. Emma has a lot of emotions, but she's not big on jealousy. She likes to see me happy. Ironical that I keep from her much of what is making me happy right now. I wish I'd never insisted on fidelity, though. A degree of freedom would have been better all round."

"Ah, so many women, so little time," Maz repeated an oft heard mantra.

"What about you, Maria? How do you feel about deceiving Lesley?"

"It's too easy," Maz replied, sadly. "It never even occurs to her that I might be going behind her back. She expects me to be sprawled on the sofa when she gets in on a Thursday night, and I am."

"Would you like to tell her?" asked Claire.

"No," said Maz, staring bleakly at her half empty glass on the coffee table. "We've made a life together, both of us working hard. I don't know how long you might want me, Claire. I'm flattered that you want me at all, but Lesley has been good to me."

"You've known each other a long time," said Claire.

Maz agreed.

"Thirteen years and counting. What was it Emma said? Half her lifetime. I still love her, you know, despite doing this with you."

“That's fine,” Claire assured her, “no one wants to hurt Lesley or Emma.”

Maz perked up.

“Wouldn't it be funny if Emma and Lesley were seeing each other, afraid that we'd find out?”

Lesley sighed, rising gracefully to her feet, aware that her attention had been anywhere but on her breathing for the past forty five minutes. She was in her meditation room, set up in the back bedroom of the home she owned with Maz. The curtains were closed against the evening sun, dipping low now behind the boundary trees. Tonight the flickering candles, the smell of sandalwood oil and the accumulated ambience of hundreds of hours of meditation had combined to produce the perfect conditions for A Good Think. A Good Think about Claire, Emma, Maz and herself.

Lesley was glad they had met Claire and Emma. It was the first and only time that her notion had worked out wholly as she envisaged. Her plan had always been to see a couple regularly, but not frequently. For over a year however, first meetings had resulted in nothing more than an unsatisfactory series of four way one night stands. Lesley had been disappointed. She had hoped for a situation of ongoing friendliness between the participants, though it soon became apparent that this was going to be harder to achieve than she realized. Something, usually some emotional insecurity, had intervened each time to put an end to further meetings. With Claire and Emma and their monthly visits, she had finally got what she was looking for.

Lesley's demand that she and Maz engage in the writing and answering of personal ads had been born of desperation. She was accustomed to people describing themselves as celibate when merely between lovers. When opportunity arrived, celibacy departed with never a backward glance. But for Lesley, a situation of near celibacy had been imposed upon her by a seldom motivated partner. Lesley was trapped. She had not been free to find someone new, but her lover of over a decade while affectionate still, appeared to have almost no sexual desire for her. It was a painful and bewildering turn of events for Lesley. Ironic too, looking back to their time at university.

Maz, the confirmed and confident lesbian had clowning around the junior common room until she'd succeeded in hijacking Lesley's attention with her antics. Keeping up the assault for weeks on end, Lesley had

fallen head over heels in love with the tall girl with the childlike nature. All this coming at a time when Lesley was neither confirmed nor confident in her own sexuality.

In the early days, they had bought bags of fruit, made mounds of sandwiches, filled an outsize flask with coffee, then stayed in bed for entire weekends at a time. When, years later, their sex life had dwindled and then died, Maz had seemed unconcerned. Protesting that she still loved Lesley as much as she ever had, Maz was comfortable with the cooling of their physical ardour. It was only when Lesley had reached the end of her endurance, frustration and unhappiness bursting from her in sobs and threats to leave, that Maz saw the seriousness of the situation, eventually agreeing to Lesley's solution.

Eventually. For Lesley was no longer satisfied with Maz alone. Her horizons broadening, she imagined enjoying the breadth of experience she felt she had missed out on in her teens and twenties, when she had settled down with her first serious affair.

Meeting Claire and Emma had been very good. Theirs was a bright, fresh new love, which was attractive. Lesley really did feel as though she had been included on their honeymoon. She particularly liked Emma. Oh, they swapped back and forth to guard against anyone feeling left out, but she liked Emma best and Emma liked her. Emma was small, the same height as Lesley. It was refreshing to stand looking into somebody's eyes rather than up their nose. Both Maz and Claire were tall women. Claire was classically beautiful, but Emma had an appeal of her own. She had a vaguely boyish look, with her short fair hair and small breasts. A kind of toned down version of Maz, she thought. Emma appeared streetwise but she carried the bruises of numerous past romantic skirmishes. She possessed many of the qualities that first attracted Lesley to Maz, settling her into a lesbian lifestyle when she might still have been sufficiently young and inexperienced to have been influenced either way. But above all else, Emma was not the loose cannon Maz was. Lesley sometimes thought that Maz could cause trouble in an empty room and was often on edge over what Maz would say or do next.

Lesley opened the curtains. She looked out on to the mature garden, planted by Maz when they first moved to the new house. She had Lesley choose all of the shrubs and flowers, all the colours and textures and the site for the wildlife friendly pond, but she had insisted on doing all the work herself. It was her gift to Lesley. Lesley bent to unplug the oil warmer. Maz was down the pub tonight, playing bar billiards and skittles with Danny, a guy she took on every spring when her workload picked

up. Lesley snuffed out the candles then went downstairs. She thought about phoning Emma, but decided against it. After a lively exchange of emails over the past few days, tomorrow's meeting was set and there was nothing left to say.

At least, nothing to say tonight.

Lesley parked in the university car park in good time for Emma's finishing work. She had been in Solihull all day, visiting an old client. Old in every sense of the word, Mr Hiller had been a valued client of Lesley's law firm for over sixty years. Now increasingly infirm, it made good business sense for Lesley to go over personally with the new will. It had been revised after the death of Mr Hiller's sister, herself a wealthy woman from a wealthy family. Not a man to send a text message, Mr Hiller appreciated when things were done properly, at the proper pace and by an attractive young woman he would be happy to have as a granddaughter.

Lesley leaned against the bonnet of her car, soaking up the warm sunshine. A "heatwave" according to the papers, it was the third day in succession that it had been unusually warm for the time of year. At length, she began walking towards the Faculty of Art building. She quickly spotted Emma, leaving the administration block and heading her way. They met, kissing full on the lips before walking back to the car park, arms around each other's waist. Lesley pressed the keyfob, sliding the convertible roof elegantly into the boot of her neat little sports car.

"That is such a clever trick", Emma said admiringly, getting into the passenger seat.

"There aren't many days when we can do this," Lesley said. "Let's enjoy it while we can."

They drove over to a nearby park where they sat drinking cans of pop under a lime green umbrella. Lesley said,

"You mentioned in your email that you were not sure whether you would recognize me with my clothes on. Did you know me, or were you simply out to kiss the first woman you found between the art department and the car park?"

"Not just any woman," denied Emma. "Only a goddess with the sun in her flaxen hair."

Lesley smiled at the flattery, then became serious.

"I know that ours is an unusual set of circumstances," she said, glancing at Emma, "having a sexual affair first and a friendship second. Having said that, it has been working well. Until the last time, that is. I don't know if you noticed, but things between Maz and Claire seem to me to have become rather distant and cool." Lesley paused, perplexed. "They were fine with you and me, but hardly went near one another. Now I'm afraid that everything will come to an end if the two of them can't get on."

Emma replied gravely,

"Yes, I did notice and the same thought had struck me."

Lesley went on,

"You may also have noticed that I'm very fond of you. More than fond, in fact. I would think it a terrible shame if we were unable to see each other in future."

Emma held Lesley's gaze throughout, replying softly,

"Yes, me too."

Encouraged, Lesley continued,

"What I want to put to you, is the possibility that you and I should continue to know each other, regardless of what the others decide."

Put on the spot, Emma looked to buy time, taking a sip from her can, then lowering her eyes, she traced round the trademark with a fingernail.

"A secret affair, do you mean?" she asked.

"Not necessarily a sexual affair," Lesley replied, "though that would be nice too. No, what I had in mind was a kind of close and loving friendship. I don't have a close female friend. Apart from Maria, of course. I don't want what I see developing between you and me to disappear, if friction between the other two compels us to stop meeting."

Having laid her cards on the table, she waited for Emma's response. Emma was sympathetic to Lesley. Although this was the first time she had spoken directly of being lonely in her relationship with Maz, Emma was not overly surprised. Maz could be quite a handful. Emma wondered how Lesley came to be the indulgent adoptive parent of her manic and unpredictable girlfriend. Emma did not dislike Maz, on the contrary, she found her highly entertaining and amusing. Visits to Planet Maz however, were not excursions which she would contemplate without the Maz-absorbing company of other people and even then, not for prolonged periods at a time. Maz, with her boundless energy and unique personality

was too much of a thing for Emma, leaving her to marvel at Lesley's patience and endurance.

Emma turned her mind to Lesley's proposal, but felt uneasy. Whether sexual or not, she did not want to become involved in secret dealings with Lesley, however much sympathy she might feel for her plight. None of Emma's critics and there have been plenty, could in all honesty accuse her of being underhand. Whatever Emma did, she did in the light.

Emma looked at Lesley waiting apparently serenely, for her to reply, then noticed a tell-tale nerve fluttering in Lesley's cheek. Time was ticking and Emma needed to say something. Ordinarily she would have been only too pleased to begin an affair with Lesley, though to say so now would help no one in view of her newly agreed chastity. A promise was after all, a promise and Emma took her obligations seriously.

With no surreptitious love affair beckoning chaste Emma, some other solution to a mutual problem had to be found. The rift had been there for all to see, yet Emma wanted desperately to believe that the harmony of the recent past might somehow be restored to their little group. That happy state that existed before the spark had faded between Maz and Claire, plunging herself and Lesley into uncertainty.

"I think the best thing," she said at length, "is to work on our partners. Try to get them to appreciate the outstanding qualities of the other and be more friendly in future. Pretend if they have to; it's for the greater good. Then hopefully we can all get back to enjoying our four weekly get-togethers, the same as we used to. Frankly, I'm surprised at Claire going off Maz, if that is what has happened. Maz has the sort of look and energy about her that I thought Claire liked."

"Maybe it's a personality thing," suggested Lesley.

"Could be, let's hope we can find out, then do something about it. When Claire and I contacted the two of you, Lesley, it was just for sex, I'm sure it was the same for you. But in all the discussions we had beforehand, when I thought we had looked at it from every angle, it never occurred to me just how much I was going to like the two of you, and how sad I would feel if our time together was ever threatened."

Lesley slid her hand part way across the table. Emma covered it with her own. She would have kissed Lesley, were alfresco kissing in public not a privilege accorded solely to heterosexuals and had not a bunch of kids just arrived, bad-mouthing the café owner and looking for something to trash.

They talked some more, discussing various bribes or threats they might employ, but it came down in the end to asking their lovers what was wrong, then imploring them to give things another go. It was a weak strategy, but the only one open to them.

As Lesley drove home after dropping Emma at the station, she felt more cheerful. She had aired her concerns, Emma agreeing that there was indeed a palpable rift between Claire and Maz. Lesley was not convinced that the situation really was retrievable, having seen just how offhand they had been with one another, but she did feel heartened. At least now there was a united plan of action aimed at resolving the problem. She changed gear to dart past a lumbering BMW, hurrying home to speak to Maz.

“Good morning, Madam. I see you are admiring our handsome new convertible,” said the oily car salesman. “Beautiful, isn't she?” he asked, casting a slantwise eye over Lesley, deciding at once that

a) she could afford the car she was looking at
and

b) he stood to make an excellent profit on her pretty bronze cabriolet, if she would agree to part exchange at the figure he had in mind.

Practically slaverling over the deal he was about to make, he fetched the keys for a test drive. As she took the car through the town and out on to the open road, Lesley reflected on the email she'd received late yesterday. The news it relayed relieved her of her recent cares, giving her the enthusiasm to turn her mind to other things. Like buying a new car. Something with less out and out grunt but more boot space, she thought. Less of a head-turner, in fact a vehicle more in keeping with her status as a partner in a prominent local law firm.

As she had driven away from Birmingham two days ago, Lesley had been ready to beg or even bully Maz into showing more affection towards Claire in future. Yet mentioning her concerns to Maz at dinner, she had been immediately reassured. Maz was astonished that Lesley could have thought for one second that there was any lack of feeling between herself and Claire. So transparently honest had been Maz's denial, Lesley began to wonder if her misgivings had been illusory; if she had been anxious without reason. But Emma had seen it too and had drawn the same conclusion.

Against this background Emma's email arrived, short but instantly liberating. Claire had been mortified to hear that she had unwittingly been a source of concern to Emma (who had not let on that she had been comparing notes with Lesley). They could rest assured: Claire would be measurably more demonstrative with Maz in future. She had vociferously reasserted her commitment to their convivial little soirées, leaving Emma convinced that she too had been worried over nothing.

Lesley turned on to the forecourt of the car dealership, applying the handbrake but leaving the engine running. She agreed that this car was indeed a Scandinavian rocket launcher. It had power to spare. But she did not really like it. The multicoloured dashboard display would be fine in a spaceship, but there were many more gauges, gadgets, switches and readouts than could ever be necessary for the relatively simple task of driving. What was intended to appear hi-tech seemed cluttered to Lesley, while the whole concept of the interior felt very masculine. Lots of black leather, dark wood trim, black carpet. It had blacked out windows she could barely see through. Even the air conditioning vents and indicator stalks had a chunky, mannish heaviness about them. It would be the ultimate toy for a boy, but it was never going to be a serious rival for her affections.

She thanked the long-faced salesman, telling him that unfortunately, the car was not what she was looking for. She drove away, not at all discouraged, but thinking happily that her feminine little sports car had always been the perfect choice.

31

Unholy Mess

Returning to her office after lunch, Claire found a message on her desk in Sarah's disjointed hand.

“Ring Mars.”

Claire rang, Maz answering the phone gravely,

"Hello, Claire, thanks for getting back to me. It's Mitzi. She let go in a pretty major way today. The garage won't have the parts until the morning, so I won't be able to get over to see you tonight."

"Oh no," replied Claire, dismayed, "I was so looking forward to seeing you. What shall we do? Do we give it a miss this week or would you like me to come over to you?"

"I'm down enough over Mitzi as it is, Claire. Not seeing you this week really would be the pits. Please come. I'll leave the garage door open so that you can drive straight in. Lesley won't be home before 9:30. We'll have loads of time. I'm so glad you're coming over, Sweetness, I couldn't go a fortnight without seeing you."

Maz operated the electric motor, closing the big double door on Claire's Jaguar. She dragged Claire from the car into the kitchen, hugging and kissing her joyfully.

"Good grief!" cried Claire, laughing, fending off Maz with both hands. "If I'd known you'd be this pleased to see me, I'd have visited you here weeks ago."

"I'm not pleased, I'm ecstatic," said Maz. "Do you want my body now or would you like something to drink first?"

"How about we take coffee upstairs?" suggested Claire.

"A brilliant compromise, Carruthers. Let's go."

Maz led Claire to the first floor landing.

"In here," she said, opening the door to the erroneously titled master bedroom.

Claire was doubtful.

"Not the Rumpus Room?" she asked.

Maz shook her head.

"The Rumpus Room is where we play," she replied. "You've taken me to your bed, now I want to take you to mine."

She stood aside to allow Claire to enter ahead of her. The room was big and bright, filled with evening sunlight. The bed Maz might consider hers, but the room spoke wholly of Lesley. The dressing table was covered in perfumes and cosmetics, obviously Lesley's, Maz never wore make-up. The room was neat and tidy. Claire fancied that any room of Maz's would contain posters of pop stars and sporting heroes, her discarded clothing naturally draped across the back of a chair.

Claire was shown to the en suite bathroom where she quickly showered. Putting down her coffee on the bedside table, Maz pulled back the duvet in readiness, drawing the curtains against the westering sun. Maz was in bed by the time Claire reappeared from the bathroom.

Wrapped in a towel, she left damp footprints across the polished wood floor. Slipping in beside Maz, they embraced with love.

Claire awoke abruptly from a doze. Instantly, she began to panic.

"What time is it?" she asked, terrified.

"Nearly eight," said Maz, reaching out to calm her.

Relieved, Claire subsided on to the pillow, her heart beating like a hammer. Maz gathered her into a soothing embrace.

"Would you like something to eat?" Maz asked once Claire was calm, recalling she had not yet been home.

"No thank you, darling. I'll eat when I get in. I just want to lie here with you until it's time to leave."

"Good," said Maz, wrapping Claire's arm round her shoulders and snuggling into her neck. "We still have an hour."

Lesley followed her departing clients from the tiny office out into the reception area.

"Marjory," she said to the receptionist, "I have a blinding headache. I'm going to have to wrap it up for tonight. Can you let the others know. Tell them I'm sorry and that I'll be in next week as usual?"

"Of course I will," replied Marjory, concerned for Lesley who she knew was extremely conscientious in her work, paid or otherwise.

"You get off home, dear. Have yourself a good night's sleep. You've probably been working too hard. Have you taken anything for it?"

"A couple of paracetamol."

"They'll help. Don't you worry about anything here. Just you get better soon."

Lesley operated the garage remote. As the door swung upwards she was intrigued to see Claire's car in the space where Maz's should have been. Her head pounding, she shut the garage and let herself into the house. The downstairs had a deserted feel to it. Lesley snapped on lights as she moved from room to room. No one in the kitchen or the living room. The conservatory was empty, the doors all barred and bolted. Lesley looked out into the garden, but there was no one there either. She

began to climb the stairs. Belatedly registering they were no longer alone in the house, Maz and Claire scrambled out of bed. Maz knocked her cup from the table, spattering coffee dregs up the wall. Claire was fleeing for the bathroom as Lesley pushed open the bedroom door.

Lesley entered, calmly taking in the scene. Maz ceased her dressing. Like a cornered animal, she straightened up to face her long time lover. Without taking her eyes from Lesley's face, she pulled her twisted tee shirt slowly down over her body. Her nipples puckered, standing erect in silent accusation. In the bathroom, Claire dressed frantically, omitting any item not strictly necessary. She emerged from the bathroom to Lesley's right.

Maz and Lesley regarded each other in silence. Tears filled Lesley's eyes. She took two steps across the room to deliver an open palmed blow to Maz's cheek, then another with the back of her hand. Maz rocked with the force of Lesley's anger, but she did not defend herself. Lesley's handprints darkened, becoming livid stains on Maz's skin.

"I can't believe you did this, Maria," she said, her voice cracking, "and in our bed too."

Claire saw the blows fall, gasping involuntarily at the sound they made in the still room. Without taking her eyes from Maz, Lesley shot an accusing finger in Claire's direction.

"You. Get out."

Claire did not move.

"I said, get out."

Claire went to the door, then turned.

"I have to go now, Maria," she said shaken, "but if you want to come with me, come now."

Claire backed down the drive to park in the street. Stomach churning, she clutched the steering wheel to steady her nerves. She watched the dashboard clock slowly mark off time. After ten long minutes, Maz appeared from the porch, carrying a bag. Dejected, she got in beside Claire and they drove off.

"Did she try to stop you?" Claire asked as they glided down the motorway.

"No," Maz answered, miserably.

Her face turned to the window, Claire knew she was crying.

Back at the flat, Claire poured Maz a large brandy, returning to pour herself one not much smaller. Maz had stopped crying, but she was fragile and bewildered still. A small bruise had appeared where Lesley's ring had caught her cheek. Maz drank her brandy, her eyes misty and unfocused. Lost, she began to cry again. Claire fetched tissues. Soon there was a heap of them accumulating on the low table. Claire held her while she cried.

When she was cried out, Claire helped her to her feet then put her to bed. Smoothing Maz's hair, she kissed her tenderly before returning to the living room. Exhausted, she tried to relax. Tipping back her chair, Claire shut her eyes and sipped at her brandy.

At the same instant, not so far away, Lesley took a sip of her own drink. Walking out to the terrace, she surveyed the garden. The long summer day was deepening into night. Her mind returned to the moment the door had shut behind Claire, leaving her alone in the bedroom with Maz. Maz bracing herself for the accusations and recriminations which must inevitably follow. Marshalling her thoughts, How best to weather this unholy mess?

"Go with her," Lesley said quietly.

Maz looked at her in disbelief.

"I'm sorry, Lesley," she said, suddenly frightened.

Lesley walked away to sit at the dressing table, shoving a damp towel to the floor before she sat down. She turned slowly to face the mirror. Tears glistened in dark rimmed, pale blue eyes. The painkillers had taken the edge off her headache. She felt curiously clear and detached.

"I want you to go," she said, calmly.

She looked at Maz through the dressing table mirror, adding dispassionately,

"I'm sorry I hit you. Now go."

And Maz had gone and Lesley was coolly elated that their time together was at an end.

Claire's phone rang. She had forgotten Emma! She was tempted to switch off the phone, but then took the call after all. Before Emma could say a word, Claire got in first,

"Emma, I'm so sorry. I can't talk to you right now. I won't be able to see you this weekend either."

Emma was alarmed.

"Why? What is it? What's happened? Shall I come over? There might be something I can do to help."

"There's nothing. Trust me."

Claire's voice was drained of emotion.

"You're scaring me, Claire. You sound weird."

"I'll call you at the weekend. When the dust has settled. I really am sorry."

She broke the connection. Turning out the lights, she went to bed. Emma tried to call again but the phone had been switched off.

The following morning, Claire was moving quietly through the bedroom, getting dressed. She saw Maz was awake so went to her.

"Hello, darling, how are you feeling?"

"A bit rough," admitted Maz, her eyes puffy and swollen.

"Did you sleep?"

"A bit. I was awake on and off till it got light, but I slept after that."

Claire nodded.

"I was getting ready for work, but I could stay home if you would prefer me to."

Maz shook her head.

"You do what you have to. I'll be OK. Would you mind if I hung around here today? I need to think about a few things and sleep a bit more, not necessarily in that order."

"Of course I don't mind," Claire replied. "When I asked you to come back with me, it wasn't just to offer you a temporary refuge while things blew over. I was asking you to be with me."

Maz looked blankly at her. Claire kissed her forehead.

"Look," she said gently, "we can talk when I get in tonight. You'll still be here, won't you?"

"I need to get Mitzi," Maz said dully.

Claire smiled reassuringly.

"Find out if she is ready. I'll take you to fetch her in the morning. I'll call you later, see how you're getting on. Try not to worry, darling. We'll get through this."

"How was your day?" Claire asked, arriving home some ten hours later.

"Up and down," replied Maz. "I'll be all right for a while, but then I'm bowled over by a tsunami of sadness and regret. I can't believe that things can change so suddenly. A comprehensive unravelling of my life, all in a matter of minutes. I keep thinking, If only I'd gone down to make Claire something to eat..."

"It's done," said Claire, philosophically. "We need to decide now what to do about it. Will you go back to Lesley?"

Maz stared at her then shook her head.

"No. We could have sorted things out. Said sorry, promised never to do it again. But she hit me. Up until then, I would have stayed. But not once she'd hit me. She left a message on my phone today. She wants to buy my share of the house." Maz laughed bitterly. "Suggests I get a solicitor. For thirteen years I lived with one, now I've got to find one from Yellow Pages."

"I'm sorry, Maria," said Claire.

She held Maz to her, laying her cheek to that of her downhearted lover.

"How's Mitzi?" she asked.

Maz brightened.

"She's fixed. I can go back to work on Monday. I'll throw myself into some heavy physical work. That usually makes me feel better when things are going badly."

Maz in more positive mood, Claire moved to her own concerns.

"Emma rang last night," she said. "I put her off. Said I'd call her at the weekend. But I need to know what I should say to her. Do I tell her

about what happened last night? And what about you and me? Can I tell her that you are living with me now?"

Maz nodded reluctant agreement, saying,

"Poor Emma. This changes everything for everyone, I know. I'm sorry for all of this, but yes, she has to be told. The whole sorry tale. I do want to be with you, Claire. It would really be great if we can be together. If you can put up with me in this state, that is. I can't see an end to this roller coaster ride, though I expect there will be one some time.

"What about seeing other people?" Claire asked.

"Please, no others," Maz replied wearily, "I can't handle it. I never really could."

Emma's phone rang. "Claire Calling," it flashed, launching into an animated video clip. She took a deep breath, putting the phone to her ear. Emma had waited more than a day and a half for this call. A day and a half spent anxious and uncertain.

"Hello," she said, warily.

"Hello, Emma. How are you?"

"I've been worried sick about you," said Emma. "Wondering what's happened. Upset that you cut me out of the loop."

"Yes, I'm sorry, Emma. It's been a difficult time for everyone."

"Everyone who?"

"Me. You. Maz. Lesley, I suppose."

"Maz and Lesley? What have they got to do with anything?"

Emma sensed Claire take a deep breath of her own before replying.

"I've been having an affair with Maz."

"We've all been having an affair with Maz," said Emma.

"No, I mean we have been seeing each other... Privately. Outside of the couples thing."

"You sneaky so-and-so," said Emma, laughing. "You've been seeing her out of school, have you? Well, that's rich. You ban me from doing that, but you're doing it yourself. How long ago did you move the goal posts?"

"I don't know. Sometime last month, I suppose," said Claire.

"Well, I have to hand it to you, Claire, you had me fooled," Emma said with grudging admiration. "I'm not best pleased mind, but you really had me thinking you didn't much care for Maz."

"I do care for Maz," said Claire.

"So what's the problem?" asked Emma. "I know," she said suddenly. "Maz told Lesley. No, that's not right. Lesley caught you. That's it, isn't it? You were caught."

"Yes."

"And she went ballistic?" said Emma, gleefully.

"She hit her."

"Blimey, Lesley? What did Maz do?"

"Nothing. She gathered up a few things, then left."

"Where is she now?"

"My place."

"And this happened - ?"

"Thursday night."

"Ah, so that's why you were behaving so strangely when I called. It had just hit the fan, hadn't it?"

"Yes," said Claire, quietly.

"Will she go back to Lesley?"

"I don't think so," Claire replied, "Lesley is offering to buy Maz's share of the house. If she doesn't agree to that the alternative will be to sell it, then split the proceeds. Either way, it looks like Maz won't be going back there, except maybe to pick up mail and personal belongings."

"Heavy," commiserated Emma. "How has Maz taken it?"

"Badly. It was all very sudden. It's as though she's been bereaved. She's grieving for the relationship, but she won't be going back. She was shocked when Lesley hit her. I was too."

"Did she hurt her?"

"Not physically," replied Claire, "but it's the reason she won't consider going back."

"I'll come over this afternoon," decided Emma, "see if I can cheer her up."

"No, Emma, you mustn't do that," said Claire, hastily. "That's what I'm ringing to say. Maz is living with me now. We won't be seeing other people any more. Not for sex, anyway."

"Since when did I become Other People?" demanded Emma.

When Claire did not reply, Emma provided a summary of the situation as she understood it.

"You are telling me," she said slowly, "that you have ruined Lesley and Maz's relationship, caused Lesley to become violent and the house to be sold, and now you're ditching me so that you can have the kind of "Exclusive" relationship with Maz, you were supposed to be having with me? All this since you were telling me you loved me last Sunday?"

Silence.

"You can't go through life like this, Claire. Every time you see something new you want, you grab it. Leaving a trail of disaster in your wake. I played by your rules, did it your way. Why are you treating me like this?"

"Emma, don't make this difficult. Please," cajoled Claire.

"Me making difficulties? Does Maz have any idea what she has let herself in for, getting involved with you?"

"I don't think there's any point continuing this conversation, Emma," Claire replied coldly. "Not if you're going to take that attitude. Goodbye."

But Claire was too late, Emma had already terminated the call.

32

Wretched

Whatever satisfaction Emma derived from hanging up first evaporated almost immediately and she plunged headlong into despair. Anger and sadness vied for dominance. Sadness won. She sobbed from her heart, muffling the sound with her pillow. Overshadowing all else was her towering resentment at having played no part in her own catastrophic downfall. Emma spent the afternoon in turmoil. In the evening, she stole downstairs to make toast. By morning, half of it remained uneaten. As Emma chewed listlessly on rubbery cold toast, she thought about getting up. Three hours later, thirst overcoming lethargy, she went downstairs.

Usually careful to avoid Gerry unless she was bored or desperate for company, Emma ran straight into her coming from the utility room, a basket of laundry in her arms.

"Hi, Emma. What's up?" she asked, peering over her washing.

Emma thought about giving her the slip, but decided that she would like someone to talk to, even if it was only Gerry.

"My life has come crashing down around my ears," she said, fighting back more tears.

"Claire?"

Emma nodded.

"I thought something must be wrong there for you to be home with us plebs at the weekend. I'd considered subletting your room Friday to Sunday night, supplement my pittance of an income."

Emma summoned a weak smile, saying,

"You'll have to get used to having me around, Gerry. Claire left me."

"That is a great pity," said Gerry, touching Emma's arm. "What are you going to do now?"

"What the British always do in a crisis."

"Go to war?" suggested Gerry.

"It's an idea. I was thinking more of a cup of tea."

"I'll put the kettle on," said Gerry.

"So there you have it, the reason I'm feeling so utterly miserable on this beautiful summer's day. Claire played me for a fool."

Emma turned her gaze from the bay windowed view of the street, regarding Gerry for the first time since beginning her story.

"Hmm," said Gerry, thoughtfully. "Where do you go from here?"

Angry and disillusioned, Emma replied,

"For sure I've no reason to stay in Birmingham now. I might just take off. Try to forget all about Claire and Birmingham, and Maz and Lesley. The whole place is ruined for me now."

Gerry collected Emma's cup, pouring them both more tea.

"It will be a shame if you do go, Emma. It's been nice to have another woman in the house."

Emma was surprised. She had consistently avoided Gerry, or had treated her as a joke if they did meet. Belatedly came the realization that

she had underestimated Gerry. She was touched that there was anyone who noticed whether she was around or not, much less a person who appeared to care. Too late, Emma saw that Gerry, had she given her a chance, would have been her friend.

"Anyway," Gerry went on, "don't go making any knee jerk decisions. You're at a low point right now, that's understandable. Given time though, you might elevate Birmingham to the status of OK place to be again."

But Emma, in no mood to be convinced, regarded Gerry sceptically.

"Look. Do you have any Irish in you?" asked Gerry.

"It's the eyes isn't it? Green eyes, you've got to be Irish. I'm English. Like pork pies and cheddar cheese. I've had my sweetheart run off with a landscape gardener. I feel like a punch up, but no Gerry, I've no Irish in me."

"Then it's time you did. Get your shoes on and desist with the racial slurs, I'm taking us to the ice cream parlour."

"I thought I had it made, Gerry. Claire was such a beautiful woman. Kind, tender, generous, everything I had ever wanted."

Emma paused to arrest the progress of a glob of Irish coffee ice cream down the cone and over her knuckles.

"Good ice cream this," she remarked.

Gerry agreed from behind her sundae, piled high with scoops of Irish cream, whipped cream and whiskey sauce.

"Thirty eight flavours and not one of them Guinness, can you credit it? grumbled Gerry, taking another spoonful.

"Tell me about this Maz," she said, sucking cream from a cherry.

"That's the funny thing," replied Emma, "I don't want to sound arrogant, but I am better looking than she is. Maz is tall and strong, quite androgynous. Claire always had an interest in skinny, boyish looking women. Gamine she called them, though I'd never heard the word until she showed it me in a dictionary. She said they gave her a frisson, another one for the Concise Oxford. Well, this Maz isn't gamine, but she does appear very young. Twenties going on eight years old, I'd say. I suppose you do seem young when you're not burdened by adult restraint or

inhibitions. Personality wise, she reminds me of the drummer from the Muppet's."

"Animal," volunteered Gerry, whole generations of the Lynch family having been raised on Muppet videos.

"Yes, Animal. Oh, she was a nice enough person, I'm not saying she wasn't, but why Claire would dump me for her, I don't understand. And why Maz would jeopardize her life with Lesley, I don't understand that either. Maz would be fine as an energetic bit on the side, but Claire seems to have taken her on as a full time thing."

"I did meet Claire once, you remember," said Gerry. "I thought at the time the two of you got together, you'd found your Julia Roberts at last."

"Hmm," cringed Emma, shrinking from the memory.

"You said that they'd been together a long time," continued Gerry, "maybe Maz was bored. Flattered too, with Claire taking an interest in her."

"Could be," agreed Emma. "I think Lesley probably took advantage of the situation to be rid of Maz. She was pretty quick in offering to buy Maz's share of the house. I can't blame her, thirteen years with a Muppet would be long enough for anyone. If you were going to choose one, Gerry, it would be Lesley. Lesley is a very sophisticated woman. Whereas Maz seems to have regressed into some sort of delinquent teenager. Yet Claire wants Maz. That's what I can't get my head around."

"It sounds like Claire doesn't know what she wants. Maybe needs to do some growing up," suggested Gerry.

"I opened a door for Claire," said Emma, "now she's dashed through slamming it on my fingers."

Gerry winced, curling her fingers into her palm.

"If it hadn't been for me, Claire would still be flitting from bloke to bloke, wondering why it never felt quite right. She used me. You know, I'm angry with Claire, but I actually feel sorry for Maz."

"If you ask me, Emma, Claire was a fool to leave you. On the other hand, you're well off out of the situation. Better you found out sooner rather than later."

"I know all that, Gerry, so why is it I still feel so absolutely wretched?"

"That's because you haven't eaten enough ice cream. Knock that back, it's time you tried the sundae."

Despite Gerry's conviction that ice cream was the path to ultimate happiness, Emma continued to feel wretched throughout the remainder of July and into August. Her world contracted. Work. Groceries. Moping about in her room. A room full of memories of Claire, though she lacked the energy to move house again. After their brief flurry of intimacy, Emma went back to avoiding Gerry. Embarrassed at never having anything new to say. Never feeling any different to how she felt the Saturday Claire left her. Gone too were the bi monthly cultural evenings in the city. Theatre, film and live gigs all went ahead minus the involvement of the depressed art faculty employee. She stayed away from Pete too, not wishing to inflict herself upon him in her loathsome state. Deeply aware that he had warned her against taking risks with her relationship with Claire, she did not want him to know just how right he had been.

Work was the only place Emma did maintain some semblance of normality. Although her sexuality was always common knowledge, no one was ever made privy to her private life; a situation she did not feel inclined to alter. Especially not now that her life had irredeemably soured. She tried to keep busy, re-arranging storerooms, rechecking deliveries. Shutting her mind to the loss of her lover. Gerry suggested that she should contact Lesley again, but Emma had never wanted Lesley the way she wanted Claire. Claire had been all she had ever desired, but she had let her slip away. As time passed, Emma came to see that she had all but *given* Claire away, with her open-handed approach to sex. It was an understanding that just made her feel worse.

The regular students now gone from the university campus until autumn, the site became the venue for conferences and summer schools. For Emma it was not unlike term time, art being a popular short course. Sunk in depression with a brittle veneer of workday pretence, she'd taken to brooding in the campus bar on Sunday afternoons.

"Emma? Emma. It is you, isn't it?"

The voice dragged Emma out of her reverie. She turned from the window where she had been staring intently at nothing, possibly for hours. She looked up into the quizzical face of Aneesha, Kate's flatmate.

"I thought it was you. What are you doing here?"

"I work here," replied Emma.

"On a Sunday?"

"Drowning my sorrows," she said, indicating her glass. "I can't stand to be at home, so I come here. And you, Aneesha, what are you doing here?"

"Latin American Film Festival," she replied, referring to a fortnight long event at the university cinema.

"What sorrows can a girl like you have to drown?" Aneesha asked, taking a seat.

"Oh plenty. I'm still fretting about my lover dumping me for another woman. Five weeks ago, it was," replied a grim, unhappy Emma.

She swilled her drink round her glass before taking another swallow.

"I thought that you must have found someone new when you stopped seeing Kate back in the spring."

Emma winced at the mention of Kate. So much of her life hurt nowadays, she felt like a walking bruise.

"So she left you?" said Aneesha.

Emma nodded.

"Yup."

They sat pondering this for a moment.

"How is Kate?" Emma asked nervously, not sure if she could really stand to know if the news was bad.

"Well, you know Kate," Kate's friend replied. "She's not one for discussing what's going on. If she was bleeding to death inside, no one would ever know."

Emma's insides contracted.

"But no," continued Aneesha, "I think everything is fine. She hasn't let the grass grow. She did a few short residential courses. Now she's qualified to teach Karate. She teaches a bunch of eleven to fourteen year olds on Saturday mornings. She seems to enjoy that. She goes out some weekends with a shady bunch of characters called Jill and Wendy. To hear Kate not speak of them, you'd think they were Fred and Mary West. Have you run into her at all?"

"No," said Emma, "I haven't been going out. Not since the break up."

"She has been doing well at work too," Aneesha resumed her bulletin. "They want her to go for promotion. Her current boss's job, in fact. Well

paid, some foreign travel. Looks interesting, even to someone who doesn't know the first thing about banking."

"Will she take it?" enquired Emma.

"She has until Friday to make her decision. She would need to relocate to London. I don't think she's keen on London, even with the generous resettlement package they're offering. She'd get a serviced apartment there for one thing. Never have to pay another phone bill, gas bill, electricity bill. I'd be off like a shot. She's usually so decisive, so it must be something major that's holding her back. Still, she doesn't need to decide quite yet."

"Good," said Emma, cheering up, "I'm glad she's happy. I was a fool not to realize what I had in Kate. Sometimes I think there must be a strong element of the prat in me."

Aneesha laughed.

"Oh Emma, you had a bit of bad luck, that's all. You'll bounce back. Then it will be Watch out Birmingham."

"No, it won't," refuted Emma. "I'm flying to Bombay the twenty-ninth of this month."

"Why?" asked Aneesha, her eyes widening with interest.

Emma shrugged.

"To get away from here. I really have made a mess of things, Aneesha. Six months ago I had two friends. I traded the one, and the other has dumped me for someone she once described as "Cute in a boyish kind of way." Is that an insult or what? Call it running away if you like. I don't care. I'm going. I'm a danger to myself and others."

"My, you are down," marvelled Aneesha, with a smile Emma didn't find entirely sympathetic. "I'll tell Kate that I've seen you."

"Go ahead," said Emma, morosely, "it might give her a laugh."

Aneesha frowned.

"If you think that, Emma, you don't know Kate."

"No, Aneesha, I don't think that at all. I'm so grumpy nowadays, I get on my own nerves. I'll be glad when I'm out of here."

"When did you say you're flying?"

"Three weeks on Friday. From Heathrow, via Doha," Emma replied mechanically.

Aneesha nodded.

"Middle Eastern airlines can be very competitive, if you don't mind a few hours in the desert, changing planes."

"I don't mind," replied Emma. "Time is the one thing I have plenty of. Seems appropriate to be spending some of it in the Qatari desert."

"Well," said Aneesha, getting to her feet, "good luck with what you want to do. I must be getting back for the second film. Bye, Emma."

"Bye, Aneesha," Emma said quietly, Aneesha vanishing through the cinema doors.

33

Fragile Hope

Emma sat at her desk the next day. She was poring over a stock printout, matching invoices to deliveries. There was a knock at the door.

"Come in."

Kate appeared, closing the door softly behind her. Unease flickered across Emma's face.

"It's OK, Emma, it's only me. Aneesha said you've been beating yourself up. I came to see if I can help."

"Help beat me up?" asked Emma, a feeble attempt at levity.

Kate smiled.

"From what I hear, you're doing a great job on your own. What time do you have your lunch?"

"In half an hour."

"Fine. Could you meet me by the vending machines in the foyer?"

"OK," agreed Emma, wondering why she should feel afraid of Kate. Kate would never hurt her. She was undemonstrative, not violent.

Kate left without further comment, closing the door softly. Emma let out a breath. She leaned back in her chair, chewing thoughtfully on the end of a pencil, no work likely for the next half hour.

They walked out of the faculty building, down to a bench by the artificial lake. It was a lovely day, entirely at odds with Emma's mood.

"Why aren't you at work?" Emma asked, accepting a cheese and tomato sandwich fresh from the vending machine.

"I threw a sickie," Kate replied, taking an intrepid bite of her lunch.

"I didn't know you did things like that," said Emma, impressed.

"Neither do work. That's what's so good about it. They'll expect me to die now that I've taken a day off."

"Let's hope not," said Emma, "a girl needs a job. As bizarre as it sounds, going to work is the one thing kept me sane recently."

Emma contemplated her sandwich, but couldn't feel hungry.

"Kate, I'm sorry for the way I treated you. Actually, I'm ashamed," said Emma, mostly to the sandwich.

Kate turned to look at her.

"Don't worry about it," she replied, returning her gaze to the scenery. "It had to end some time. Every time I rang you with a suggestion for the weekend, I was prepared for you to turn it down. It worked while we were both getting something from the arrangement, but either of us could have had a change of mind at any time. You decided to do something different of a weekend..." Kate shrugged.

"Did Aneesha tell you what happened?" asked Emma.

"That your girlfriend left you? Yes, she told me. Said you're leaving for India soon."

"Yes, that's right. I'll work my notice, save as much as I can, then away."

"Aneesha also reckons you're flying Qatar Airways," said Kate. "She's fairly certain Qatar is the only airline that changes planes in Doha."

"Guilty as charged," said Emma, wondering if Aneesha numbered secret plane spotting amongst her nefarious activities.

"Let's walk," said Kate.

They strolled along the edge of the ornamental lake. A few scattered picnickers enjoyed lunch on the grass, the sounds of the city in the distance.

"Do you still see Jill and Wendy?" asked Emma.

"Sometimes," Kate replied.

"Any meaningful one night stands on your travels?"

Kate smiled, replying,

"One or two."

"I'm told you have the chance of promotion at work?" Emma said, trying another tack.

"Yes, if I want it."

"Is moving to London a stumbling block?" Emma asked. Eliciting information from Kate was akin to pulling teeth.

"No, not really. It's about whether I want to continue with the bank. How I want to live my life. Where and with whom."

Having circled the lake, they detoured towards the visitors' car park. Emma spotted Kate's sleek black Ford.

"Did you know, that car's a dark horse?"

"Yes, I do know," Kate replied, zapping open the doors from a distance. She smiled a private smile, revealing nothing.

"Take care," Kate called through the window, slotting the car into gear. The wide tyres crunched loose gravel as the car picked up speed. Emma watched her all the way to the security gate then out on to the road, fragile hopes of reconciliation leaving with her. As she put the remains of her lunch into a bin, Emma decided there was just time for a swift visit to the bar.

Warm and friendly drink in hand, Emma tried to fathom her meeting with Kate. It defied understanding. Kate seldom explained and never complained, fulfilling the role of enigma with consummate skill. On a hiding to nothing, Emma turned to that which reliably yielded solace: she ordered another drink.

Having heard nothing from Lesley since before Maz and Claire were caught in a flagrant breach of the rules of engagement, Emma was surprised next day to find an email from her. Emma, who had always liked ice cool Lesley, warmed to her anew, but when she found that the email was just a list of how well Lesley had fared since parting company with Maz, Emma became disillusioned once more. It was nothing to her that Lesley had a new car or that she had bought Maz's share of the house. So what if she then had the house redecorated? And it was a positive insult that Lesley had a shiny new lover. They were having a housewarming party and Emma was invited.

It was clear Lesley was not pining for her former love, while Emma lived every day in abject misery. After considering not replying, Emma decided to respond. She was too busy to go to their party. She was going to India within weeks, she wrote, inviting Lesley to believe that was why she was busy. What Lesley believed was in all honesty of little account to Emma. Had not Lesley's sexual curiosity ruined Emma's life?

In a week when Emma, resigned to her suffering for weeks now, had contact with two former lovers, she wondered why either had bothered. They were both doing so much better than Emma, but she had always assumed they would. Lesley in her flash new car (it would be flash, Emma had no doubt of it) and Kate with her six cylinder wolf in sheep's clothing, with their well ordered lives and their dreams for the future were a world away from the reality of Emma's daily grind. Where just getting out of bed was a feat of determination. Depressed, plodding through life, Emma's only compensation was the knowledge that she wouldn't be doing it for much longer.

She thought briefly of contacting Pete. Of being proactive in who she let into her life, but even with her trip now looming large, she could not face Pete. She would see him when she returned. If she returned. She purged her email account of all her former contacts, including Claire, then went back to counting off the days till her departure.

34

Plan A

Emma lay on her bed, catching up with the day's news on the radio. It marked the first part of her evening routine. Later, when everyone was finished in the kitchen, she would sneak downstairs, make some dinner, then sneak back upstairs to eat it. Friday evening thus complete, there then remained several vacant hours before she would sleep. Hours to remember, agonize. Most of all to regret the loss of the only relationship ever truly to matter.

She heard the doorbell ring in the hall below. Gerry scurried to answer it. Footsteps followed on the stairs, then a knock at Emma's door. Intrigued, she turned off the radio. Emma went to the door, confident she had no appointments for the remainder of the decade. Pulling wide the door, she came face to face with Kate.

Emma froze.

"Hello, Emma. Can I come in?"

"Yes. Of course. I'm sorry, I wasn't expecting anyone."

Emma stood aside.

"No one expects the Spanish Inquisition," said Kate, inexplicably. "Could you take a look at these, please?" she said, handing Emma a sheaf of papers.

It was a detailed itinerary for a railway journey through India. Bombay, Delhi, Agra, Jodhpur, Jaisalmer, Lucknow, finally Calcutta. Trains, times, fares, berths, even catering arrangements. The final page was an airline ticket to Bombay.

"What is this?" she asked, flicking through the documents.

"That," said Kate, "is plan B. It's what I'll do if you don't like plan A."

"Which is?"

"My flight gets into Bombay fifty minutes after your Qatar Airways flight from London. If you want me with you, wait by the prepaid taxi counter in the arrivals hall, and I'll join you presently. If you don't, I'll take the train tour of India."

Emma's green eyes met Kate's brown ones. A smile spread slowly across Emma's face.

"See you at Bombay Airport, Kate."

