

'Warm, funny and poignant'

DAILY MAIL

The Little
BAKERY
on
Rosemary Lane



Ellen Berry

Ellen Berry
**The Little Bakery on Rosemary
Lane: The best feel-good
romance to curl up with in 2018**

Аннотация

****Take a trip to the Yorkshire village of Burley Bridge, where a new arrival is going to shake things up... ****Growing up in a Yorkshire village, Roxanne Cartwright couldn't wait to escape and make her place in the world. Now, thirty years later, she's a fashion editor living a glamorous life of perennial singlehood in London – or so it seems to her sister Della. But when Roxanne finds her career under threat, she feels herself pulled back to the quiet village she'd been so desperate to leave. As Roxanne reacquaints herself with life on Rosemary Lane, she slowly makes a surprising discovery: the people who live in Burley Bridge are, well, just people – different from the fashion set she's used to, but kind and even interesting. Michael, a single dad trying to make a go of a small bakery, particularly so. Little by little, cupcake by cupcake, Roxanne and Michael fall into an unexpected friendship. Could there be a life for Roxanne after all, in the place she's spent years trying to escape?

Содержание

Copyright	5
Dedication	7
Prologue	9
Chapter One	15
Chapter Two	24
Chapter Three	37
Chapter Four	57
Chapter Five	73
Chapter Six	80
Chapter Seven	95
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	100

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Copyright



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Dedication

For Tania with love, hugs and sufficient fuss xxx

Table of Contents

Cover

Title Page

Copyright

Dedication

Prologue

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chapter Thirty-One](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Two](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Three](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Keep Reading ...](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Ellen Berry](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

Prologue

Something peculiar had happened to Marsha Kennedy.

She had found herself editor of Britain's most popular fashion magazine. While she had already edited several publications, they had been in the diet and fitness markets, promising taut bodies and rapidly shed pounds; she knew virtually nothing about fashion and had even less interest in it.

'Don't you worry about that,' Rufus had said when he had first suggested she step into the role. 'In fact, view it as a positive. You're commercial, Marsh – you know how to sell copies and that's what this lot need. A kick up the backside, a wake-up call. They've had it too good for far too long, floating about and creating their ... *pretty pictures*.'

As publisher at Walker Media Inc., Rufus was in charge of a whole raft of magazines, and as he said the words 'pretty pictures', his nostrils seemed to flare in distaste. Unconcerned by the creative aspects, his job was to ensure that his magazines raked in maximum profits. He was also Marsha's married boss with whom she was having a somewhat frenetic affair.

'We need to be radical if the magazine's going to survive,' he'd added, twitching as Marsha traced a finger through the reddish, sweat-dampened hair on his slightly paunchy stomach.

They had been lying on plastic sun beds on the rectangle of Astroturf that covered her south-facing roof terrace in Dalston

in East London. It was an uncharacteristically hot April day, and the pair had spent most of it massaging sunscreen into each other. Rufus had muttered that he would have to shower it off so as not to return home to his wife smelling of sickly shea butter. (His rather sunburnt hue would be a trickier matter, he realised, glancing down in alarm at his chest. He was supposed to be visiting his mother at her care home in Stroud, so how would he explain why his chest was the colour of bacon?)

‘I want to put you in there,’ he’d said, ‘like a heat-seeking missile. If anyone can sort things out it’s you, Marsh, sweetheart.’

‘You really think so?’ She’d twisted her shoulder-length chestnut hair into what she hoped was a cute little braid.

‘Yes, why not?’

‘Because it’s not my market, darling.’

‘Oh, come on. I know what you’re like. You can do anything when you put your mind to it.’ He winked, and she laughed. ‘And believe me,’ he’d added, pulling her close to his clammy chest, ‘I’ll make it worth your while.’

He had, too – financially as well as in other, more immediate ways. Marsha had now been installed at the helm of Britain’s best-loved fashion magazine for two weeks. Although sales had dipped over the past couple of years, she was confident that this would soon be rectified. Rufus had been right: *of course* she was capable of running a glossy fashion magazine. She just needed to scare everyone senseless. And, so far, this was working a treat.

First up, she had established a new start time of 9 a.m., instead

of the more relaxed ten o'clock kick off. She had also introduced daily yoga classes, which were to be held on the office's scratchy grey carpet. 'It's optional, of course,' she had explained, baring her eerily white teeth at everyone, 'but I think you'll all benefit and I'll be *very* disappointed if you don't at least give it a chance.' Jacqui, the PA Marsha had insisted on bringing with her, had ordered in mats and bolsters for everyone, and booked two teachers to take classes on alternate days. To Marsha, who could conduct an important phone call while assuming a full headstand, there was something intensely amusing about watching the facial contortions of the less supple members of the team.

People like Roxanne Cartwright, the fashion director and longest-serving staff member, who had just this morning hurtled in, slurping coffee from her takeaway cup. Typical, Marsha thought. Everyone else was ready to start the session with their legs neatly crossed and eyes closed.

'Sorry I'm late,' Roxanne blustered, placing her coffee on the edge of Zoe the beauty director's desk, where it sat for a moment, half-resting on an eyeshadow compact before tipping over. 'Oh God!' Roxanne gasped, running to the kitchen and returning with a wad of paper towels. 'So sorry, Zoe,' she added.

'Rox, it's fine,' Zoe murmured from her mat on the floor. 'Calm down, darling ...'

However, it *wasn't* fine, as far as Marsha was concerned. She sighed irritably as, with the coffee lake now blotted, Roxanne rushed off to change in the loos into her yoga gear. Apparently,

she couldn't bring herself to travel to work in it as everyone else did. Finally ready for class and back in the main office, Roxanne assumed the required seated position on a mat next to Marsha. Funnily enough, that space was always the last one taken.

Whilst pretending to sit completely zen, Marsha snuck a glance at Roxanne, who was still panting a little. Marsha had already spent an awful lot of time observing her over the past fortnight. She was always running, Marsha had noted – off to appointments and shoots, cheeks flushed, hair askew, phone clasped to her ear. And she was in some state this morning. Her cheeks were bright red and her casual topknot was tumbling loose, with strands of fair wavy hair flapping in her face. However, although it pained Marsha to admit it, Roxanne was still striking for her age (when you were a mere thirty-three, 'late forties' sounded geriatric), her natural beauty quite captivating. Her light blue eyes were stunning and she was blessed with the kind of delicate bone structure that gave a person an air of elegance and dignity.

On top of this, Roxanne had a casual, bohemian way of dressing that Marsha could only hope to emulate – just how did one throw a perfect outfit together, seemingly without effort? Whenever Marsha tried to do that, the 'quirky' accessory – even something as innocuous as an Indian scarf – had the appearance of being flung at her by a passer-by as a cruel joke. As a result, Marsha tended to stick to the safe territory of fitted shirt in cream or white, plus black trousers; a uniform, really, which eliminated

the hassle of thinking about what to wear every morning. Rufus had assured her that the editor of a fashion magazine was there to drive sales, not appear as if she had just stepped off the catwalk.

There was something else about Roxanne that Marsha had noticed, apart from the natural beauty and effortless style, damn her; she had a childlike enthusiasm that drew people to her and commanded fierce loyalty. Marsha had already had informal chats with Zoe and the other department heads, all of whom had been pleasingly compliant about the direction the magazine should take. Where Roxanne was concerned, she suspected things might not be quite so simple. Marsha's intention was to put a stop to the stunning fashion photography for which the magazine was known, and instead feature hundreds of cheap-as-chips outfits, promising figure-shaping miracles. Miracle knickers, bum-slimming trousers, boob-hoisting bras: *that* was what Marsha wanted to see. Of course, Roxanne would hate that. It hardly fitted in with her romantic aesthetic of achingly beautiful girls on horseback, swathed in chiffon – but who cared? Marsha's job was to sell more copies, reversing the circulation decline, and maximise profitability. This would secure her not only a whopping bonus but may also be the trigger for Rufus to leave that dreadful wife of his, and be truly hers. She loved the man deeply, and her favourite pastime was picturing the two of them – London's media power couple – scooping every accolade going at all the industry awards.

Whilst holding a perfect downward dog pose, Marsha glanced

around at her team. All were obligingly trying their best, although she caught the odd anxious glance at the wall clock. Poor Tristan, the art director, was trembling visibly, a vein protruding from his neck. She caught a whiff of cigarettes from Grace, the beauty assistant, and Kate, the fashion assistant, let out a groan.

Meanwhile Marsha held the pose firm – muscles taut, wobble-free bottom hoisted high in the air – as she glanced at her potentially troublesome fashion director. She would have to be tough with Roxanne, but Marsha wasn't fazed by that. In all areas of life – such as achieving a tightly honed body and stratospheric career success – she had a clear end goal in sight, and she wasn't about to let Roxanne Cartwright stand in her way.

Chapter One

Gently melt the butter, sugar and golden syrup in a small saucepan ...

That sounded simple enough. This was a children's cookbook – a gift from her older sister Della, and intended as a joke. Roxanne was no cook. She couldn't see the point of baking anything you could quite easily buy from a shop. However, if a seven-year-old could manage it then surely, at forty-seven years of age, Roxanne could follow a simple step-by-step recipe without setting her kitchen on fire. Couldn't she?

Roxanne had chosen to make brandy snaps, her attention caught by the photograph in the book. As fashion director of *YourStyle*, she liked things to look pretty, and what could be more eye-pleasing than lace-textured biscuity curls? She opened her fridge, averting her gaze from the clear plastic sack of kale, which she had bought with the intention of throwing it into smoothies – to boost her energy and make her 'glow from within' – and which was now slowly decaying whilst awaiting a decision to be made regarding its destiny. Throw it away, like last time, and endure the wave of disquiet that was bound to follow? (*I can't even get it together to use up my kale!*) Or just leave it sitting there, quietly rotting? Deciding to pretend it wasn't there, she grabbed the butter, checked the use-by date on the packet and shut the fridge door. It was still edible – just. As Roxanne lived alone, a

single packet could last her for weeks.

Not being in possession of kitchen scales, Roxanne estimated quantities, all the while picturing Sean's look of surprise and delight when he came over later and saw what she'd made for him. An edible love offering for his fiftieth birthday! How sweet was that? In the nine months they had been together, she had never made anything more complicated for him than toast, a coffee or a gin and tonic. 'My undomesticated goddess,' he called her, fondly, often teasing her about the kale supply: 'Why not just stop buying the wretched stuff?' Well, that would have been far too logical, and would have highlighted that she had given up on self-improvement. It would be like accepting she would never again fit into those size eight jeans stuffed in her bottom drawer and donating them to charity.

You kept them, just in case. Surely any woman understood that?

Anyway, never mind that right now. With all that syrup and fat, brandy snaps hardly counted as 'clean food', but on a positive note, an unusually delicious and heady aroma was filling her small, cramped kitchen.

While Roxanne might not exactly be glowing from within – a spate of late nights with Sean had dulled her light blue eyes and fair skin – she still experienced a flurry of anticipation for the evening ahead. Pushing back her long, honey-coloured hair, she smiled at the unlikeliness of the situation: *Roxanne Cartwright, actually baking!* She owned just one saucepan, one frying pan

and a single wooden spoon with a crack in it. As children, her big sister Della had been the one to potter away contentedly with their mother in the kitchen; she now owned a quaint little shop back in their childhood Yorkshire village of Burley Bridge, which sold nothing *but* cookbooks. Initially stocked with their mother's collection after she'd died, the shop was now thriving, a real hub of the close-knit community up there. Yet to Roxanne, that kitchen back in Rosemary Cottage had never felt welcoming. If she'd tried to help, she had botched things up and been snapped at by her mother: *For God's sake, Roxanne, how hard is it to chop a few onions? Oh, just give me that knife. Might as well do it myself!* At the sound of a bicycle approaching along the gravelled path, Kitty's expression would brighten. *Ah, that sounds like Della. Thank goodness someone around here is capable of helping. Off you go, Roxanne. You're just getting under my feet ...*

'Getting under my feet.' How those words had stung. *I won't, then, Roxanne had vowed. I'll get well out of your way – as soon as I possibly can.* She had dreamed of escape and adventure; of stepping onto a London-bound train and never looking back. Her mother smacking her bare arm with a fish slice – 'Go on, scarper, can't you see I'm busy?' – had been the final straw.

Right here, in North London, was where Roxanne had landed at eighteen years old, having talked her way into the lowly position of fashion junior on a women's magazine. From her Saturday job in the newsagent's back home, she had saved up enough for an overnight coach fare to Victoria station and so was

able to attend the interview without having to ask for money. Kitty had taken a dim view of the capital and all that she imagined went on there; ‘*That London,*’ was how she always referred to it. The intimidatingly chic magazine editor could hardly believe a fresh-faced teenager from a sleepy West Yorkshire village could be so keen to learn, so passionate about photography and fashion. She had gazed in wonder as this eager girl had spread all her sketches and scrapbooks over the desk. The fish slice incident had propelled Roxanne into action, and thankfully the editor offered her the job there and then. And here she still was, on a different magazine and fashion director now, with almost three decades of hard-earned experience to her name. Not that she was entertaining any fashion-related thoughts right now. She hadn’t even considered what to wear tonight for dinner with Sean. Right now, she was focusing hard on the job in hand:

Allow to cool slightly, then sieve in the ground ginger and flour. Stir in the lemon juice. Line a baking tray with a sheet of parchment and drop on teaspoons of mixture ...

Parchment? What was this, Ancient Egyptian times? Of course, they probably meant greaseproof paper or something along those lines. She remembered that much from her mother’s kitchen. As she didn’t have such a thing – and Sean was due in less than an hour – she made do by liberally buttering her sole baking tray, then blobbed the mixture onto it and slid it into the oven. The used cooking utensils were dumped in the sink, and a tea towel draped over them for concealment purposes. *That*

hadn't been too difficult, she reflected with a smile. Really, it had just been a matter of mixing a few ingredients together. Why did people talk about baking as if it were some mysterious art?

In her windowless bathroom, with the fan whirring noisily, Roxanne pulled off the indigo shift dress with pretty crocheted Peter Pan collar which she had worn to work, followed by her plain black underwear. She stepped under her rather feeble shower, sluiced herself down, then wrapped herself in a scratchy towel before making her way to her bedroom, where she flipped through the rail in her enormous antique French wardrobe.

A common assumption was that a woman in her position would live in a truly beautiful home, as photo-shoot-worthy as the models who trooped into her office on castings for shoots. Yet, perhaps because Roxanne lived and breathed her job, her domestic surroundings had always held little interest for her. Much of her furniture was, frankly, pretty scabby, having been hauled from flat to flat and more befitting her younger years as an impoverished fashion junior. In lieu of a proper bedside table, she still had a crate.

In fact, this wardrobe was the only item in her home which she truly cared about. With four doors and swathes of lavish carving, it was adorned with rococo swirls and carved angels picked out in gold. It was outrageous, really – an overblown folly crammed into the bijoux top flat of a three-storey Victorian conversion in Islington. It was more befitting a French country home, somewhere with powder-blue shutters and gardens filled

with lavender. It had been the flat's previous owner's, and once Roxanne had set eyes on it, she hadn't been able to focus on anything else. How could she possibly formulate sensible questions about boilers and council tax banding when she had fallen headlong in love with a piece of furniture? 'They did mention that they're quite happy to sell it,' explained the estate agent, catching Roxanne fondling it lovingly. 'It was a nightmare to get in – had to be hoisted through the window by a crane, apparently. You'll see a small chunk out of the left side. That's where it smacked against the window frame.' Poor injured thing; she couldn't bear the thought of it being hoisted back out again, and possibly ending up being dumped. She had to have it.

With her wet hair bundled into a towel now, Roxanne pulled on her prettiest lingerie – scalloped indigo lace – followed by a simple bias-cut dress in charcoal linen. She blow-dried her hair upside down for maximum fullness, although, in reality, fullness was proving a little trickier to achieve than it used to. Where was all the volume going to? Perhaps it was time to consider subtle extensions? Her hairdresser, Rico, had already suggested she try some, in a way that had made it sound like a fun thing to do, rather than an emergency measure to compensate for middle-aged thinning. 'No woman has the thickness of hair in her forties that she had in her twenties,' he remarked cheerfully.

Now for make-up, with underplayed, natural eyes and strong red lips being her default look in a hurry. Forty-seven wasn't *that* old, she reassured herself. It was just that the glossy

world she inhabited revered youth and made her feel quite ancient sometimes; she suspected that in fashion years, she was something like 167. However, she still scrubbed up okay as long as the light was right, and the restaurant she had chosen was *enhancingly* dim. Just last week, she and Isabelle, her seventy-five-year-old neighbour from the ground-floor flat, had had lunch at the local Italian Roxanne had booked for tonight, and barely been able to read the menu – which was a good thing, she decided, even if they had had to ask the waitress to read out the tiny print.

As she blotted her lips on a tissue, the intercom buzzer sounded. Was that Sean already? Roxanne frowned and checked her phone. Time had run away with her; it was 8.26 p.m. and their table was booked for 8.30. She scampered through to her hallway to buzz him in. She had seen him two days ago but still, her spirits rose like champagne bubbles as she heard the front door close behind him two floors down. No one else had ever had that effect on her. All the terrible boyfriends, the compulsive liars, drunks and narcissists (impressively, some of Roxanne's lovers had combined all three qualities): how joyful to be free of all that.

Once, her sister Della had joked that she had a talent for choosing men whose job titles required quotation marks: 'DJ', 'record producer', 'design consultant' – and, at one particularly unhappy point, 'socialite', which just meant he went out every night and could often be seen with cocaine-speckled nostrils,

draped over models. Still, Roxanne had reassured herself: at least these men made life interesting – and what was so great about feeling safe and cared for and loved? Who really wanted a man who would cook for you and cuddle you when you were feeling down? Who'd show up when he'd promised to and didn't sleep with anyone else? What was so great about *that*?

Roxanne's own father, William, had plodded along, finally leaving her mother years after it had come to light that she'd had an affair with an artist from Mallorca. In fact, just a couple of years ago it had transpired that this artist, a man named Rafael, was Della's real father. Although shocking, the revelation had explained the perpetual tensions between their mother and William at Rosemary Cottage when the three Cartwright children were young, and the simple fact that Della, with her dramatic dark colouring, looked strikingly different to the fair-skinned and blue-eyed Roxanne and their brother Jeff.

For Roxanne, the most baffling aspect had been the fact that William had known about Della's parentage all along – and chosen to bury his head in the sand. Roxanne *never* wanted a man like that. She was attracted to fiery, irresponsible types; like Ned Tallow – a 'party organiser' – who had once 'lost' a ready meal in his oven, having flung it in with such force, it had tipped over and gummed itself to the back. She had always found it almost impossible to resist the charms of the glamorous, the unhinged and frequently out of it – men whom she had supposed epitomised thrilling London life, in contrast to the rather safe

and reliable Yorkshire lads she had known back home in Burley Bridge.

However, with Sean she had finally discovered how wonderful it was to be with a properly grown-up man who thrilled her yet still cared. He was cool, sorted and hugely successful as a freelance fashion photographer (in other words, he had a *proper* profession that needed no quotation marks). Clever, funny and charming, he looked as good in bespoke suits as he did in old, faded jeans, and the only Coke he acquainted himself with came out of a red can.

Sean's smiling, handsome face appeared as he hurried up the last flight of stairs towards her. It was his fiftieth birthday today, and Roxanne was determined it would be one he would never forget.

Chapter Two

‘Hey, sweetheart. Sorry I’m a bit late ...’

‘That’s okay. Happy birthday, darling.’ Her lips landed on his, and his arms slid around her waist as he pulled her in tight. Sean O’Carroll’s kisses felt so good. She stood back and smiled, still a little dizzy from the feel of his mouth on hers.

‘Thanks, Rox. You look gorgeous. That’s a very cute dress ...’ He glanced down. ‘But aren’t you forgetting something?’

‘Oh yes.’ She looked down at her bare feet and laughed, wondering if the attractiveness of his soft Dublin accent would ever wear off for her. His cropped dark hair was speckled silvery at the sides, and his wide, unguarded smile seemed to brighten the gloomy landing. He was wearing smart jeans, a pristine white T-shirt and a dark grey jacket.

Leaving him loitering in her living room, she hurried to her bedroom, deciding that her planned footwear – preppy lace-ups – looked too dumpy for the simple elegance of the dress. Dropping to her knees, Roxanne began to burrow amongst the muddle of shoes stashed in the bottom of her wardrobe, excavating deeper and deeper until a vintage suede sandal revealed itself like a prized fossil. She burrowed further amongst ballet flats, ankle boots, knee-high boots, loafers, stilettos, slingbacks, pumps, kitten heels, espadrilles, clogs – yes, actual wooden *clogs*; she had worn them just once and they had nearly hospitalised her – and

every conceivable style of mule until the other suede sandal was found. Roxanne was not one of those highly organised women who stored her shoes in their original boxes with a photograph of them stuck to the lid.

‘Aren’t we going to be late?’ Sean called out.

‘No,’ she lied, flicking through the tangle of shoulder bags which hung from the foot of her bed, and locating the correct one – a beauty in soft caramel leather – before pulling on her black jacket and smiling apologetically as they stepped out of her flat.

‘So, where are we going?’ he asked as they made their way downstairs.

‘I told you, it’s a surprise.’

‘Oh, c’mon, honey. Are we getting a cab?’

She smirked. ‘Don’t need to.’

Sean shot her a quizzical look. In fact, there were so many restaurants within walking distance of her flat, they often spent half the evening debating where to go. ‘Is it that Lebanese place?’ he asked.

‘No ...’

‘Manny’s? Nonna’s? Lol’s Kitchen?’

She shook her head.

‘Not that burger place?’

By this, he meant the crazily popular new restaurant at Angel tube station, where you couldn’t book, and therefore had to stand outside for roughly fifty minutes and then, to add insult to injury, when you were finally allowed in, you couldn’t sit down either;

you had to munch your dripping beef pattie whilst standing at the bar. Roxanne felt far too old to stand anywhere. ‘Just wait,’ she teased him.

‘Or that Nordic place where everything comes on a slab of rock?’ His clear green eyes glinted with amusement.

‘Nope, we won’t be repeating that ...’

‘And not even your own, personal rock,’ he went on, enjoying himself now, ‘but a sharing one. Basically a communal paving slab for everyone to eat off. I blame Jamie Oliver.’

She laughed as his warm hand curled around hers. ‘You can’t blame Jamie Oliver for everything.’

‘Yes, I can. Last book of his I bought, everything was presented on planks. He’s single-handedly destroyed the crockery industry. Been in the china section of John Lewis lately?’ She shook her head. It was not a department she frequented. ‘It’s like the *Marie Celeste*,’ he added with a smile.

‘Surely that trend must be coming to an end?’ she suggested. ‘Slate, wood—’

‘I should hope so, but then, what’s next? Bricks? Roof tiles?’

Roxanne chuckled. ‘You needn’t worry about that because we’re going to an old-fashioned place where they wouldn’t dream of serving your dinner on anything but a proper plate.’

‘Oh, whereabouts?’ His trace of cynicism evaporated immediately. Despite his high standing in the fashion world, Sean had no time for poncery where food was concerned. It was one of the countless things Roxanne loved about him.

‘It’s an Italian,’ she explained as, still holding hands, they darted across the main road. ‘You don’t know it – neither did I. It’s tucked down a little lane by the canal, just along here ...’ They turned off the main street towards the towpath.

‘Really? I thought you knew everywhere around here.’

‘I thought so too, but Isabelle came across it on one of her walks ...’

‘Isabelle?’ He groaned. ‘Christ, Rox, so she’s managing our nights out now ...’ Roxanne smiled, well aware of how Sean viewed her elderly neighbour.

‘No – listen. She finds places. That’s what she does, she goes on these rambling explorations ...’

‘When she’s not topping the bill at Ronnie’s Scott’s,’ he cut in with a smirk.

‘She’s never claimed to have sung at Ronnie’s Scott’s.’

‘Well, other jazz clubs, then. Any that’ll have her ...’

Roxanne smiled as he squeezed her hand. The late May evening was bathed in golden sunshine, and jovial groups had already congregated outside the well-kept Islington pubs, where hanging baskets were ablaze with freesias and petunias. Relaxed and companionable, just tipping into summer: this was the London she loved, and there was no one she would rather enjoy it with but Sean.

Roxanne had found him immediately attractive and charming when he had shown up in London five years ago after a lengthy stint of working in New York. She had booked him for a

relatively low-budget shoot, and the elegant shots he produced had sparked the beginning of a fruitful working relationship. It had tipped from professional and friendly to much more when, after several margaritas, they had kissed like teenagers in the velvet-lined booth of a Hoxton bar and he had asked her back to his flat. While there were no signs just yet of the relationship progressing beyond what it was now – he clearly valued his space, and they only saw each other around three nights a week – Roxanne had managed to convince herself that she should just enjoy things the way they were. They *were* having fun, and his busy diary was simply testament to his popularity; everyone loved him, from the interns in her office to the elderly fashion PRs who had been around since the 70s and were personal friends of Vivienne Westwood. Sometimes, she couldn't quite believe they were together.

'Don't tell me she's joining us,' he teased.

'Of course not,' Roxanne laughed. 'It's just us, sweetheart.'

'Well, that's a relief ...' In fact, he was right to regard Isabelle as a whacky eccentric. A Londoner born and bred, she was suspiciously hazy about the venues she claimed to have performed at – and still sang at now, occasionally, or so she said – and a Google search of Isabelle Hudson had thrown up nothing of note. But who cared if she had fabricated an illustrious career as North London's very own Nina Simone? Squirrelling out delightful, tucked-away little restaurants and pubs – that was something she did for real, and from time to time Isabelle would

invite Roxanne to try out one of her latest finds. She was just lonely, Roxanne had decided, when she had first moved into her top-floor flat twelve years ago, and got to know the curious single lady who lived alone on the ground floor. Apparently the great love of Isabelle's life had died before Roxanne had moved in, and although there was a son, there had been no visits that she was aware of. To say that mother and son weren't close seemed to be an understatement, as far as Roxanne could make out. In fact, Isabelle barely mentioned him and gave the distinct impression that she wasn't happy to discuss him at all. It seemed to echo Roxanne's own, rather fractured family, and to her seemed terribly sad.

Sean's arm wrapped around Roxanne's slender shoulders as they made their way down the steps to the towpath. A few turns later, and there it was: the small, slightly shabby Italian, its hand-painted sign crying out for a freshen up, but still welcoming with the glow of orangey lamps inside.

'This is it?' Sean asked with a note of surprise.

'Yes, we were here for lunch on Sunday ...'

“We”?’ he teased her. ‘So you and Isabelle are a *we* now?’

‘Oh, stop it,’ she chuckled as they stepped into the hubbub, where they were immediately greeted by a cheery young woman, her sleek dark hair secured in a neat chignon.

‘Hi, d’you have a reservation?’

‘Yes, Roxanne Cartwright ...’ Roxanne glanced around the room. Its dark wood-panelled walls were hung with oil paintings

of Italian coastal scenes, and shelves bore numerous, rather dusty-looking bottles of wine and leafy pot plants, which may or may not have been artificial. Apart from one vacant table right at the back, the place was full. ‘Sorry we’re late,’ she added.

‘Oh, don’t worry about that – let me take your jackets ...’ As they were shown to their table, Roxanne glanced at Sean.

‘Hey, this looks great,’ he enthused as they took their seats.

‘I knew you’d love it,’ she said as they were handed unadorned hand-written menus. Sean smiled with approval as he registered the simple Italian dishes: not remotely trendy, and certainly nothing served on a plank. After the waitress had taken their orders, Sean clasped Roxanne’s hand across the table and beamed at her.

‘Maybe Isabelle does know a thing or two after all,’ he conceded.

‘Well, I hope it’s special enough for your fiftieth.’

‘I don’t need special – you know that ...’

‘And you are having a *ridiculously* extravagant party tomorrow night,’ she teased him.

‘Yeah, but only because Britt forced me to. You know what she’s like, taking charge of my life, saying she knows what’s good for me ...’

Roxanne nodded. Britt was Sean’s formidable agent, and had poo-pooed his initial suggestion of a small gathering in the pub.

‘I’m not planning to keep you out too late tonight,’ he added. ‘Remember you have that meeting first thing ...’

‘Yes, I know.’ She grimaced. Sean was aware that her former editor, Cathy, had been shunted off without warning to be replaced by Marsha, who had come from the terribly depressing diet magazine that was published by the same company.

‘I can’t understand why she got the job, Rox,’ he added. ‘It seems nuts to me, and what about poor Cathy?’

Roxanne sighed. ‘She’s okay, apparently. She knew changes were afoot and she was given a huge pay-off. It *is* awful, but what can we do? All management keep saying is that we need to sell more copies if we’re going to survive ...’ She tailed off, keen to change the subject. After a pretty dismal couple of weeks, during which the office had hummed with speculation about whose job might be in jeopardy, Roxanne just wanted to forget about work for one evening.

‘I take it that optional morning yoga’s still happening?’ Sean asked with a smirk.

‘Yes – you mean optional as in, it’s the law?’

He nodded, amusement glinting in his eyes. ‘I’d say that contravenes acceptable working conditions. It’s blatant cruelty to fashion journalists ...’

She chuckled and turned to thank the waitress as she poured their wine. ‘But let’s not talk about all that stuff tonight,’ she added.

‘Okay,’ Sean conceded. ‘But you do know everything’s going to be okay, don’t you?’

She didn’t know, and, frankly, she *was* worried – but nothing

would be gained from dwelling upon it now. ‘Yes, of course I do,’ she replied.

Their talk turned to fashion-industry gossip, and by the time their plates were set down, the crisp white wine – and simply being with the man she loved – had helped to convince Roxanne that, somehow, everything would work out fine. While Sean tucked into a retro chicken parmigiana, she had chosen a comforting spaghetti carbonara with lashings of cream. Hell, why not? Her many years of unrelenting dieting were behind her now. At her age, when she could no longer drop a few pounds by existing on black coffee and cereal for a couple of days, it was simply too misery-making to be perpetually ravenous. While she still tried to be ‘good’ – witness the purchase of kale – she now refused to deny herself the occasional bowlful of silken pasta or steamy, salty chips.

‘That was amazing,’ Sean enthused when they had finally finished. Roxanne smiled and studied his face. He was ageless, really, in the way that men blessed with striking bone structure often were; his hair showed no sign of thinning, and his green eyes had lost none of their sparkle. She had seen photos of him from when he was much younger and, if anything, he was even better-looking now. How she longed for more time together, rather than just their nights dotted throughout the week. She had an urge to go away with him – to escape from their hectic London lives, just for a week or two, and be able to focus fully on each other. So far, they had yet to manage a holiday or

even a weekend away together. Whenever she had mooted the possibility, Sean had proved impossible to pin down regarding possible destinations and dates. Of course, she understood why. He was incredibly in demand, and travelled constantly for work; even Britt complained that she had to beg him to take the odd break occasionally. However, Roxanne was finding it harder to ignore the persistent voice in her head which reminded her that going away on romantic little trips was something ‘normal’ couples did. Surely he could make the time for a night or two away with her, for goodness’ sake?

‘You don’t fancy a weekend up at my sister’s, do you?’ she ventured as they were handed dessert menus.

‘Uh, what for?’ he asked.

‘Remember I mentioned it? She’s having a party at her bookshop ...’

‘Oh, yeah – what’s that all about again?’

‘Remember I told you she’d spent her share of her inheritance from Mum on buying the dilapidated shop next door, so she can expand her empire?’ She beamed at him hopefully.

‘Er, yeah,’ Sean said vaguely, clearly not remembering at all. To him, Yorkshire was just part of that mysterious territory called ‘The North’ – supposedly cold and uninviting, inhospitable to human life. Many of her colleagues were of the same opinion. Roxanne found it amusing and quite baffling, this fear of venturing further than a couple of hours’ drive up the M1.

‘Well, she’s had the two places knocked into one,’ she

continued, ‘and she’s having a party to celebrate the opening of the new, double-sized bookshop.’ She paused. She had mentioned this too – several times. ‘So, d’you fancy coming up with me?’

He frowned. ‘What, to your sister’s? C’mon, Rox – you don’t need me there.’

Frustration bubbled inside her now, but she tried to keep her tone light. It was his birthday, after all, and the last thing she wanted was a tetchy exchange. ‘I don’t need you there, but I’d *like* you to be. Why is that so weird to you?’

‘Oh, baby, it’s not weird.’ He touched her hand across the table.

She forced a smile, trying to ignore the slight prickling sensation behind her eyes. ‘So, why are you so reluctant to come to Yorkshire with me?’

‘Because there’s nothing there?’ His crooked grin indicated that he was teasing.

‘How can you say that?’

‘Honey, I’m *joking* ...’

‘Don’t you want to see where I grew up?’ She paused to sip her wine. ‘Aren’t you *curious*?’

‘Rox, darling.’ He squeezed her hand tightly. ‘You told me you couldn’t wait to get away – that once you’d been offered your first London job you made a little chart to stick on the inside of your wardrobe, where you’d cross off the days ...’

‘Okay,’ she conceded, ‘but it still has charm – it’s beautiful,

actually – and I'd love you to meet Della and see her shop. She's put her heart and soul into it ...'

'I know, it sounds amazing ...'

'Shall we go, then?'

'Uh, sure, babe. We can go *sometime*. Just leave it with me, okay?'

But it's my sister's party! she wanted to add, trying to shrug off her irritation. None of her previous boyfriends had deigned to meet her family, even though she had tried to lure them north – so why was she feeling miffed that Sean was clearly un-thrilled at the prospect of a party in a cookbook shop? The only trouble with seeing a lovely, properly grown-up man, she realised, was that you started to hope for more commitment, whereas, with your Ned Tallows, you expected nothing.

She finished her wine as Sean studied the menu. 'Mmmm,' he murmured approvingly. 'Haven't seen these kind of desserts for years. D'you reckon they come on a trolley? Tiramisu, trifle, brandy snaps with whipped cream ...'

Roxanne let her own menu drop. 'Brandy snaps?'

'What's wrong?' He frowned at her.

'Oh my God, Sean. I'm *so* sorry ...' She scrambled up from her seat and glanced around in panic for the waitress. 'I was making some for your birthday. Oh hell, I can't believe what I've done!'

'You were making brandy snaps, for me?' He couldn't have looked more astounded if she'd announced she had bought him a camel. 'You mean you've actually been ... *baking*?'

‘Yes,’ she barked, loudly enough for the couple at the next table to spin around, alarmed, ‘and they’re still in the oven. I’m sorry, darling, but we have to leave right now.’

Chapter Three

‘Excuse me?’ Roxanne waved to attract the waitress’s attention. ‘Can I have our bill please? We’re in a terrible hurry ...’

The woman nodded, signalling that she’d be over in a minute. She was carrying two cream-laden desserts and chatting jovially as she placed them on the customers’ table.

Tension seemed to clamp itself around Roxanne’s ribcage. Sean was murmuring something – telling her not to panic – but she wasn’t really listening. The restaurant, which until a few moments ago had seemed so charming and intimate, now appeared to be criminally understaffed. For goodness’ sake, the place was packed – surely they could employ some more people? And why was the sole waitress now chatting away about the couple’s recent holiday (‘If you loved Corsica, trust me, you’ll adore Sardinia!’) when the confectionery currently smouldering in Roxanne’s oven could quite feasibly burst into flames?

‘Rox, just sit down,’ Sean hissed, trying to grab at her wrist. She shook him off.

‘Please,’ she called out, her voice rising in panic, ‘I really do need our bill right now ...’ Despite having risen to lofty heights in the fashion world, Roxanne *hated* to cause a fuss. In a world where kindness wasn’t always apparent, she was renowned for being a delight to work with, no matter how difficult or spoilt a model happened to be. On a shoot, she was virtually unflappable,

even if the make-up artist fell out with the hairdresser, or a hovering seagull happened to do its business on a £1000 chiffon gown. However right now, she felt her blood pressure soaring. ‘Excuse me!’ she shrieked.

All heads swivelled towards her. The waitress widened her eyes.

‘Sorry, but we really have to go,’ Roxanne implored, conscious of Sean gawping at her.

‘We can still have dessert,’ he insisted.

‘We can’t. I’m sorry.’

‘Rox, they’ll just be a bit burnt. Nothing terrible’s going to happen ...’

‘You don’t know that!’

‘Well, I don’t want to seem rude,’ he said, sighing, ‘but I probably know ovens better than you do. How many times have you used yours?’

The waitress reappeared with their bill, and Roxanne snatched her purse from her bag. ‘That was the first time,’ she muttered.

‘You’d never turned on your oven before?’ Sean exclaimed.

‘I’ve never needed to,’ she mumbled, deciding not to add that she had in fact *used* it – continuously – as a storage facility for the vintage china tea sets she had taken from Rosemary Cottage when her mother died.

She handed the waitress her credit card and stabbed her pin number into the little machine. ‘Thank you,’ the woman said primly. ‘I hope you enjoyed—’

'It was lovely, thanks,' Roxanne cut in quickly.

'Sorry you're having to dash ...' But Roxanne didn't hear any more as, rude though it was, she had blundered out into the humid London night without properly saying goodbye.

She wasn't a natural runner. Just as she had failed to fully engage with the new mandatory workplace yoga, so Roxanne had managed to get by for almost half a century without ever having participated in aerobic exercise apart from the occasional dash through the rain into a heated shop. However, she was running now, in a rather ungainly style, sandals clattering on the pavement.

'This is mad,' Sean exclaimed at her side. 'We don't have to run; it's not going to make any difference ...'

'It might. What if the place is on fire?'

'Don't be crazy! It's just a few biscuits ...'

Just a few biscuits! She must remember not to bother baking anything for him ever again.

'You'll break your neck in those,' he added, meaning her beautiful suede sandals which she had spotted in the window of a vintage shop, a size too small as it happened, but heck, she had managed to cram her feet into them and they'd eventually stretched enough so as not to be completely agonising.

She stopped abruptly and tugged them off. Damn Sean and his practical trainers.

'You're not going to run home barefoot?' he gasped.

'It's *fine* ...'

‘It’s not fine. You’ll cut your feet or stand in something disgusting. Come on, darling, put your sandals back on and let’s just walk ...’ She glared at him, then realised he was probably right and slipped them back on. Sean took her hand as they fell into a brisk walking pace. ‘I still can’t believe you were baking something for me,’ he added, throwing her a fond glance.

‘Hmm. Well, I probably won’t again.’

‘No, it’s really sweet of you. But it’s not very ... *you*, is it?’

‘Obviously not,’ she muttered.

‘I mean, it seems more like something your sister would do. Didn’t she send you that tin of edible tree decorations at Christmas?’

‘Yes. I didn’t have the heart to tell her I hadn’t got it together to buy a tree ...’ In fact, Roxanne had taken the delicious snowflake-shaped butter cookies into the office, and everyone had swooped upon them over drinks one afternoon. This was when Cathy was still editor and it was possible to have fun at work, in the days when there were frequent gales of laughter and the sound of a cork being popped.

‘I’d never have thought of you as a baker,’ he added.

‘Yes, *okay*, Sean ...’

‘It’s quite sexy actually,’ he added, grinning now.

Despite the turn of events, she couldn’t help smiling. ‘I knew it. You actually want a wifey type in an apron, don’t you? *That’s* what you’ve been holding out for ...’

‘God, yes,’ he teased. ‘Floury hands and lipstick on, waiting

for your man to come home ...’ He fell silent as they turned the corner into Roxanne’s tree-lined street.

‘Sean, look!’ They both stared. A fire engine was parked outside her block.

‘It’ll be okay,’ he said quickly, taking hold of her arm. ‘It might not be your place. It could be another flat ...’ But this time, she shook him off and broke into an actual sprint. Despite her unsuitable footwear, she clattered towards the vehicle. She quickly spotted Isabelle, who was looking her usual elegant self – chic silver bob, simple navy blue dress – and hovering at the main door.

‘It was Henry who called them, love,’ she announced. ‘I told him it’d be nothing – that you’re always burning toast. A waste of resources, I said! I phoned your mobile a couple of times but it just rang—’

‘Sorry, Isabelle, I didn’t realise ...’ Roxanne hurried past her and charged upstairs. She always put her phone on silent when she was out on a date with Sean.

‘I said you once burnt your fringe off the gas ring,’ Isabelle called after her, ‘when you were lighting a cigarette ...’ The elderly woman’s voice faded, to be replaced by strident male tones on Roxanne’s landing on the top floor: ‘*Sounds like someone’s coming now – finally. Christ, what a bloody waste of time ...*’

Sean had lagged behind. Roxanne could hear him being accosted by Henry, the boorish thirty-something solicitor who

must have sprung out of his flat on the first floor, one short flight of stairs below hers. ‘Sorry if I called them over nothing but the smell’s awful. Emma’s worried that her clients will complain. I mean, it’s hardly *conducive* ...’ Never mind Emma, Henry’s wife, and her psychotherapy clients. What about Roxanne’s irreplaceable French wardrobe? She reached the top floor to find two firemen emerging from her flat.

‘How bad is it?’ she gasped.

The younger man frowned. ‘This is your place?’

‘Yes, it is ...’ Sean appeared at her side, catching his breath as she took in the damage. Her door was splintered, having been smashed open, and an acrid stench hung in the air.

‘You’re very lucky,’ the fireman remarked as his companion made his way back downstairs. ‘Your neighbour smelt smoke but there hasn’t actually been a fire.’

‘Oh, that’s wonderful.’ Roxanne felt like hugging him.

‘But there *could* have been.’

‘Yes, I know ...’ Impatient now, she peered behind him into her flat but this young man – this boy, who looked barely old enough to have any sort of paid job – was blocking her way.

‘You need to understand that it’s very dangerous to go out and leave something in the oven.’

She rearranged her expression so as to look suitably chastised. ‘I do realise that, and I’m very sorry for taking up your time.’

He squinted at her, seemingly not done with lecturing her yet. ‘You won’t believe how many fires I’ve seen that have started this

way. It's the fat, you see. Grease spits over the edge of the tray and then ignites ...' He frowned. 'What were you making anyway?'

'Brandy snaps,' she replied, at which he looked baffled; well, of course he did, they belonged to a bygone era. This child before her had probably cooked nothing more taxing than a microwaveable pouch of Uncle Ben's rice – but then, neither had she.

He stepped aside to let Roxanne and Sean pass. 'Well, just make sure, any time you're baking in future ...'

'Don't worry,' she said quickly, 'there won't be any baking in future, I can promise you that.'

She and Sean stood for a moment as the fireman clumped downstairs to join his colleagues.

'Okay up there, Roxanne? Need any help?' Isabelle called up from the hallway.

'We're fine here, thanks,' she shouted back brightly.

Sean shook his head and frowned. 'Bit of an over-reaction from Henry, wasn't it, calling the fire brigade? Look at the damage to your door ...'

'Oh, it can be fixed. It's not the end of the world.' In fact, she surmised as they strode through to her kitchen, perhaps she had got off lightly. Apart from a terrible stench and the urgent need for a joiner, there was really nothing to worry about. The oven was open; the blackened tray of brandy snap mixture having been dumped in the sink and water poured onto it. The kitchen window had been opened, and a cool breeze was wafting in. She

met Sean's gaze. 'I'm so sorry, sweetheart. This isn't quite how I imagined your fiftieth would turn out.'

'Hey, darling, it's okay.' He kissed her forehead softly, then wound his arms around her waist and held her close to his chest. 'I'm just relieved your place didn't burn down.'

She nodded and stepped away. 'I'd better see if I can find a joiner ...'

'Yes, of course ...' However, before she could even do a Google search, Sean had said, 'Hey, I'll do it,' and taken her phone from her, and was jabbing at it – because, of course, he was a man and this involved a tradesman with tools. *Blokes' stuff*, Roxanne thought wryly as Sean made the call on her behalf, as if she were incapable of communicating that her front door was broken. At least he was being helpful, she decided. What use would any of her other boyfriends have been, in a situation like this? They'd have laughed and called her an idiot, then raided her fridge for beer while *she* sorted everything out.

'Yeah,' Sean chortled into her phone, having lapsed into conversing-with-tradesman mode. 'Girlfriend left something in the oven, fire brigade called ... yeah, you could say that, hur-hur-hur ...'

She jammed her back teeth together. *You know what women are like*, was the unspoken theme.

Sean finished the call and beamed at her. 'Well, that was a bit of luck. He's local: says he'll be here within the hour.'

'Great.' Roxanne mustered a wide smile. 'Oh – let me get you

your present.’

‘Darling, I’m sorry.’ He frowned in mock regret. ‘I really think they’re too burnt to eat.’

‘That was just a little treat—’

‘Come here. I want *this* kind of treat ...’ He grabbed her playfully and went in for a kiss, but she spun away.

‘Hang on a minute ...’ She rushed off to her second bedroom – a box room really, that served as overspill storage for clothes and accessories – to retrieve the gift she had wrapped so beautifully in matt duck-egg blue paper with a perfect silver bow.

Sean was lounging on the sofa in her living room when she handed it to him.

‘Here you go. Happy fiftieth, darling.’ As she curled up beside him, she experienced a rush of pleasure at having tracked down a wonderful gift for a man who really did have everything.

‘Thanks, sweetheart.’ He peeled away the wrapping paper with care. ‘Oh, wow! This is amazing, Rox. You know I love his work ...’ He gazed at the hefty coffee-table book of photographs by Laurence Grier, one of his photographic heroes.

She snuggled close as he turned the pages reverentially. Grier, who had been active since the 50s, specialised in black-and-white photographs of achingly beautiful women in rather shabby surroundings. They always looked as if they had been caught off guard, applying lipstick in a dingy cafe, or drawing a picture with a finger on the steamed-up window of a bus.

‘Glad you like it,’ she said with a smile.

‘Of course I do. You’re so thoughtful. I love you, babe.’ He kissed her gently on the lips.

‘I love you too, darling,’ she murmured, beaming with pleasure. ‘Look, there’s something else too.’ She leaned over and turned to the book’s inside front cover, on which the photographer himself had written: *Happy 50th birthday Sean, with all good wishes, Laurence Grier.*

Sean stared at the inscription. ‘It’s signed! Is this for me?’

‘Well, yes,’ she said, laughing, ‘unless it’s a remarkable coincidence.’

His eyes widened. ‘How on earth did you get this?’

‘I bribed him with enormous amounts of money,’ she said with a grin.

He closed the book and placed it on top of a muddle of magazines and newspaper supplements on her coffee table. ‘Seriously? You actually met him?’

She nodded. ‘Yes – when I was in Paris for the shows.’

‘Really? Wow. *You* planned ahead ...’

‘It was just luck really,’ she said quickly, a little embarrassed now: Paris fashion week was back in October. Did it seem overly keen to have planned Sean’s birthday present seven months ago – and only two months after they’d started seeing each other? ‘He was staying at my hotel,’ she added.

Sean kissed her again. ‘You’re *amazing*, Rox. Gorgeous, sexy and amazing ...’

She smiled and pushed back her tangled hair. ‘And I noticed

that he liked to sit with a gin and tonic in the hotel bar every evening, so I went out and bought a copy and hoped he'd be there, just one more time ...' She omitted to mention that it taken visits to four different bookshops before she had managed to track down a copy, and even then, it had a torn cover so they had to order another for her to pick up the next day.

The intercom buzzer sounded. Sean leapt up to answer it. 'That'll be Tommy!' he exclaimed.

She stared before scrambling up after him. For a moment, it seemed as if the excitement over the joiner's arrival had surpassed that of the photography book.

Sean hared towards the front door ahead of her in order to greet him. 'Hi, mate, that was quick ...'

'Only three streets away,' Tommy replied with a grin. He had cropped ginger hair, a soft Liverpool accent and scratched at his stubbly chin as he examined the door. 'Whoa, that's some mess you've got here.'

'Yep, think the whole door needs replacing?'

'Yeah, for sure – but I can do a temporary patch-up right now, make it secure ...'

'... And fit a new door at some point?' Sean enquired, as if this was *his* flat, and he was in charge here.

'Uh-huh, I can get you some prices ...'

'That would be great,' Roxanne said firmly, forcing the man to register her presence. 'A temporary patch-up, I mean. It's actually my flat.'

‘Oh, is it? Right ...’ Tommy darted a quick look at Sean as if to say, *Is that okay with you, her expressing an opinion?* before starting to unpack his tools. Roxanne gave them a cursory glance, then strolled away to get on with the business of chipping the brandy snap mixture off the tray, to the soundtrack of the two men bonding.

‘My missus once left the iron on,’ Tommy was saying. ‘On our way to the airport, we were, in a taxi. “Christ, Tommy,” she screams, “I think the iron’s still on!” So we had to turn around, get the driver to take us all the way back ...’

‘God, yeah,’ Sean sympathised. ‘I know that feeling ...’

What feeling? Roxanne wondered, using a bendy kitchen knife to hack at the charred confectionery. She didn’t recall that she had ever subjected Sean to an iron-left-on incident – although she supposed after tonight’s episode she could hardly occupy the moral high ground.

‘... And d’you know what happened?’ Tommy crowed. ‘We get all the way home and the iron’s stone-cold ...’

‘It was off all the time? You’re kidding me!’

‘Nah, isn’t that typical?’

‘Did you miss your flight?’

Tommy snorted. ‘Course we did! Cost us over three hundred quid for new tickets.’

Their laughter rumbled through Roxanne’s flat as the two men revelled in that hoary old topic: the idiocy of womankind. Oh, what *fun* they were having. Roxanne understood what was going

on here, as shards of black stuff pinged off the tray, occasionally hitting her cheek and landing in her hair. Sean spent most of his life in the company of rarefied fashion types. Most of his conversations were about whether the model's hair should be up or down, or if a necklace was required to finish the look. His professional life was all about capturing beauty, which was fine; there were far worse ways to make a living than photographing the world's most breathtaking women wearing exquisite clothes. Yet, despite Sean's creative talents, he was a pretty down-to-earth bloke, who had grown up with a ferocious single mother in an area of Dublin he always described as 'lively'. Opportunities to flex some masculine muscle were few and far between.

'So, what's your line of business?' Tommy was asking now.

'I'm a photographer,' Sean explained.

'Oh, right. Weddings, portraits, that kind of thing?'

'Well, I'm more kind of—'

'Would you do one of our Jessica? She's a right little character – just turned eighteen months. Me and my girlfriend, we'd love a proper picture of her to have framed for the living room.'

'Er, that's not quite my—'

'You know – looking cute, sitting on one of those sheepskin rugs?'

Roxanne chuckled to herself as she sensed Sean struggling to remain on his new best mate's good side. 'Uh, yeah, I know the kind of pictures you mean, but I'm actually more of a—'

'She's just *adorable*,' Tommy added fondly. 'D'you have a card

or anything, so I can contact you?’

‘Uh, not on me, no ...’

‘Aw. Well, I’ve got your number.’

‘I called you on my girlfriend’s phone,’ Sean said quickly.

‘Right. So, will you text me yours, so we can arrange to do the pictures?’

‘Yeah, ’course I will ...’

No, of course he won't, Roxanne mused as she sanded off the last of the burnt crust with a Brillo pad. He happens to be a top fashion photographer whose latest campaign for a high-street chain is currently gracing enormous billboards all over Britain. Sean O'Carroll does not photograph babies on fluffy rugs.

Drilling and hammering curtailed their conversation, and once Roxanne had finished cleaning the tray, she found Sean lurking in her living room. ‘Why are you hiding in here?’ she teased him.

‘I’m not *hiding*,’ he murmured defensively. ‘I’m just letting him get on with the job.’

‘Right. It’s just that, a few moments ago, it sounded as if you were about to arrange a holiday together.’

Sean’s eyebrows shot up. ‘Don’t be ridiculous!’

She laughed, just as Tommy called out to say he’d finished.

‘So that’s it secure,’ he remarked as she inspected his work. Sean had failed to reappear from the living room.

‘Brilliant, thanks so much – and, yes, I’d like to go ahead with the replacement door, please. Could you send me an estimate?’

‘Yeah, no problem.’ He seemed disappointed at having to deal

with her now.

‘Shall I pay you for this now, or will you invoice?’

‘Now would be great, if you don’t mind ...’

‘Sure, no problem.’ She fetched her purse from her bedroom and doled out a bunch of tenners. Sean remained in hiding, perhaps hoping that the matter of baby photography would be forgotten as soon as Tommy left Roxanne’s flat.

After he’d gone, they curled up companionably on the sofa together. Sean was drinking wine, while Roxanne sipped chamomile tea – not because she enjoyed it especially but because it seemed like the right thing to do the night before a meeting with one’s new boss. She rested her head on Sean’s chest, once again picturing them together in her childhood village, with her showing him around, delighting him with its quaintness. After nine months together, it seemed important for him to understand where she was from, and get to know the place that helped to shape the person she was now. Plus, it would be fun to share a bottle of wine in the Red Lion, where she was occasionally allowed a Coke and a bag of crisps as a little girl. Sean would love its olde-worlde charm.

‘So, what d’you think about that weekend in Yorkshire with me?’ she ventured, turning to study his reaction.

‘What’s the date of the party again?’ Sean asked.

‘The ninth of June. Couple of weeks away.’

He nodded thoughtfully. ‘I told you, darling – I’ll have to check what’s on. You know how crazy-busy it’s been lately ...’

Of course, Sean was never merely busy, like a normal person; he was always *crazy-busy*.

‘I’d just like to show Della some support, and I think it’d be fun,’ Roxanne added, hating the pleading tone that had snuck into her voice.

‘Sure, we can go away sometime. I’m just not quite sure about *this* time, okay?’ He smiled and kissed her.

‘Okay,’ she said flatly, realising her suggestion was being treated in the same way as Tommy’s request for a baby-on-fluffy-rug photo, in that it was clearly not something Sean wanted to do. She wondered then, as they settled in front of the TV to watch a late-night music show, whether their relationship would ever progress from how it was now. Of course, compared to Ned Tallow and the other reprobates, Sean was an absolute saint. Yet they still dated as if they were in that tentative early stage (‘So, how are you fixed this week?’), their time together dotted in amongst their numerous other social engagements. Roxanne’s evenings were often taken up with work-related events, and Sean was often shooting on location and didn’t return until late. Around half the week, he stayed alone at his own sparsely furnished warehouse apartment with its bare-brick walls and enormous red fridge. But what more did she want, or expect from him?

Although she hadn’t brought it up, she sensed that he wasn’t exactly itching to live with anyone. He had twice before, each time for a decade or so – first with a model (naturally!) called

Lisa who had, by all accounts, left him broken-hearted when she had fallen in love with a fellow model on a shoot in the States. Then had come Chianna, a jewellery designer from whom he had simply ‘grown apart’; she now lived in Devon with a brood of wild-haired children and a famous drummer. Sean had never been married, had no children and didn’t seem saddened by the fact.

As for Roxanne, a few boyfriends had moved in with her for brief periods – although usually due to their own shaky financial circumstances rather than any real desire to cohabit with her. She had never had any yearnings for marriage and, obviously, children were out of the question now – which was *fine*. Yet, deep inside her – and it irritated her to even think this way – she needed to feel as if things were moving on. A few weeks ago, she had had the audacity to leave her spare toothbrush in the porcelain holder in Sean’s bathroom, plus a small pot of night cream on his shelf. ‘I think these are yours, Rox,’ he remarked next time she’d stayed over, looking rather startled as he handed them to her, as if they were her false teeth. The more she felt he was keeping her at arm’s length, the more commitment she craved. Roxanne had never felt so needy before, and she despised herself for it.

Later, at around 12.30 a.m., she found herself unable to sleep as they lay curled up in her bed together. He was spooning her, with one arm resting gently on the soft curve of her stomach. Roxanne stared at the glow of the street lamp through her cheap white Ikea curtains, failing to be soothed by Sean’s rhythmic

breathing.

This was happening more frequently: an inability to drift off and, instead, a tendency to fixate on a whole raft of worries – such as, why had Henry found it necessary to call the fire brigade tonight? Which segued neatly into growing panic over the meeting with Marsha in a few hours' time – and the realisation that, really, the one person Roxanne wanted to talk to right now was her sister, up in Burley Bridge. Of course, she couldn't call Della now; it was the middle of the night. However, she fully intended not to just go to her party, but to spend time with her sister beforehand to help her prepare.

Would Marsha let her have some time off? she wondered. She would *have* to. Roxanne was still battling with residual guilt over the period leading up to her mother's death from cancer two years ago, and she was keen to make up for it. She knew she should have spent more time up in Yorkshire. Pretty much all of Kitty's care had fallen to Della. Della's ex-husband Mark had been useless; he had left her for another woman soon after Kitty's death, just as Sophie, their daughter, had flown the nest for art college. Roxanne was well aware that several Burley Bridge villagers assumed she had been flouncing from fashion show to fashion show whilst her mother had been dying in the hospice.

In truth, a lurking sense of ineptitude had kept Roxanne away. 'You need to get yourself up there,' Isabelle had chastised her, 'and help that poor sister of yours.' And so Roxanne had eventually driven north – but felt, just as she had as a child, that

she was merely getting in the way.

One of her visits after Kitty's death had coincided with her brother Jeff and his wife Tamsin descending on Rosemary Cottage. As they had grabbed what they wanted from the house, so it had looked as if Roxanne, too, was only there to snatch her share of the pickings. She had taken an emerald felt hat with a short net veil, a string of jet beads and the pretty rose-pattered tea sets, which until recently had resided in her unused oven – and that was all. She had watched, feeling faintly disgusted, as Tamsin breezed past with boxes piled high with silverware and, at one point, a vast fur coat. Roxanne hadn't wanted the coat – she never wore fur, and refused to feature it in the magazine. She had principles, although it hadn't seemed like that, as Jeff, Tamsin and their twin sons had swarmed like locusts all over the house, cramming their estate car with Kitty's possessions while Roxanne just stood there, feeling helpless.

'Can I do anything to help with the funeral, Dell?' she'd asked.

'No, it's all organised. There's nothing left to be done.' Her words had been delivered with a note of bitterness.

'Can't I make sandwiches, help with the food—'

'We're *fine* with the food, thank you!'

Well, her sister hadn't seemed fine. She had launched herself into scrubbing and packing up their mother's house, and announced that all she wanted was Kitty's vast collection of cookbooks. Even more startling, Della then decided to use them to stock a clapped-out old shop she had decided to rent,

and subsequently bought, along with the flat above and then the vacant shop next door – how crazy was *that*? Not at all crazy, as it turned out. Eighteen months down the line, Della's bookshop had been featured in numerous magazines and even on TV. On the other hand, Jeff was still working in banking – and clearly despising it – while Roxanne had almost burnt down her flat and endured a stern ticking-off from a fireman who looked about nine years old.

Looking at it that way, she mused, still wide awake at 1.47 a.m., who ranked highest on the craziness scale?

Chapter Four

On a bright-skied Friday morning, Roxanne opened a bleary eye and watched as Sean pulled on his jeans. Even his back view was lovely. She took in the curve of his lightly tanned neck, his firm upper arms, the graceful lines of his shoulders. She yearned to touch him, to coax him back to bed just for a few more minutes. There was time; it was just 7.30. However, Sean's attentions were now directed elsewhere as his assistant, Louie, was already on the phone about some small drama concerning the party at Sean's studio that night.

'Foie gras canapés?' he exclaimed. 'Britt showed me the menu and they definitely weren't on it. Has she been running away with herself again?' There followed some urgent muttering. It was obvious to anyone who met Louie that he was clearly in awe of his employer, and Roxanne could picture the eager twenty-one-year-old's pale face flushing, his forehead beading with sweat. 'I don't care if they're on sticks – if they're *lollipops*,' Sean barked. 'I'm not having canapés made out of force-fed ducks or whatever the hell that stuff is. It's disgusting. Just cancel them, all right? Get onto Britt, say we've spoken. Okay, good. Catch you in a bit – and remember we need to be right on the nail with today's job. I want to be finished by five so the DJ can set up for tonight.' He finished the call, turned to Roxanne and rolled his eyes as if his fiftieth birthday party had been foisted upon him – which,

in a sense, it had. 'It's a monster that's grown out of control,' he groaned. 'What's wrong with a big bowl of sour cream and onion Pringles?'

She laughed, slipping out of bed as he pulled on his white T-shirt. She knew the party really wasn't Sean's style, but that his agent had convinced him that this friends and contacts in the industry would love it. 'Why not make a big splash? You're only fifty once!' Britt had insisted, having breezed into his studio when he and Roxanne were in the midst of a shoot for her magazine a few months ago. He could afford it, of course. Sean was at the top of his game right now. Whilst magazine shoots were moderately paid, he could command thousands per day for an advertising job.

'Gotta go,' he said now, kissing Roxanne softly on the mouth. 'Cab's on its way. See you tonight, sweetheart.' There was the toot of a car horn in the street below, and he was off.

Roxanne showered quickly, reassuring herself that of course he meant to wish her good luck for the meeting; he'd just been in a hurry, that was all. Anyway, it was no big deal, and it would soon be over, and tonight she'd be clutching a glass of perfectly chilled Chablis (Britt would insist on the best of everything) at his party and having a little dance. Even aside from the fire brigade incident, it had been a long, hectic week, with problematic shoots to arrange, all under the watchful gaze of Marsha in her little glass cube at the end of the office. Roxanne needed to kick back and have some fun.

Dressed for work now, she surveyed her reflection in her dressing table mirror. With today's meeting in mind, she had chosen her favourite cream calico top with embroidery around the neckline, plus a knife-pleated black skirt, low patent heels that would also do for Sean's party, and a blue topaz necklace she had bought on holiday last summer with her friend Amanda. They had gone for four days to Ibiza together – Amanda's first trip without her daughters, who were then six and eight years old and had stayed at home with their dad.

Roxanne smiled at the memory, wishing she could spirit herself back there right now, instead of heading for her meeting with Marsha. It had been wonderful. They had chatted perpetually while sipping copious sangria in the quaint bars of the Old Town and swum in the clear turquoise sea. Amanda had been the unfailingly cheerful receptionist at Roxanne's first London office. Although Roxanne was five years older, they had become exceptionally close – and now she was godmother to Keira, Amanda's eldest daughter. Roxanne had reconciled herself with the fact that it was probably better to not be a mother herself than to have had children with any of the low-level lunatics she had involved herself with over the years. Imagine embarking on parenthood with a man who was incapable of heating up a ready meal! But then the brandy snap debacle shimmered back into her mind, so she banished all oven-related matters from her consciousness and concentrated instead on applying her make-up. To boost her morale, she applied a hideously expensive new

primer called Blur which was supposed to, well, *blur* everything – but seemingly not sufficiently, she decided now.

Was she stressing too much over this meeting? she wondered. Marsha had already had one-to-one talks with the other department heads, and from what Roxanne had heard it was nothing to worry about. ‘It was just an informal chat,’ Zoe, the beauty director, had told her. Yet still Roxanne felt uneasy. Why had Marsha left their meeting until last, when fashion was by far the most prominent section of the magazine? ‘I’ve cleared some time for us straight after yoga on Friday,’ she had said with a brittle smile.

Pulling on her jacket now, Roxanne picked up her shoulder bag and sniffed the air in her living room. The burnt brandy snaps whiff still lingered, or was she imagining it now? Perhaps it had impregnated her curtains and sofa and she’d never be rid of it. Something else had been left behind, too – something of Sean’s, but not in that I’ll-just-pop-my-toothbrush-next-to-yours sort of way. There on her coffee table sat the signed Laurence Grier photography book.

After all her efforts, he had simply forgotten to take it.

Roxanne emerged from Leicester Square tube station and made her way through the crowds towards the nerve centre of women’s magazines. She stopped to buy her coffee from her usual kiosk and quickened her pace through Soho, more through nervousness than because she was running late. Her stomach tightened as she glanced up at her publishing company’s block.

It was impressive from the outside, all blue-tinted mirrored glass, the kind of place a young wannabe might gaze up at and think, *Oh to work somewhere like that! Wouldn't that be so glamorous?* Imagining grandeur, visitors were often surprised at the scruffiness of Roxanne's magazine's office.

In she walked, greeting her colleagues, some of whom were already lounging on mats on the floor. Marsha, who was already arranged in a cross-legged position, gave her an inscrutable look, so Roxanne flashed her a tense smile. To be fair, it wasn't the actual yoga that most of the team objected to. It was having it foisted upon them every single weekday, in an environment that was hardly suited to it. Everyone was too crammed together on the stained, ancient carpet. This was a place for work, not for 'connecting with the breath'. The beige walls were scuffed, the tiny kitchen equipped with no more than a cheap toaster, a kettle and a rather sour-smelling fridge housing a half-empty bottle of Baileys that Roxanne suspected had been languishing there since the 90s. Six magazine teams were based in the building, ranging from the glossy *YourStyle* to mass-market titles in the diet and fitness markets. Roxanne regarded exercise in the same way as she viewed the kale in her fridge; in other words, she knew she should involve herself with it, but would prefer not to, if possible.

In the office loos, Roxanne changed reluctantly into her yoga kit. There were certain items of clothing she simply couldn't 'do'. Culottes and waterfall cardigans fell under this banner, as did the cheap leggings she'd bought, begrudgingly, for these morning

classes, hence being unable to bring herself to wear them for the journey into work. Now appropriately attired, she hurried back into the main office and plonked herself down on the consistently last-to-be-taken mat next to Marsha's.

Throughout the class, she tried, unsuccessfully, to calm herself in readiness for her meeting. With Marsha twisting her skinny body into all manner of contortions a mere three feet away, it was virtually impossible. Perhaps Marsha had requested the 'chat' today just to establish her authority? If so, it really wasn't necessary; there was no doubt that she was boss now, although it never even occurred to Roxanne to pull rank with *her* team. Despite her senior position, she wasn't concerned about status at all. All she cared about was creating beautiful pictures and, alongside that, trying to keep her team happy and motivated so they could all work well together. *That* was what mattered.

After yoga, she changed back into her work outfit and touched up her make-up in the mirror above the basin. She was soon joined by Serena, her deputy, and Kate, the fashion junior.

'How long d'you think these classes are going to go on for?' Serena asked, leaning close to the mirror as she swept powder over her face.

'I'll ask Marsha,' Roxanne said dryly, 'when I have my meeting.'

Kate's dark eyes widened. 'Oh, is that today?'

Roxanne winced and nodded. 'Yep – in a few minutes in fact ...'

‘It’ll be fine,’ Serena assured her. ‘Everyone knows Marsha doesn’t have a clue about fashion. She totally needs you on board.’ She snapped her powder compact shut. ‘C’mon, cheer up – we’re all off to Sean’s party tonight. Looking forward to it?’

‘Yes, of course.’ She mustered a wide smile.

Serena grinned. ‘Did he enjoy his brandy snaps?’

‘Oh, God – things didn’t exactly go to plan ...’

Serena and Kate convulsed with laughter as Roxanne filled them in on last night’s events, and by the time she stepped back into the office, their shared hilarity had dissipated her nerves a little. She slipped her bag over her shoulder – it was weighed down with the scrapbook she had brought in with her – and spotted Marsha in her little glass cube of an office, motioning for her to come in. Roxanne cleared her throat and strode towards her.

Marsha was out of her seat, all bared-teeth smiles whilst dispensing instructions to Jacqui, her PA, to bring them coffee. ‘Sit down, Roxanne. How are you getting on with the yoga?’

‘Oh, er ... great!’ She was conscious of her voice shooting up.

Marsha laughed. ‘Before I came here I imagined you lot’d be a right bunch of yoga bunnies. You know, being fashion types, desperate to remain a size eight. But no! Everyone’s really unfit!’

‘Oh, I wouldn’t say—’ Roxanne started.

‘Anyway – never mind that.’ Marsha clasped her hands together as if in prayer. ‘So, tell me. How’s it all going with your team?’

‘Great, thanks,’ Roxanne said brightly, perching on the padded seat.

Marsha murmured her thanks as Jacqui glided in with two mugs of coffee. Her desk was completely bare, unlike Roxanne’s, which at present was littered with magazines, books, tissues, packets of mints, a utility bill from home, a gift voucher, a cereal bar wrapper, a bottle of perfume and a tub of nail polish remover pads. ‘Glad to hear that,’ Marsha remarked. ‘Serena and Kate are so keen, aren’t they? That’s great to see ...’

‘Oh yes, they’re both amazingly creative and organised. I don’t know what I’d do without—’

‘So, what about you?’ she interrupted again. ‘Tell me all about your vision for the future.’

Roxanne frowned, and her nostrils flickered. Was that the burnt brandy snap smell she could detect? Had she somehow brought it to work with her? Marsha sniffed audibly and twitched her tiny nose.

‘Well, I know we’re in challenging times,’ Roxanne began, ‘and glossy magazines are in decline. But women still enjoy them. They’ve just stopped buying a whole raft of titles and have whittled it down to just one, a firm favourite – the one they feel the most loyal to. I truly believe that, if we make ourselves stand out from the crowd, then that can be us.’

She swallowed hard, trying to drag her thoughts away from incinerated confectionery as she fished out her scrapbook from her bag and placed it on Marsha’s desk.

‘What’s this?’ she asked, crooking a brow.

‘My ideas book. Would you like to see it?’

‘Of course, yes!’

Roxanne felt the blood rushing to the tips of her ears as she flipped it open. Could the smell have clung to her top and/or skirt? Her French wardrobe was antique and the doors didn’t fit too well. Perhaps the smoke had crept in through the gaps? Marsha’s gaze had dropped to the scrapbook which Roxanne had opened randomly to show pages crammed with her own lively pen-and-ink sketches, plus pictures of outfits snipped from magazines.

‘This all looks very ... interesting,’ Marsha said unconvincingly.

‘Um, it’s just the way I work,’ Roxanne explained. ‘It’s how I gather my ideas together and plan the next few issues with the team ...’ She flipped the page to show more sketches, plus fabric swatches, scraps of denim and printed cotton and lace; the pages were bursting with ideas, annotated with Roxanne’s beautiful looped handwriting. ‘People are always complaining that the clothes featured in glossy magazines are exclusively designer,’ she added, showing Marsha page after page of her chaotic yet beautiful collages. ‘Well, I think it’s important to make our pages inspirational for *everyone*. We’re not just reproducing top-to-toe designer looks. We’re all about creating beautiful outfits that *any* woman can afford. Yes, we can use the odd designer piece, but we also bring in quality high-street buys, vintage finds, things

we've customised ourselves ...'

Roxanne paused for breath and glanced across the desk. Marsha's attention was waning, she could sense it. 'This all looks great,' she said briskly. 'It's so quaint and childlike – so old-school – to have a funny little scrapbook of ideas ...'

A funny little scrapbook? 'Well, I do find it helpful to—'

'And I'm glad to see you're not fixated on blow-the-budget shoots,' she interrupted, 'insisting on flying everyone to Africa and hiring eighteen elephants as props ...'

Roxanne smiled tightly. 'Er, no. We often shoot in London, the home counties or the south coast ...'

'No elephants there,' Marsha quipped.

'... Unless you count zoos,' Roxanne said, ridiculously.

'Ha, yes, and I don't think they loan out their animals for fashion shoots, do they? Anyway,' she added, shutting the scrapbook firmly to indicate that she had seen quite enough, 'there's something else I need to discuss with you, while we're here.'

'Oh, really?' Roxanne's eyebrows shot up. Something solid and heavy seemed to have lodged itself in her gut.

Marsha's nose twitched again, like a mouse's. 'Yes. Don't look so alarmed. It's actually all good and I think you'll find it'll make your job much, much easier.' Roxanne shifted uneasily as Marsha picked up her mug and took an audible sip of her coffee. 'As I'm sure you're aware, everyone's cost-cutting these days – making redundancies, culling whole departments ...'

Oh, good lord. Here it comes – she was about to be given the heave-ho. Her job was about to become ‘much, much easier’ because soon she wouldn’t have one at all.

‘... And you’ll be glad to hear I’m not about to do that. On the contrary, I’m investing in our brand, bringing in extra resources. I know our circulation has only dipped a little, but I’m here to reverse that trend before we find ourselves in real trouble.’

Roxanne nodded. ‘What sort of resources do you have in mind?’

Marsha dispensed a quick, bright smile, the kind a nurse might give before plunging in the needle. ‘Well, this is all terribly exciting and you’re the first to know. I’m bringing in someone new, someone amazingly talented to take a fresh look at the whole magazine ...’

‘In which department?’ Roxanne was trying to sound calm, as if Marsha had mooted the possibility of new chairs. She glanced down at her coffee. Jacqui had put milk in it, which Roxanne didn’t take.

‘She’ll be my right-hand woman,’ Marsha explained, ‘helping me to implement all the changes I want to bring about. We’ve worked together before. She’s brilliant, a real firecracker: I know you’ll *love* her ...’

The effort of trying to appear relaxed and non-defensive was making Roxanne feel quite light-headed. She focused hard on Marsha’s mouth as she spoke. Her teeth were small and perfectly even, like a row of tiny chinks. While Roxanne had her own teeth

professionally whitened – a faff, but sort of expected in fashion circles – Marsha’s were obviously veneers. ‘Who is it?’ she asked, trying to keep her voice level.

‘Tina Court. Have your paths ever crossed?’

‘Um, yes, briefly, although we haven’t worked together. I’ve seen her at plenty of events, she seems very, er ...’ She tailed off. What to say? Tina Court was fashion director on a mammoth-selling weekly and had a reputation for being utterly formidable.

‘She thinks very highly of you,’ Marsha added, widening her eyes alarmingly. ‘She thinks it’s amazing that you still want to create beautiful pictures when really, all anyone wants these days is twenty-five figure-fixing dresses crammed onto the page ...’

Roxanne blanched. She detested the phrase ‘figure-fixing’, implying as it did that women’s bodies were on a par with faulty guttering, and needed to be rectified. ‘Er, that’s good to know,’ she muttered. ‘So, have you worked together before?’

‘Oh, lots of times. We’re quite the team, the pair of us. We go way back ...’ She beamed, as if reflecting upon how *fabulous* they were together. ‘So, she’ll be working alongside you, offering lots of support as we move away from arty-farty shoots towards practical, *useful* fashion ...’

A sense of dread was juddering up inside her. ‘What sort of thing d’you mean?’

‘Like, “Here are the hundred best knickers to squish in that nasty wobbly tum!”’ Marsha beamed at her, as if astounded by her own genius. Roxanne started to speak, but Marsha charged

on: ‘That’s what women want, and we might as well accept it. Big bottoms, porky thighs, saggy boobs, bingo wings, that hideous knee fat that sort of hangs down ... we’re all desperate to cover up our problem areas, aren’t we?’

Roxanne shifted uneasily on her seat. ‘Er, I’m just not sure about the message we’ll be putting across—’

‘Well, it’s where we’re going and Tina will be in charge of all that.’

For a moment, Roxanne just stared at her as this new information sank in. ‘You mean Tina will be in charge of *all* of our fashion?’ she asked carefully. ‘Or just these figure-fixing pages you’re planning to introduce?’

‘Ha. Yes and no. Or, rather, yes and yes. From now on *all* of our fashion will be body-correcting, using the cheapest brands available, and shot economically in a studio. So, no more arty outdoor shoots with your fancy photographers, okay?’

‘But we’re *known* for beautiful photography,’ Roxanne said, aghast. ‘It’s what the magazine is all about ...’

‘Oh, no one gives a fig about that anymore. We’re all about quantity and value now – and Tina’s remit will be to oversee it all.’

What the hell will I be doing, then? Roxanne wanted to ask, although she couldn’t quite manage to string the right words together. Almost thirty years she’d spent, creating gorgeous images. She adored her job and couldn’t imagine doing anything else; only now, it seemed her skills were no longer required. ‘So,

uh ... what will her job title actually be?’ she managed to croak.

Marsha fixed her with a cool stare. ‘She’ll be fashion-director-in-chief.’

‘Fashion-director-in-chief?’ Roxanne repeated. ‘I’m sorry, but what even *is* that?’

‘It’s the person who heads up the fashion department of course ...’

‘But I head up the fashion department!’

‘Yes, and I think this’ll be good for you,’ Marsha said firmly, ‘and your professional development. Tina’s a powerhouse and we need that strong direction, the *clout* she’ll bring us in the industry. I know you’ll get along like a house on fire ...’

Oh, will we? Roxanne opened her mouth to speak but no words came out.

‘Please don’t look so worried,’ Marsha remarked.

Stop telling me how to arrange my face! ‘It’s just a bit of a shock,’ she muttered, digging her nails into her palms now. ‘I mean, if Tina’s being brought in to do my job, then where will I fit in?’

‘How d’you mean?’ Marsha pulled a baffled look, and then – in an act that struck Roxanne as unspeakably disrespectful – bent to rummage in her leather satchel and pulled out a small, oil-stained paper bag from which she extracted a Danish pastry. As if Roxanne had ceased to exist, she took a large bite.

For a moment, all Roxanne could do was watch her, chomping. *Oh, sorry, was I interrupting your breakfast?* What

was the etiquette here? It didn't feel right to question Marsha while she was cramming baked goods into her face, but then, weren't they supposed to be having a 'chat'?

'So,' she managed, her voice unsteady now, 'am I to understand that Tina will be managing my team and essentially doing my job?'

'Yes,' Marsha conceded, nodding emphatically whilst still chewing, 'but don't look at it like that. It's just a slight restructuring and you'll learn *so* much ...'

'And when is she starting?'

Marsha swallowed and took another bite. 'On Monday,' she said, a flurry of crumbs shooting from her mouth.

Roxanne flinched. 'On *Monday*?'

Marsha nodded. 'Yes. I know her editor very well so I've managed to arrange for her to be released immediately. Time is of the essence here, I'm sure you understand ...'

'Of yes, of course,' Roxanne said, wondering if she understood anything anymore. 'So, er, is that all?'

Marsha nodded, her cheeks bulging like a hamster's. 'Yes, thank you for your time ...'

'Thank *you*,' Roxanne exclaimed, polite to the last and willing herself to hold it together as she sprang up from the seat and strode out of Marsha's glass box. *Thank you, thank you, thank you.* She would probably have expressed her gratitude if Marsha had kicked her in the teeth.

'Roxanne? You forgot this!' Marsha was standing up now, still

chewing, bovine-like, waving her scrapbook and planting greasy fingerprints all over it. As Roxanne darted back to retrieve it, Marsha frowned and sniffed its appliquéd cover. ‘Does this smell of *burning* to you?’

Chapter Five

All eyes were upon Roxanne as she made her way back to her desk with her stupid *old-school* scrapbook wedged under her arm. At least, it felt that way. In a decade of working here, Roxanne had always regarded the office as her second home, with its scruffy old swivel chairs and temperamental toaster and dog-eared magazines piled everywhere. In some ways she preferred it to her *real* home as all the team were here, the lovely people who cared about magazines as much as she did and who were like family, really. Ibiza jaunt with Amanda aside, she had never been one for holidays. If she did force herself to go away – alone, usually, on some kind of ‘activity break’ where you were pretty much guaranteed to meet other single people – she tended to spend the second half of the week sketching ideas for shoots and itching to return to work.

Not today, though. Right now, she’d have given anything *not* to be here – to be magically transported back to her flat, with the door firmly locked. She was aware of Jacqui’s gaze following her as she lowered herself onto her chair back at her own desk. Zoe was staring openly, her mouth ajar. *Yes, I’ve just been told some awful news, she wanted to announce, just to be done with it. Someone’s being brought in over my head, so I’m effectively demoted – but, hey, I’m fine with that because, apparently, I’m going to ‘love’ her!*

She glanced back at Marsha, insulated from the rest of the team in her glass office. Her predecessor, Cathy, had never used it, preferring to have a desk out here in the main space, in the thick of things. Marsha was on the phone now, stuffing more pastry into her pursed little mouth.

‘Everything okay, Rox?’ Serena murmured from her own desk, which faced Roxanne’s.

‘Yes, it’s fine,’ she said briskly, catching Kate giving her a quizzical look.

‘Want to nip out?’ Serena whispered. ‘Get a coffee or something?’

‘No thanks.’ Avoiding eye contact, Roxanne shook her head. ‘Are you sure? You look awfully pale. Was it something she—’

‘I’m-fine-honestly,’ she barked, causing Tristan to spin his head around from the art department. Roxanne started rummaging in her top desk drawer, not because she needed anything but to give herself something to do. Like the top of her desk, it was a terrible tip. She delved amongst staplers, rolls of Sellotape, parcel labels, bulldog clips, cans of hairspray, notebooks and lip balms in a cacophony of flavours, willing Serena to stop giving her sympathetic glances, and wishing everyone would just leave her be.

Roxanne wasn’t sure she could handle anyone being kind to her right now. She thought again of that time with the fish slice, when her mother had smacked her upper arm: it wasn’t the actual event itself that had triggered her tears. It had been later, when

she'd run out of Rosemary Cottage and up into the hills by herself, and had happened to come across Len from the garage with his wife, Pat, and their two young children. They were out with their dogs and had beckoned her over to join them.

Hey, what's happened, Roxy? You look all upset!

People had called her 'Roxy' then. Not anymore; she had cast that off like an unwanted jacket when she'd moved to London. Pat had hugged her, and that's when the tears had flowed.

Roxanne shut her desk drawer, delved into her bag and pulled out the small notebook in which she wrote copious to-do lists. There was tons to get on with, and keeping busy would at least get her through the rest of the day. She had a shoot coming up and she needed to call in clothes and accessories from fashion PRs, as well as trawling her favourite vintage shops for quirkier pieces. She wanted to book a new model – a fresh face – rather than one of her regular girls, which meant arranging a casting. Plus, there were Kate and Serena's shoots to oversee, and a whole raft of product launches Roxanne should show her face at over the coming week.

She made a barrage of calls until lunchtime rolled around, at which point she grabbed her bag and darted out of the office before anyone could ask to join her.

On a bench in Golden Square, clutching a chicken sandwich she didn't want, she called Sean.

'Oh, darling,' he said, when she'd splurged what had happened. 'Tina Court! She's meant to be a bit of a terrier ...'

‘You know her?’

‘Just in passing. We haven’t worked together. So, what’re you going to do?’

‘Nothing. I mean, what can I do? Marsha’s within her rights to bring in whoever she wants ...’

Sean sighed. ‘Just sit tight, darling, and see how things pan out.’

‘Yes, I will. Sorry to land all of this on you. I know you’re busy shooting today—’

‘Hey, I’m okay for a couple of minutes,’ he said gently.

She cleared her throat. ‘Pringles all ready?’

‘Huh?’

‘For the party,’ she prompted him.

‘Oh. Haha – well, Louie’s been onto the caterers. Foie gras lollipops! I don’t *think* so ...’

‘Let me know if you need anything,’ she added, before they finished the call – knowing, of course, that he wouldn’t, and that this was hardly a casual flat party where one might expect friends to bring a bottle of wine. No, this was an extravaganza with waiting staff, a seafood bar and a budget of thousands, and right now she couldn’t *wait* to slick on her red lipstick and get her hands on that first glass of wine.

The office announcement about Tina’s arrival was brisk and to the point. Jacqui had rounded everyone up, in the manner of an eager sheepdog, and now the whole team stood around stiffly while Marsha, who was perched with exaggerated casualness on

the edge of Jacqui's desk, enthused over Tina Court's imminent arrival.

'I know she's going to fit in so well here. You're all going to adore her. She's such a breath of fresh air ...' Implying what? Roxanne mused. That they were currently *stale*? 'She'll shake everything up!' Marsha wittered on, seemingly oblivious to the cloud of gloom now hanging heavily above them as she babbled on about figure-fixing fashion, page after page of cheap knickers that promised to squish in one's tum.

'How depressing,' Tristan mouthed at Roxanne, with a horrified look. She nodded and shrugged. At least her colleagues seemed to share her view. Roxanne had assumed a non-committal expression, and was trying to keep her gaze firmly on Marsha as she spoke. However, it was impossible not to register the quick looks of alarm and sympathy her colleagues were giving her. She knew what they were all thinking: *Poor Rox! How must she feel, being effectively demoted? Is this a sneaky way of trying to force her out?*

Then Marsha was thanking everyone for their time – 'We're heading into such an exciting new chapter!' she trilled – and everyone was trying to check out Roxanne's face as she scuttled back to her desk. Before anyone could accost her, she scooted out of the office and along the short corridor to the ladies' loo.

As she tried to collect her thoughts at the basins, Serena and Kate arrived in pursuit. 'My God, Rox, what's going on?' Serena exclaimed.

‘You heard,’ Roxanne replied with a grimace.

‘Fashion-director-in-chief? We’ve never had one before. I’ve never even heard it used as a job title ...’

‘No, that’s because Marsha probably made it up.’

Kate ran a hand through her short coppery hair. ‘What does it mean?’

‘It means she’ll be running our department and changing the style of our pages beyond all recognition,’ Roxanne muttered.

‘But *why*?’

‘Because that’s what Marsha wants, and she and Tina go way back, apparently. They’ve worked together before. Marsha said they’re quite the team ...’

‘Well, that’s complete nepotism!’ Kate gasped.

Roxanne murmured in agreement, once again visualising the chilled glass of wine she would soon be clutching at Sean’s party. Usually she was happy to work late, but she was now experiencing a strong desire to escape from the building as soon as possible. ‘Everyone hires people they know,’ she said, trying to remain professional rather than letting rip with how she *really* felt. ‘Cathy brought me in, remember? We’d worked together before too. It’s natural to want people you trust.’

‘Yes, but that’s because you’re the best,’ Serena declared, ‘and this is different. Tina’s pages are a mess, more like a tatty old catalogue than proper fashion – and come on, we’ve all heard what she’s like to work with. She’s had her assistants and interns in tears. No one seems to last there more than a couple of months

...’

‘I’ve heard all that too,’ Roxanne remarked, touched by her friends’ loyalty, ‘but we haven’t actually worked with her ourselves. We should just keep an open mind ...’

‘Oh, stop being so *reasonable!*’ Serena exclaimed. ‘If it was me, I’d be having a complete meltdown.’

Roxanne forced a brave smile, pulling out her topknot and shaking her hair loose to signify that they had given the matter of Tina’s imminent arrival quite enough of their attention for now. ‘Don’t worry,’ she remarked dryly, ‘I’m saving that for Sean’s party so as many people as possible are there to witness it.’

And now she was extracting her make-up pouch from her bag, plus the original 60s black dress she had earmarked to wear tonight, and which was ideal for this kind of office-to-party scenario as it simply didn’t crease, even after being scrunched in the bottom of a shoulder bag.

She turned to Kate and Serena, who were still looking mournful in the wake of the day’s news. ‘Come on, you two,’ Roxanne said briskly. ‘Let’s get ready and off to this party. Anyone would think we weren’t desperate for a drink.’

Chapter Six

Sean's studio occupied the entire second floor of a canal-side warehouse close to King's Cross. All white-painted brickwork with a glossy concrete floor, tonight it had been filled with silver helium balloons which were bobbing up at the rafters. The biggest, tethered above the huge metal-framed windows, read SEAN50. When Roxanne, Serena and Kate arrived, the room was already bustling.

There was a pop-up bar, manned by almost laughably handsome young men. Roxanne recognised them as new faces at one of the model agencies she used regularly, and Serena and Kate scuttled over to say hello. Other fledgling male models patrolled the studio, joking and flirting and carrying trays laden with glasses of champagne. At the far end of the room, a DJ was playing mellow tracks.

'Hi, sweetheart,' Sean said, having made his way towards Roxanne and given her a heartfelt hug. 'Sorry about your awful day. Are you okay?'

'Oh, I'm fine – don't worry about that now. It's your party! It looks fantastic in here ...'

He grinned. 'I'll give Louie his due, he pulled out all the stops.' Sean paused and appraised Roxanne's appearance. 'You look drop-dead gorgeous tonight, babe—'

'Thanks, darling,' she said, glowing now as Serena strode over

to greet him, followed by Kate. Soon a cluster of new arrivals were descending upon him too.

‘Let me grab you girls some champagne,’ he said.

‘Oh, don’t worry about us,’ Roxanne said quickly, feeling buoyed up already by the jovial atmosphere. ‘We can sort ourselves out, can’t we, girls?’

‘We sure can,’ Kate chuckled, indicating the stunning young waiter who was gliding towards them.

‘See you in a little while, birthday boy.’ Roxanne kissed his cheek and stepped away, leaving him to welcome the stream of newcomers, and accepted a glass of champagne from the waiter gratefully. Naturally, Sean would be busy playing host tonight, which was fine by Roxanne; she was used to them each doing their own thing whenever they were at parties together. She could hold her own in social situations and had no desire to cling to him, limpet-like.

With Serena and Kate at her side, she milled around the studio in a flurry of kisses and hugs; Sean’s crowd were an affectionate and demonstrative bunch, forever greeting each other with cries of delight. As Roxanne had expected, she knew almost everyone here. ‘Daniella, hi! Sadie, hi, sweetheart! Angelo – so lovely to see you ...’

‘Oh, you look stunning, Roxanne,’ enthused Jarek, a hairdresser she worked with regularly on shoots. ‘What a fabulous dress! Is it vintage?’

‘It is, yes ...’

‘You always find the most *perfect* thing ...’

She thanked him and moved on. Make-up artists, hairdressers, models, photographers, stylists, PRs and agents ... they were all out in force, filling the studio with chatter and boisterous laughter as the music grew louder and more champagne was swigged. It wasn't long before Roxanne began to feel quite light-headed. She was drinking too quickly, trying to shake off the stress of her meeting with Marsha. She really needed to slow down. One more glass wouldn't hurt, though, and she'd be sure to eat plenty and drink some water.

She took another glass of champagne from a tray and went in search of food to soak up the fizz. Bypassing the seafood bar, where piles of oysters glistened on ice, she made her way to the Indian street food stall where a glamorous young woman with her hair tucked into a crisp white hat was handing out paper cones of puffed rice. ‘This is bhel puri,’ she explained. ‘Would you like some?’

‘Ooh, yes please – it looks delicious.’ Roxanne tucked into her cone with a wooden fork, noting that the light and spicy rice was proving especially pleasing to the fashion crowd, most of whom tended towards the determinedly skinny. Roxanne, who had settled at around a size twelve, feared for their bones sometimes. Sean's agent, Britt Jordan, looked as if she might snap. Even her back – which was entirely visible in a tiny grey sheath of a dress – looked starved, with all the nodules visible. You could actually *count* the vertebrae. Roxanne was sick to

death of carb-avoiding these days. She tucked into a second cone of bhel puri and washed it down with her champagne. Who could blame her? It had been a *horrible* day, the sort that needs its rough edges smoothed by something chilled and delicious, and this particular vintage was doing the job extremely well.

‘Hey, Rox, you’re looking good, darling!’ Britt had glided over towards her.

‘Thanks, Britt. So are you. Isn’t this great? I hear you had quite a hand in the organising ...’

‘Oh yes, I had to, or we’d have been sitting in the pub with a dish of dry-roasted nuts.’ She laughed huskily. ‘But he’s loving it, isn’t he?’

The two women glanced over to where Sean was holding court with a group of younger men and women by the DJ booth. Everyone was laughing and sipping champagne. ‘I think he is,’ Roxanne said with a smile, genuinely happy to see him enjoying himself.

Britt turned to her. ‘All that not wanting a big fuss ... it’s all show, isn’t it? Who wouldn’t want a gorgeous party like this?’

‘Yes, you’re right,’ Roxanne said, surprised that Britt was spending time with her. A notorious networker, she usually flitted from one potential client to another, eager to make contacts that might benefit her roster of fashion photographers. Roxanne booked Sean regularly, as she had before they were seeing each other, so there was no need for any schmoozing where she was concerned.

Britt's expression turned serious. 'Um, I hope you don't mind me saying, but I've just heard your news ...' Roxanne frowned, uncomprehending for a moment. 'About Tina Court being brought in over you,' she clarified.

Oh, right, cheers for that! 'It's not really like that,' Roxanne said quickly, trying to take a sip from her glass before realising it was empty.

'Isn't it? Because Sean said—'

'No, it's just a sort of restructuring,' she explained, prickling at the fact that they had discussed it at all. Of course, they were friends; Britt had represented Sean for many years. But, still, Roxanne wasn't thrilled at the thought of being gossiped about.

'Really? Why are they doing that?'

'Erm, I guess Marsha wants to bring in someone with a strong fashion background as hers is more, er ...' Roxanne trailed off. What was Marsha's area of expertise again? Diets. Celebrity diets, at that. All made up, of course; Roxanne knew from inter-office gossip that she used to harangue her interns into writing any old tosh. 'She's more health-focused,' she added carefully.

'But she has *you* to produce the fashion pages,' Britt was insisting now. 'Oh, it's awful, Roxanne. So insulting. Everyone's gutted for you—'

'Everyone?' Roxanne's face seemed to freeze as Louie, Sean's assistant, landed beside them clutching a large glass of red wine.

'Yeah, we can't believe it, Rox,' he said, glancing around as they were joined by Johnny, a make-up artist who was also

clearly in the know.

‘I admire you, I really do,’ he announced, enveloping Roxanne in a hug.

‘I don’t know what for, Johnny,’ she said with a tight laugh, disentangling herself and grabbing another glass of champagne as a waiter glided past.

‘For putting on a brave face tonight,’ he exclaimed.

‘Oh, I’m not being brave – I’m fine, really. I’m having a *great* time—’

‘We’re all amazed you’re here at all!’ added Dinny, a fashion editor from another magazine who had popped up seemingly from nowhere. She clamped a hand around Roxanne’s wrist. ‘If it was me, I’d probably go into hiding ...’

‘Or throw myself off a bridge,’ quipped Johnny.

What? ‘Honestly, it’s not a big deal,’ Roxanne said, a shade too loudly as the DJ had misjudged the end of a track and the music stopped abruptly. ‘And of course I’d be here for Sean’s birthday.’

‘Well, you’re very stoical!’ Louie gushed.

‘You show them, Rox,’ Britt added. ‘You poor, *poor* thing. It’s so demeaning for you ...’

‘Erm, would you excuse me for a minute?’ Roxanne hoisted a rigid smile, still catching snippets of conversation as she strode away. She really had to escape from this group, before she drowned in a pool of pity.

‘She should get her CV out pronto ...’

‘D’you think she’ll resign, or what?’

‘Christ – *I* would ...’

And worst of all: ‘I suppose she *has* been in that job a terribly long time ...’

As Roxanne wended her way through the crowds, she tried to emit an aura of quiet dignity. She gulped her champagne and glanced around, looking for someone to talk to who wouldn’t go on about Tina Court joining the team and her own career being truly up the spout. Perhaps, she thought bitterly, she could gather everyone around to decide which bridge exactly she should hurl herself off? If only her old friend Amanda was here – but then, this wasn’t her sort of party at all. After her stint as a magazine publisher’s receptionist Amanda had retrained as a primary school teacher; i.e., got herself a *proper* job. The parties she threw were casual affairs with bunting, sausage rolls and cheap prosecco in her kitchen or unruly back garden.

What was the big deal about Tina Court anyway? Amanda taught children to read and write – she helped to shape their futures – and here Roxanne was, despairing just because someone new was being brought in to oversee the fashion pages and drag them downmarket. She stood for a moment, sipping her now-lukewarm champagne, aware of an unpleasant tightening sensation in her chest.

Fashion Guilt, that’s what it was. It had happened before when she was trying to pull together a cover shoot and a PR had sent the wrong fake fur jacket for the model to wear. Roxanne had been moaning to Kate in the office when a little voice in her

head (the Fashion Guilt voice) hissed, *'You watched Syria being bombed on the news last night. And you're sitting there, nibbling your Pret a Manger sushi and drinking your coconut water and grumbling about a fluffy jacket?'*

Wondering what to do with herself now, Roxanne found herself back at the Indian street food stall. She wolfed another cone of bhel puri, then regretted it immediately: all that puffed rice seemed to be swelling up inside her. Uncomfortably bloated, she stood tall and tried to hold in her stomach. No sign of Serena or Kate, and Sean appeared to be busy, still surrounded by friends, filling the studio with his wonderful infectious laugh which she had loved from the moment she first heard it. She would go over to join him soon, but right now it felt better to give him his space. She caught his eye, and he smiled. How handsome he looked tonight in a crisp white open-necked shirt and smart dark grey trousers. She didn't mind in the slightest that legions of younger women were perpetually clustered around him. That was what it was like, in this sort of world – just harmless flirting. Roxanne was overcome by a rush of pride in him, and almost wished she could fast-forward to the moment when they were home together, undressing and tumbling into his bed.

However, it was only 9 p.m., and there were *hours* to go yet. Aware of her tipsy state, Roxanne fixed her gaze on the area of floor in front of the DJ booth. She inhaled deeply, reassuring herself that she was perfectly capable of holding her own as she strode towards it and started to dance.

That felt good. She could sense any remaining tension floating out of her pores, dissipating into the fragrant air, as she started to move. Never mind yoga with its slow pace and emphasis on breathing; Roxanne had one of those restless minds, so was it any wonder she found it so hard to concentrate in eagle pose? This was *far* more her sort of thing. As the music filled her consciousness, she no longer cared about Marsha or whether Henry from the flat below would be banging on her door to tell her off again for the lingering burnt smell. Stuff all that, she thought, closing her eyes and swaying her body, barely aware that she was the only one on the floor.

Roxanne had always loved to dance, right from when she was a little girl; back then, no one had known as she'd done it in secret, in her bedroom, having put on one of her favourite records to mask yet another of her parents' monumental fights downstairs. As she'd twirled on her faded floral carpet, she had ceased to hear them at all.

An escape, that's what it had been back then in Rosemary Cottage – just as it was now. There was something magical about music, the way it could transport you to some other place. With her vast collection of crackly old jazz records, her neighbour Isabelle understood that too.

Roxanne caught the DJ's eye and he grinned at her. He had a full, bushy beard, as was mandatory amongst a certain breed of twenty-something males right now. What would happen when the fashion was over? she mused. Would the companies that

made all the necessary beard oils, balms and pomades – she wasn't entirely sure how these products differed – go out of business?

The track ended, and she was seized by an urge to hear something from way back, something she had danced to as a little girl in her bedroom in the eaves.

Another track started but it wasn't right: all this music was all too esoteric. What the DJ needed to play was ... *what* was it called again? Heck, it was her absolute favourite, she'd danced to it a billion times and now she'd forgotten it. She wobbled slightly on her black patent heels and pushed a slick of damp hair away from her face. Across the room, Serena waved and gave her an *everything-okay?* sort of smile, but Roxanne didn't really register it. She was too busy approaching the DJ, trying to explain over the pulsing music, 'D'you have, er ...'

'Sorry, love? What was that?'

She frowned, trying to flick back through her mental Rolodex of songs that had meant so much to her as she was growing up. The DJ was peering at her in a bemused sort of way. 'I can sing it for you,' she yelled at him. 'Can you listen for a minute?'

'Aw, don't worry, darling,' he said with a patronising smile, as if she was an old lady who had just biffed him with her wheeled shopping trolley.

'No, no, I'll remember it if you let me sing the start. Could you turn your music down, please?'

He laughed and shook his head. 'Sorry ...'

‘I remember it now! *Dancing Queen* by Abba. D’you have it?’ The DJ sniggered again. ‘No, love, it’s not really my kind of—’ ‘You must have!’ she begged. ‘It can’t be a party without *Dancing Queen* ...’

‘Oh, you reckon?’ The young man grinned.

‘Could you at least have a look?’ She wobbled on her heels and clung to the front of his booth as if it were a swaying ship.

‘Off you go and dance,’ he urged her. ‘You’re a great dancer. Pretty impressive moves, you’ve got there ...’

She peered at him squiffily, wondering if there had been a trace of sarcasm in his voice. No, she was just being paranoid, and no wonder – it had been a terrible day, so of course she’d drunk too much and was feeling sensitive. But what the hell? She was tottering off now and dancing, still on her own, feeling happy and light and not caring that Sean had just thrown her a concerned look, and was shaking his head and muttering into someone’s ear, or that she was one of the oldest women in the room.

Sean waggled his hand to beckon her over but Roxanne just laughed and turned away. How *boring* he was, never venturing onto the dance floor. Age didn’t matter one bit! Britt was beside her now; skinny, sexy Britt, who Sean reckoned to be around forty, although no one was sure and she refused to divulge her age.

Roxanne glanced back at Sean and cried, ‘C’mon, it’s your party! Come and dance!’ He just gave her an inscrutable look

and disappeared back into the crowd.

Now more people had joined Roxanne and Britt on the dance floor: Johnny, Serena, Kate, Louie and a couple of new girls from Roxanne's preferred model agency. They were all dancing and whooping, hair flying, and nothing mattered to Roxanne anymore. Not until she glimpsed a new arrival who was looking around expectantly. Marsha! What was *she* doing there? Sean didn't even know her. Roxanne stopped dancing and stared, realising now that Marsha hadn't come alone, and that Tina Court was hovering at her side. Tina, who'd been hired as the new fashion-director-in-chief! Roxanne had seen her at enough events to recognise her, even in dim light. She was a tiny woman, bird-like with pointy features and brows plucked to the point of near-invisibility. Her long, straight black hair hung in a glossy sheet, and her wincingly tight outfit comprised a shimmery cobalt blue dress with a silver belt and towering nude heels. Marsha was still wearing the same cream shirt and dark skirt she had had on all day. Now the two women were laughing together as if enjoying a particularly hilarious joke.

Roxanne glanced around wildly for Sean, seized by an urge to demand to know why they were here. Okay, so Britt had probably pulled together the guest list, but Sean must have been involved at some point. He'd have been happy to delegate responsibility for the bar staff, the DJ and drinks – but not who was coming. Maybe Britt had insisted Sean invited Marsha, with her being an editor of a glossy magazine now? Roxanne supposed that made

sense. But why Tina – the one Roxanne was apparently being so brave and stoical about? Her blood seemed to pulse at her temples as she watched them accept drinks from a waiter and gaze around as if they were utterly entitled to be there.

‘Okay, Rox?’ That was Serena, gently touching her arm.

Roxanne flinched. ‘Yes, I’m fine ...’ She tried to carry on dancing, realising how terribly drunk she was now, and aware of several glances in her direction. She needed water or more of that puffed rice. It was too hot in here, that was the trouble; lately, her internal thermostat seemed to have gone haywire. She tottered away and stepped outside, onto the red metal fire escape where she inhaled the evening air. From here, she took in the view of London; it was unusually warm, even for late May, verging on stuffy. Perhaps a storm was brewing.

Further down on the steps, a couple of models were smoking. Usually, Roxanne didn’t mind the smell of cigarettes. She had been a smoker herself until she had finally managed to quit last year, after visiting Della and feeling like an idiot, puffing away on the pavement outside her bookshop with virtually every passer-by stopping to say hi. But now, as the girls’ cigarette smoke plumed upwards, she felt queasy. She looked out again over the city she had loved with a passion since she had arrived here at eighteen years old, and felt nausea rise in her.

Back in the studio, she scanned the vicinity for Marsha and Tina, keen to avoid bumping into them. They were nowhere to be seen. A waiter glided towards her with a tray laden with more

glasses of champagne. ‘Thank you,’ she murmured, knowing it was the last thing she needed, but since when was champagne about need?

As she took a sip, a familiar voice floated above the hubbub: ‘Yep, Roxanne’s definitely here. I spotted her dancing like a nutter a few minutes ago.’ That was Marsha – and what did she mean by that? Roxanne whipped around to see her, still with Tina at her side, turned partly away and facing the seafood bar. A fresh wave of nausea rose in her stomach, and for a moment she feared she might be sick.

‘I thought she might not turn up tonight after your big announcement,’ Tina replied.

‘Of course she has,’ Marsha retorted. ‘You do know she’s seeing Sean, don’t you?’

‘You’re kidding!’ Tina gasped, still clearly not registering her presence.

‘No – honestly, they’re a couple. Everyone thought it’d just be a fling, ’cause you know what he’s like ...’

‘Oh God, yeah,’ Tina murmured.

‘But *apparently* those days are over,’ Marsha crowed. ‘They’ve been together a while now ...’

Roxanne’s throat felt dry and sour. Fuzzy with booze, she felt incapable of confronting them or even wobbling over to talk to them and making any sort of sense. *What* was Sean like exactly? What the hell was she implying? Sure, he’d dated plenty of women during the lengthy periods between his serious

relationships – but there was nothing wrong with that, and she'd never heard that he'd treated anyone badly. She frowned, trying to fathom out what Marsha and Tina had meant. Of course, the fashion business was rife with gossip, most of it widely overblown or patently untrue.

Roxanne sipped from her glass, feeling quite desolate now after having her dancing *and* her boyfriend criticised, virtually in a single breath. Kate was waving from the dance floor, trying to coax her to join them. However, Roxanne wasn't really registering her.

'I thought *everyone* knew about them,' Marsha added.

'Everyone apart from me, obviously,' Tina exclaimed with a high-pitched laugh. 'Always last with the gossip. God, though – Sean and Roxanne Cartwright? That's hysterical ...'

Roxanne stood for a moment, clutching her glass which she might once have termed half-full but was now most definitely half-empty. She turned away and placed it on a windowsill. However, being made from uneven bricks, the windowsill was too wonky a surface for the glass to rest on without toppling. Topple it did, landing with a smash on the concrete floor, causing a momentary hush as Roxanne turned and ran out of the room.

Chapter Seven

Normally, Roxanne wouldn't have dreamed of making a 'French' exit, as a hasty departure from a social event was known in her circles. She would do the rounds, saying all her goodbyes; although it could easily add an extra half-hour to the night, to duck out of an event would seem rude. Tonight, though, she had just run out and was now clattering rather unsteadily down the concrete stairs and across the cobbled courtyard, pulling her phone from her bag only when she was safely out in the street.

She scrolled for Sean's number, reassuring herself that he'd be *fine*, all his friends were there, and he'd understand why she had left abruptly. Anyone would. Even aside from overhearing Marsha and Tina, how could she be expected to endure one more second of a party at which pretty much everyone felt sorry for her?

At the sound of his voicemail, she cleared her throat. *'Hi, darling, s'me. Look, I'm sorry but I'm going home early. You've probably realised. It was a lovely party but I'm just not in the right frame of mind and I don't want to be a wet, um ... a wet blanket or a wet leek or whatever it is, so I think it's best ...'*

She glanced left and right, hoping to spy the yellow light of a taxi, but there was nothing.

'The other thing is, did you invite Marsha and Tina Court tonight? Oh, I know it's none of my business and it sounds horribly

petty and maybe you didn't ask them and they just thought they'd come along anyway. But if you did, couldn't you have warned me, honey? I heard the two of them ... blabbing on about us, about our thing, our relationship – can you believe their bloody cheek?

Roxanne broke off and rubbed at an eye, past caring that she might be smudging her make-up. 'Anyway,' she charged on, 'you know I've been feeling a bit wobbly about work and, well, I just couldn't face them tonight – is that ridiculous of me? A bit silly? It probably is and maybe I just need a break. I really want to see Della, hang out in the bookshop ... d'you fancy that – coming to Yorkshire with me? Oh, I know I've gone on about that! Anyway, enjoy the rest of your party, darling. The seafood was amazing – actually I didn't have any but it looked amazing, all those gnarly little creatures all piled up. I had that puffed rice, that was good! And the little cones it was served in. So cute. Anyway, I'm going now. Happy birthday darling, I love y—' With that, his voicemail cut off.

Roxanne exhaled forcefully and shoved her phone back into her bag. She'd have preferred to speak to Sean, rather than Sean's voicemail, but, on the plus side, at least she hadn't left a rambling message. Less happily, it had started to rain. She had somehow managed to leave the party without her jacket, and her left shoe was rubbing at her heel. On closer inspection, the heel appeared to have acquired a nasty abrasion and was all sticky and raw. A dancing injury – at her age! She was a fashion director, for goodness' sake. She should be capable of putting together an

outfit that wouldn't injure her. Wincing now, and still glancing around for a cab, she started to limp towards Islington. She would find this funny one day, she tried to reassure herself. How the girls at work would chuckle over the time she ran out of Sean's party and hobbled home with a bleeding heel.

Halfway up Pentonville Road, she stopped and looked to see whether Sean had called to check on her welfare and she hadn't heard it ringing. No missed calls. But there was a text, from Serena: *Kate thinks you've gone home, are you ok?*

She replied: *Fine thanks just bit tired xx.*

Yearning for a friendly voice now – and since it was only 10.45 p.m. – she called Della.

'Rox, are you okay?' She sounded startled.

'Er, yes. Sorry. You weren't in bed, were you?'

'No, don't worry. So, um, how're things? What've you been up to tonight?'

'I've just been at Sean's fiftieth actually ...'

'Oh! Was that fun?'

'Kind of,' she muttered.

'So, where are you now?'

'Um, I'm just going home,' Roxanne replied in her best sober voice. 'I've had quite a week and I need to go to bed.'

'Right. So, er ... how are you getting home?'

Roxanne coughed and considered fibbing but wasn't sure she could pull it off. 'I'm walking but it's fine, I'm nearly there now.'

'You're walking home at *this* time, on your own?' Della

gasped.

‘Yes, but I told you, I’m nearly—’

‘Rox, for God’s sake, you’re in London!’

‘Yes, handily, because that’s where I live.’ Roxanne was striding along now, head bent against the rain. She was regretting calling Della because, of course, her sister was under the impression that you only had to pop out for milk in London and you were likely to be stabbed.

‘Could you get a taxi, please?’

‘Yes, I will – but listen, your party invitation’s beautiful ...’

‘Thanks. Sophie drew it for me.’

‘I thought she might have. How’s art college going?’

‘Loving it, as far as she tells me anything. So, d’you think you’ll be able to come to the party?’

‘Hope so,’ Roxanne replied, ‘but there’s stuff going on, I have this new boss—’

‘Oh, yes, you mentioned her. How’s that working out?’

Roxanne pushed her damp hair from her face. ‘I’ll tell you when I see you. How’s the lovely Frank?’

Della laughed at this reference to the man she’d been seeing for the past eighteen months. Secretly, Roxanne had never been terribly fond of her sister’s ex-husband, Mark – a podiatrist who had refused to even treat his wife’s feet, for crying out loud – even before it had come to light that he’d been having an affair with a patient, for whom he had left Della. In contrast, Frank really *was* lovely: an architect whose daughter, Becca, was at art

college with Sophie in Leeds. It was their daughters' friendship that had brought them together. 'He's great,' Della replied. 'He sends his love. Look – *please* get a taxi, would you?'

'I told you, I'm nearly—'

'I don't like the idea of you tottering home drunk, all by yourself ...'

'I'm *not* drunk. I'm fine!'

A pause hung between them. 'Okay, then. Just take care. I worry about you, Roxanne.'

'There's no need,' Roxanne said unconvincingly. As they said goodbye, she wondered if there would ever come a point when a phone conversation with Della didn't leave her feeling as if she was still fifteen years old.

It was almost midnight by the time Roxanne reached home. She was tired and sodden and Sean still hadn't called her back, not that she expected him to really. He'd be having too good a time to think of checking his phone, she decided. Maybe he hadn't even noticed she'd gone. That didn't seem quite so positive, but then, it was probably better than him being frantic with worry and searching for her. And he obviously *wasn't* worried, was he? Perhaps he had played her message and thought, 'Yes, I can totally understand why she wanted to leave', and gone back to enjoying his night.

At the main door into her block, Roxanne raked through her handbag for her keys. She really must become one of those sorted women who tidied their bag regularly and juiced kale.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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