Every Good Woman Deserves A Lover

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Chapter 1

Persistence is a virtue, but not, necessarily, in an alarm clock. Its beeping tone, at first gentle and insinuating, was becoming shriller, its intermittent beeps forming into one long continuous ear-splitting wail. Without opening her eyes, she reached out to slam her hand down on its plastic flap. But her hand did not encounter a small inanimate object. It encountered human skin.

The skin was warm, and smooth. Very slowly, she opened one eye. Aha. Not a dream, then. Was that bad, or good? Gently she let her fingers rest on his back, feeling the warmth beneath. He flinched, as if a fly had landed, and, moaning softly in his sleep, he turned towards her and he too opened his eyes.

The eyes were chocolate brown, almond-shaped, his pupils and irises very clearly defined against the intense white of his eyeballs. Healthy eyes, undimmed by Western excess. Young eyes. He smiled at her, and, reaching out, he gently touched her face. She stared at him, shocked, as he slid a finger down her cheek, his smile confident and faintly teasing. He was comfortable with his nakedness, quite in control of himself, while she hunched the sheets up over her chest, conscious that her skin was not as smooth, not as flawless as his. She had much more to hide.

He lifted his hand from her face, and leant over, away from her, to switch off the clock. The hair in his armpit was black and silken. There was something slightly simian about him, she thought, with his jet black hair and dark brown eyes.

'What time is it?'

'Half past five.'

'Time to get up, then.'

'I think so, yes.'

He turned onto his back, and lay staring at the ceiling, easy and comfortable while she lay rigid with astonishment at what she had done. The sun was rising, but the heavy lined hotel curtains blocked out most of the light, so inside the room there was just a ghostly paleness, barely light enough to make out the features of the room. The wide double bed, its cover thrown off on the floor, a victim of the night. The pile of

foreign currency on the dressing table, to be spent on this last day or rendered useless. Her necklace, removed by him. On the floor lay the duffle bag, half packed. Towels, T-shirts, a pair of damp walking trousers and her boots, covered in dried flaking mud, trail-worn, lay at the foot of the bed. There was so much to do, so much to organize, but she could not move. Her body lay immobile, paralysed by the extraordinary heaviness of spent passion, fear, and something very close to wild elation. In the night she had woken, and felt only wonder at what had happened. Now, in this dawning light, she could think more clearly about what the effects would be. Only not, perhaps, yet. Not yet, while he was still lying warm and naked next to her. She would not have him for long.

I will stay in this limbo, she thought. I am caught, here, in a time which does not truly exist. This cannot be reality, because this is not my life. I have stepped over, into some kind of parallel universe because I cannot fully comprehend what I have done. This does not make sense. I will just lie here, and the world will go away.

'You must get up,' he said to the ceiling.

'Is that advice, or an order?' she said.

'I am telling you,' he said, turning back to her, a smile lighting his face, 'that as your tour guide unless you get up now you will miss your plane.'

'What if I want to miss my plane?' she said, quietly.

He said nothing. He knew she did not mean it. He knew they were in limbo too, and the movement they would both have to make would inevitably signal the beginning of the end.

But still she did not move. Moving meant breaking the spell. She felt as she had as a child, lying in bed at night, afraid, and hearing an odd creak on the landing outside. If I do not move whatever it is will go away, and, for a moment, the world stopped. Not moving was a way of not existing.

She had to get up. The world marched on. Just two rooms away her closest friends would be rising, murmuring to each other about the need for plastic bags to protect damp clothing, what to do with the rest of their nuevo sols and dollars, airline tickets, passports. They were two women packing and tidying like proper middle-aged people ending a holiday, and she was lying in a bed in a foreign hotel with a naked man. How was she to move from this situation, back into normal life? Last night he had said that this night would be a memory they would have for ever, but it was all very well saying that when you were in the midst of passion, caught up in the fantasy. Now the cold light of day was beginning to shine on what had been, she

shivered, an exceptionally reckless act by a woman who frankly ought to have known better. It was fine for him, he could get up and go, as he had done no doubt many times before, and shrug off the memory, but this was not the kind of thing she was used to doing. Not at all. She had to stop being part of this extraordinary fantasy and become herself once more, and work out how she was going to stop anyone, ever, from knowing. What had been their private limbo, this remarkable moment in time, would become public and the damage to her would be - what? Irreparable? She had never had a secret like this before. And that was all it could ever be. A secret.

He turned back to her, and lifted himself up on one elbow. In this pale light, he looked even more absurdly young. Like a child she would kiss goodnight. But he was still in charge, in charge of even this surreal situation. They had to break the spell, and say goodbye.

'You know, you have to get up.' He said the last two words forcefully, jokingly, like a threat. His voice was so beautiful. Heavily accented, perfectly phrased, like Shakespearean English without the modern colloquialisms, so he would say, 'I think we ought to leave now,' instead of, 'We must go.' He had a round-the-houses way of phrasing sentences that was charming, sounding so polite and old-fashioned. If he interrupted a conversation, he would say, 'Excuse me. I wonder if you might consider,' or if they said 'Thank you,' he always responded, 'You're welcome.' He was so courteous, while all the time beneath his courtesy simmered a dangerous sexuality, like a light permanently flickering.

Can love lie? she thought. Can love, once experienced, be denied? Do you fool yourself about love, and think that you can choose? I used to think that. I thought that I would never again be vulnerable, because I neither wanted nor felt there was any room in my life for such an emotion, and, perhaps, I did believe that you simply grow out of the obsessive, white heat of love and find more practical compensations in the rest of your life. Instead of living in the clouds you walk firmly on the earth. But now, she realized, she had never truly been tested, had never been drawn into a reciprocated sexual attraction which, once set in train, sped powerfully towards an inevitable conclusion.

How condescending I have been, she thought. Imagining that I am above and beyond love. You are never safe, because it isn't about choice, as I thought it was.

A knock on the door made them both jump. She had a terrible urge to giggle, and pull the cover over both their heads. Miguel held his finger to his lips like a naughty schoolboy.

'What?'

'Are you up yet?'

'Nearly.'

'We're going down. Do you want some breakfast?'

'Just coffee,' she called back, and was amazed at how normal she sounded. That was my voice, she thought, coming from a person I am not sure is me.

Still she lay there, but was restless now. What was the etiquette? Did she rise before him, or should she wait until he got up? Should they get up together, like synchronized swimmers?

Oh, this is silly, she thought. She lifted herself up, and threw the covers off her legs. He did not stir. Now another problem presented itself. It was still dim in the bedroom, but there was enough light for her to be seen and oh, it was a very different thing walking quite naked to the bathroom in the chill early morning light to falling backwards onto a bed in the darkness when it didn't seem to matter that her thighs were not perfectly smooth and her stomach formed neat rolls when she sat up. Now the world was patently no longer mad and normal things were happening outside this room and she was expected to walk, in all her imperfection, to the bathroom in front of a man who was, this is awful, almost twenty years younger than herself. I am a clichŽ, she thought, but I don't feel like one. I don't feel worldly wise, I feel very young, and inexperienced, and intensely vulnerable. That is the one thing love can do, she thought. It makes you vulnerable, and it changes you utterly. His fingerprints would be there forever on her skin.

Get on with it, she told herself sternly. But then, out of the corner of her eye, she spotted a hotel towel draped over the back of the chair by the bed. Camouflage. Reaching out, while breathing in as hard as she could, she grabbed the towel and, rising, she slid it sinuously round herself, tucking one end into the fold so it stayed in place. Wordlessly, she padded awkwardly to the bathroom and closed the door, then leant against it, relieved.

They'd left the bathroom light on all night because that had been the last thing on their minds, and all night the electronic fan had whirred incessantly, but she had not heard it. Now, it sounded deafeningly loud. The light inside was so bright, a harsh yellow neon.

In the mirror, her face was very pale beneath the tan, the bags under her eyes accentuated by the pitiless lighting. She smoothed her fingers over them, willing them to disappear. Make me young again. Make me the person I see in my mind. She stared at herself. Surely last night must have left some visible mark upon her? But she looked just the same - only her eyes were full of the memory. She shivered, brushed by angel's wings. The mascara she had applied the evening before, ready for

their big night out, the last night in Cusco, was smudged, accentuating the dark shadows caused by lack of sleep. All the alcohol they had consumed, although she had drunk less than Nic and Katie, had left the insides of her eyes pink-rimmed and there was a horrid metallic taste in her mouth. She stuck out her tongue. It was yellow at the back, and furry, like a small dead hamster.

It was very odd. She felt as if she had to tell herself to do things - arm, reach out and lift up toothbrush, fingers, squeeze toothpaste. Hurry up, hurry up, she told herself. He might just leave. He might get out of bed, dress swiftly, and go downstairs to say goodbye to her friends and then disappear, back to his own life, without leaving a ripple. Another night, another conquest. But surely that would be the sensible thing to do? Then she could dress, and make herself look less awful, and pack everything up into the duffle bag and check the room and do things she had done a hundred times before, the woman who tidies, a normal kind of routine, and then she would drink coffee and be picked up from the hotel and be driven out to the airport through the streets of Cusco where she would try outwardly to be calm and mature, while scanning the people on the streets, so familiar to him, searching hopelessly for his face amidst his people. Knowing that she had done a dangerous thing, and she alone would pay. She was the foolish one, imagining there could be anything more to this than the passing thrill of conquest for him. She knew that, rationally, yet through her ran so many sensations long forgotten, teenage sensations of excitement, daring, powerful attraction. They were feelings experienced at the start of something new, but this could not be a start. It was as if something at the base of her, something she had thought long dead, had been stirred, unleashing a spiral of feeling which made every nerve tingle. She felt so alive. How would he feel, now that he had possessed her so totally? Was that enough, for him? Was sex all it was? Could she just - forget, leave the memory behind, like a parcel neatly wrapped in this foreign hotel room?

She rinsed the bottled water round her mouth, and spat into the sink. How good she'd been, drinking nothing but bottled water all trip, just as he recommended. It was such fun, letting someone else be boss, especially someone so much younger. Like being a child again, away from the responsibility of her life where she was always in charge, responsible, and making decisions. It was so lovely to have someone else there to make the decisions for them. He had a natural air of authority despite his youth, and he seemed at ease in every situation - lecturing them solemnly on the history of the Incas, chatting in Quechua with the porters, in brief conversation in Spanish with other guides they passed on the trail and with receptionists in the hotels, the women flashing looks and smoothing their hair while he joked with them. Being with him was like stepping into the sun. He was their leader, and they followed him, giggling like schoolgirls, unleashed from the pressures of their everyday lives. But they were playing at it, a fantasy with clear parameters, just for now. Only last night she had stepped outside those parameters and she had no idea where she stood, and how she should carry this on. She knew - and she leant forward to stare at herself firmly - she had to let go now. Now, before she made a fool of herself. Neither of them had any kind of choice, and her future was already quite complicated enough.

Quickly, she packed everything into her sponge bag. Her make-up was in the bedroom, so she couldn't even cheat and put some mascara, eyeliner and lipstick on in here and come out pretending this was her real face. Anyway, after last night, she had nothing more to hide.

When she stepped out of the bathroom, clicking off the light, his smooth brown back was bent over on the far side of the bed, as he pulled his trousers on. They were grey, with big cargo pockets on the side. Tog trousers, in breathable fabric. He loved Western clothes, his designer labels. They set him apart from the other guides on the trail. His back, though broad, looked somehow defenceless, childish. He stood up, doing up the button on the waistband, and she thought how perfect he was, and how incongruous they would look together. He was a beautiful young man.

He turned round, feeling her gaze on him. He said nothing, and the look on his face told her he would make love to her if he could. He had done that to her so often, when there had seemed no way anything would ever happen, and she had laughed to herself about it, though alarmed too, what does he think he is doing? His gaze was pure sexuality, a challenge, a very blatant statement of intent, from which she had ducked, and fumbled, and made excuses. Until last night.

Now she had to stop this fantasy or else she would go mad. It had happened, it was over, full stop. Part of her longed for him to leave so she could think, sit in silence and try and make sense of what had happened. But she didn't have that luxury, there was no time. She had to start building the connection to her proper life and she turned away from him, and started stuffing the clothes from the floor into the duffle bag, not in her usual careful way but any old how. She felt his breath on the back of her neck, felt the warmth of his arms as he held her tightly.

He said nothing, and she relaxed against him for a moment, so secure in his arms, enjoying the hard masculine feel of him. It had not been a dream, and it had not been wrong. But it had to stop.

'Please,' she said, trying to break free, trying to wrest back control against the strongest feeling inside, to turn, to kiss and lose herself once more in him and be a lover.

No. She reached down to push clothes through the neck of the bag, trying to keep her mind on mundane things, where were her sunglasses, her passport? He tightened his grip, so she could not move. His face was against her back, and she could feel his soft lips, insistent, where the towel had slipped, arousing her. But there was no time.

'Sash? We're going to be really late. Why haven't you come down yet?'

Katie's voice through the door, full of concern, jokily cross.

'You're not puking, are you?'

'No. I'm fine. I'm still packing. Give me a mo.'

She waited until the footsteps had receded down the narrow hotel corridor.

'You have to stop,' she said, pushing him from her. This was ridiculous. 'Go.'

The word came out more brutally than she intended. His arms gripped her even more firmly, then stopped, paralysed.

Grabbing her sponge bag, she shoved it into the duffle bag, and then wrenched the clothes she'd been wearing the night before off the floor, where he had thrown them. They hadn't dressed up to go out, because there seemed no point if he was not to be there, and they felt far more comfortable in their fleeces, trekking trousers, and walking boots. Make-up was the big concession to the night out. They wanted to stay in the same clothes, their uniform for the trek, because that way it stayed with them and was not about to end.

With the clothes under one arm, she pulled away from him and walked into the bathroom. She dressed swiftly, pulled a brush through her hair, and then opened the bathroom door, just as the door into the corridor clicked shut. He had gone. She flicked on the main light of the bedroom. It was a normal room again, an anonymous hotel bedroom with a heavy flowery bedcover on the floor, towels by the bed and the blank black screen of the television below the mirror.

It was as if he had never been there. There was simply an indentation on the pillow next to hers, a small, polite mark from a head which had lain so close to hers when they finally slept, arms, legs, entwined, so she did not know where she ended and he began. How very different from Alistair, who slept as if she was not there and did not matter. She and Miguel, a man who was little more than a stranger, had slept as lovers. She and the man who had shared her life for eighteen years slept as strangers. She put her hand to her face. Her skin felt warm, caressed. She was beautiful, in that moment.

* * *

She knew their relationship was never going to be easy as soon as she first encountered him in the cool dark reception area of their hotel, where he was sitting in a large, sumptuous leather armchair, waiting for them, photocopied details about the trip spread out in front of him on the polished mahogany table. He had sprung to his feet, his hand outstretched, and she thought, 'Oh, no.'

There had been a sudden jolt, something she had absolutely not been expecting. He was so beautiful, so charming and so flirtatious. In a way, he was the cliché. How could someone with forty-two years of life experience behind her be vulnerable in that way? As she shook his hand she felt herself becoming flustered, her face red, and her hands shaking. He had caught her eye, and smiled at her, impossibly white teeth in his face, skin the colour of smooth milk chocolate. He's enjoying this, she had thought, he's well aware of the effect he has on women. But why me? Why single me out for that instant eye contact which says, 'I find you attractive'? Katie was younger, much more obviously pretty and far more flirtatious. It made no sense. Nicola was her usual matter-of-fact self and didn't even seem to notice the effect he was having on both her and Katie, who had caught her eye and flashed a 'wow' look at her. They would laugh about it later, when he'd gone. 'Good job we're all married,' Katie would say. 'But hey, bags I be the first to shag the sherpa.'

Sasha had hoped, while she walked the trail, that she would get used to him, and this attraction or whatever it was would wear off because it was deeply silly and it had nowhere to go. It would just be useful, as a joke between them, something to lighten the days as they walked the arduous trail, a girly joke they could share and laugh about in their tent at night. This doesn't happen to me, she had thought, as his eyes held hers for a beat too long. I am too old for this.

There. She surveyed the empty room. Everything's packed and all I need to do now is open the door, close it, walk downstairs, meet my friends and - go. Get on the aeroplane and fly to Lima from Cusco and then wait at the hotel there for almost a day and then get on the plane to Heathrow and be home after a long and exhausting flight, and yes, life will be a bit bumpy for a while but it will all settle down and I will go back to being my normal self and this will just have been a fascinating trip. A memory. Mine is not a life built for adventure, it does not allow for reckless things to happen. I have too many responsibilities and they are all at home, lying in wait for me, full of reproach at my two weeks of freedom. Nothing will have changed. We'll meet up for supper and look at the photographs and our husbands will tease us about shirking our responsibilities and groan when we say we are planning to trek the Himalayas next year. No-one will look at me and think that Sasha, reliable, dependable mother-of-two Sasha, had spent a night of supreme and reckless passion with a beautiful twenty-four-year-old. The thought made her laugh out loud. Imagine the shock, the outrage. But this - this madness - will never happen again. It will be buried, and left, here. I have no choice.

She pulled the duffle bag up to her shoulder. It felt unbearably heavy. The poor porters, loaded down with three of these plus all the tents and the pots and pans. Not

to mention the chemical loo. While the three of them had laboured along behind Miguel, the porters had sped on ahead to set up their lunch tents and then the camp for each night on the route, their flat brown feet in dusty sandals slapping along the paving stones of the trail, up and down the steep steps cut into the mountains, always at a jogtrot, never pausing or stopping for breath as the tourists had to do. Of course they had been born here, were well used to the altitude and their lungs were acclimatized to the thin, high air. They were sinewy and strong, with not an ounce of fat on their bodies, but their faces were prematurely lined with the grinding poverty in which they lived, the responsibility they had of bringing back the handful of dollars to make sure they could buy clothes for their children, and extra food not provided from their own meagre smallholdings tended by their wives while they were out on the trail.

They had passed many of these smallholdings while they walked, and, especially in the rain, she had wondered how you lived like that and smiled. The houses were a haphazard collection of stones, the floor inside the one- or two-roomed house earthen, which threw up dust in the summer, mud in the winter. Outside, a small pig squealed and ran about among the pecking chickens. The family llama grazed nearby, tethered and aristocratic. Children, dressed in brightly coloured handwoven jumpers and dusty shorts, played in the dirt, chased chickens or shyly held their hands out for a few sols, or, much better, dollars.

This was Miguel's world. True, he had a foot in the Western world, having been educated at university in Cusco and travelled outside Peru - a rarity for most citizens - but this was his culture. He was so proud of his country and he spoke passionately of his people and their history. He could talk, literally for hours, about thousands of years of the history of Peru, and tell the stories he had grown up hearing from his schoolteacher father, a musician and storyteller himself. They had sat at his feet in the candlelit tent, like rapt schoolchildren, as he weaved his tales of magical condors and great llamas in the sky which had saved warriors and foretold wars. I am an educated man, he told them, smiling, but one day I will become a campasino, a peasant, grow my hair long down my back and go to live on my family farm, build a house and marry the local girl who is promised to me. They had teased him about that, about the poor girl waiting at home for him in the hills, while he escorted trekkers along the trail. Did she think he would ever return? And he smiled and said, yes, she knew he would because she had been promised to him from birth. He enjoyed his foreign trips, to Europe, to America, but his heart would never leave. But would he marry? they persisted. He paused, teasing. Perhaps. If she was not so fat, he joked. They did not know whether to believe him.

And while he was speaking, in his heavily accented musical voice, with its odd idioms, he would catch her eye and send her that heavy, dangerous message again, and again. 'I want you. I cannot believe you do not want me. What harm will it do?' A message she had ignored until it became impossible to do so. 'Can you really resist me?' his eyes said to her.

Last night they had all joked that they could not let him go. He was 'theirs', and they were going to smuggle him home on the plane to England, like an exotic pet. But of course that would not work. He belonged here, as he said. He could never leave. He had a duty to stay here. His people. How often he used that phrase, how oddly. 'His people.' She remembered the night he had told her how in love his parents were, and how very much he wanted that for himself. While he talked, his eyes held hers and she thought, 'What are you saying to me?' He confused her, she could not work him out. Did he make a habit of this, singling out a woman in his party, testing his charm like the point of a blade against the skin, to see if she would yield?

Why, he said teasingly, did their husbands not mind them coming away on a trip like this, alone? Did they not miss them? Katie replied quickly that her husband would miss her, very much, but he knew this trip would make her happy and he wanted to please her. Nic said she and her husband often travelled separately as they had different interests and hobbies, and having been married as long as they had, they had no fear of separation. Sasha said nothing. Her life was much more complicated than that, and Miguel had looked at her quizzically. He knows, she thought. He knows why I am silent.

I wonder, she thought. I wonder if I was simply the easiest target, the most vulnerable? The thought made her shiver. But she knew in her heart it was not true. There had been an instant connection between them, a chemistry, although she could not explain why. She was attractive, but not in Katie's league. She was no richer than the others and anyway he had shown no interest in their money. He had chosen her for his own mysterious reasons. Well, it was too late now. She could not undo what she had done.

She pulled the hotel door closed behind her, the computerized card in her hand. They'd settled up the bill the night before, which had been easy because they hadn't eaten in the hotel and had had no drinks. There was no time, arriving in a rush from the train from Machu Picchu, Katie so keen to get out and do that last bit of shopping for jewellery and soft alpaca sweaters and presents. A preparation, a way of smoothing their passage from this extraordinary journey into their lives at home. Then the last supper at the Inca Grill, convivial and noisy, all of them still high on the adrenalin of the trip, faintly hysterical at the thought of going home. Being here was like being woven into a fantasy, where anything could happen as normal life had been suspended. Now reality loomed and all three were unsure how everything they had been through on the trail would translate into the reality of their everyday existence. How could you go from the romance, the danger and the sheer grandeur of the Inca Trail to accepting a life of school runs and supermarket queues? How could you not be changed for ever by what you had seen and experienced? Sasha comforted herself with the thought that, at least, it would always be there, a time capsule in her mind, a space in which she only had to delve to see herself once more standing, looking out over a range of mountains stretching as far as the eye could see, snow-capped, remote, quite alone, on the top of the world. And everything she had to do, seemingly so important, or stressful, or worrying at the time, would be thrown into sharp relief for what it was - nothing - against that enduring vision.

All last night she had looked for him as they sat in the restaurant, the silent square overshadowed by the vast and ornate Spanish-built cathedral. No sign, no sign, until they returned to the hotel and he was there, waiting for her.

The corridor was empty, and silent. She walked slowly, borne down by the weight of the bag, her mind full of him. At the lift, she turned to look for him. There was no-one, a void with closed doors behind which room after room of travellers slept. The mirror at the back of the lift reflected a face caught between youth and age. Normally when she looked at herself she was checking for signs of age. Now she was checking for signs of guilt. It was a kind of progress, she thought, and laughed inwardly. Whenever she looked at herself from now on, she wouldn't look for imperfection, but try to see herself through his eyes, the way he had looked at her last night. When he desired her. She had been wanted. Not useless. A man who looked like a god had wanted her.

She tucked her dark hair behind her ear, and smiled, her eyes bright, brimful of secret pleasure. She wished she'd time for a shower - she felt sticky and her skin smelt of his sweat. She brought the back of her hand up to her face and breathed deeply. Closing her eyes, she could see him, as he entered the room, pushing her roughly back against the wall, frantic, male, overpowering. She was overcome with longing - why had she pushed him away just now? She might never be able to touch him again and the thought made her want to cry. She had not felt like this for so many years, the desperate need to be held by someone. It was the security and affirmation that you were needed, not just desire. She had forgotten how it felt, that all-consuming need to touch, to be entwined so you do not know where one ends, and the other begins. An attraction as powerful as addiction.

The foyer of the hotel was a bustle of activity. Other early morning travellers were milling about, checking their tickets and passports, tetchy at having to get up so early and querulous at the thought of the long flight home. In the middle a harassed-looking porter stood, trying to match up tickets from the security room with lost luggage. Most were American tourists in their impeccable beige trekking outfits. Next to them Sasha felt thrown together, untidy, but then at least she had actually walked the trail, rather than taken the train and done it the easy way.

The restaurant was tucked down a corridor away from the foyer, one wall ornately carved out of wood, looking out on a garden with a fountain in the centre of the hotel. This was one of only two five-star hotels in Cusco, but she didn't like it as much as the first they had stayed at, it was much bigger, more international, the immense reception area like an airport lounge. But then the first hotel had held the promise of the trip to come.

Katie and Nic were sitting at the far end of the restaurant, their bags at their feet, drinking coffee and chatting. They looked so resolutely normal that for a brief

moment Sasha wondered if she had imagined it all. She fought a very strong urge to turn and run. He was not there, as she had thought he might be. As he had said goodnight to them last night, pretending that he was about to leave while she knew otherwise, he had said he would return this morning to bid them a final farewell and see them safely onto the minibus which would take them to the airport to fly to Lima. They didn't look up, not hearing her approach, and as she sat down, she realized her hands were trembling. She hid them under the table.

'Oh, hi. You made it, then,' Katie said ironically, looking at her searchingly, and she felt a blush rising from her neck. She couldn't meet her eyes because she felt as if she had 'I slept with Miguel' stamped on her forehead. Surely there was some visible sign of her sin? Katie and Nic were two of her closest friends, and to tell them would mean it would hang in the air, a forever-shared secret, making them partners in guilt. They would worry for her, want to discuss it, and she now realized that she did not want anybody, ever, to share this experience. It was just for her.

'Are you feeling OK?' Katie eyed her closely. Something was up.