Entertaining Mr Stone

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Prologue

I'm staring at the door again. That big old looming great door that leads to his office.

It's huge and there must be half an oak tree there, with all sorts of knots and whorls in it, all polished to within an inch of someone's life. Two of the knots look exactly like a pair of eyes, and they're watching me. Staring me down, the way he does.

Somewhere in my innards I start to quiver. Oh, hurry up, you bastard! I can't wait any longer. Buzz me in!

As if he's read my mind with his voodoo mentalist powers or something, there's a sound like the squawk of a giant mechanical bird, and Mrs Sheldon, his PA, says, 'You can go in now, Miss Lewis.'

She gives me a kindly, clear-eyed smile, the old dear, and nods.

She hasn't the faintest idea what's going on, bless.

Now the moment's come, I'm both terrified and so excited I've almost forgotten how to put one foot in front of the other. It seems to take about a year actually to get to the door, and when I get there, my feet glue themselves to the carpet for a while.

Robert Stone, CPEA, Director of Finance.

I have a mad urge to kiss the nameplate, but I resist. Mrs Sheldon might start to suspect something at last if I start doing weird and worshipful things in the outer office. Better save those sorts of activities for the inner sanctum.

A firm, resonant voice calls out 'Come!' from beyond the whorly wood.

Oh shit! I've kept him waiting. I'm in for it now. Or at least I hope I am.

With a moist shaking palm – and some moist shaking in other bits of my anatomy – I twist the big brass door handle, push open the door and sidle inside.

He's on his feet, which throws me. And I stand there like a twit, just gaping at him, while he turns away from the window that looks down over the courtyard. I wonder who he's been watching. He likes to watch, and in this mad place there's often something going on that's worthy of his special and unusual attention.

But I'm woolgathering. I should be concentrating. He's looking at me. Waiting for me to say something. But unfortunately I'm gob-smacked. As usual.

The Director of Finance. Stone. *Mr* Stone. Clever Bobby. Whatever.

Well, he's a tall man, and imposing. Not fat exactly, but no Greek god either. Just an average-looking, middle-aged, slightly greying, five o'clock shadowy (he says he has Italian ancestry), suit-wearing local government bigwig.

Theoretically, he's the sort of bloke you wouldn't look twice at in a crowd, especially if there was plenty of younger talent around. But in practice, well, he makes my knees disintegrate and this yearning, gnawing sensation start up somewhere around where I think my heart is.

I'm just about to topple over when, thank Christ, he says, 'Take a seat, Maria.'

I take one. It's the very plain hard chair, a few feet from the front of his desk. I don't feel any better at all because I know this chair of old.

'So!' he says, sounding quite bright and perky as he leans forward, his palms on his desk for a moment, supposedly studying some papers spread out over his

blotter. The sudden movement stirs a whiff of Mr Stone smell – a mix of Dior and just a hint of not unpleasant late afternoon sweatiness – and I have to concentrate really hard not either to topple off the chair or crawl across the room on my hands and knees and press my face against his nether regions.

'Your latest performance review,' he continues, giving me a look like the devil. He's really trying not to laugh, because basically this is all bullshit. The person who's supposed to do reviews is Mr I'm-so-trendy, designer-wearing, one-time arch nemesis, full-time bisexual William Youngblood, the Human Resources supremo. And, what's more, Stone put me through one of these same 'reviews' only four days ago.

'Leaves a lot to be desired, doesn't it, Maria?' he says, as if I've any idea what's written on the paper in front of him. Raising his eyebrows, he pushes himself upright again quite quickly, snatches his stainless-steel rollerball from the desk and twirls it in his fingers. He has this way of being both nervy and totally relaxed and in control all at the same time and it's bloody disconcerting. He comes across like some naughty, overgrown imp about to play a trick on me.

I swallow. Oh, the tricks.

'Nothing to say?'

My mouth is dry. I'm suddenly impatient with all this poncing about. I wish he'd get on with it.

'I—'

Voodoo ray style, he reads me.

'Are you wearing knickers today?' he asks in the same tone of voice he'd use if he was asking me to get on the Intranet and call up some council house income stats for him. He flings down his pen again and moves quickly round to my side of the desk – light on his feet for a big man – to stand before me, reaching down to lay his hand

lightly against my cheek. His skin isn't soft like a pen-pusher's. He's a man of action, although he doesn't do sport. He just plays games.

Still, I've lost my tongue somewhere.

'Knickers, Miss Lewis?' he prompts, fingertips still against my face. They're only blood heat, naturally, but it feels as if he's branding me.

'Um ... yes.'

'Yes what?'

'Yes, Mr Stone, I'm wearing knickers.'

His fingers slide delicately across my face, and for a moment his thumb settles on my lower lip. When he withdraws it, he studies the trace of clear lipgloss that clings to his skin, then seems to zone out for a moment. Maybe it's a make-up ad fantasy? Kate Moss pouting for Britain. I don't know.

Then, 'Details, Miss Lewis, details!' He's brisk as he whirls away again and goes back to the window.

'They're pink ... er ... cotton and Lycra. They're a thong, actually.'

I stutter and choke on the words as if he's asked me to reel off a whole string of the foulest, most depraved obscenities. Which he has, as good as, for the purposes of this entertainment.

'A thong, eh?' He leans against the window jamb, looking out again, bracing himself with one arm raised, elbow crooked, cradling his head.

He's having the time of his life, as he always does.

'Not really appropriate for work, that, is it?' he queries, not looking at me. He doesn't need to. He's seen every inch of me in Technicolor close-up, plenty of times. He could probably draw a picture of my sexual topography if he wanted to. And he might actually want to, one of these days.

'I don't suppose so,' I mutter. The garment in question is rapidly becoming pretty sticky, and I'm filled with a

sick, almost head-spinning urge to show him. I want to feel ashamed and grovelling. I want to crawl on my belly for him. Do anything. Expose anything. Endure anything.

'Better take it off then, hadn't you?'

Yes!

I start to wriggle on my seat and fish around under my skirt but, before I've made any headway, he's watching me again, bitter-chocolate eyes intent and rather bright. He's smiling with them, even though his stubbly face is perfectly straight.

'Not like that, Miss Lewis. Stand up. Lift your skirt.'

I obey, hauling up the cotton fabric, although to be honest I don't have far to haul it as it's rather short. Something else that's inappropriate for work, even if it's entirely appropriate for entertaining Mr Stone.

I'm not very graceful when I'm nervous, and I scuttle and hop as I step out of my thong. I'm probably getting a black mark for that too. With no instructions as to what to do with the thing once I'm out of it, I just stand there, thong in hand, still holding up my minuscule skirt and blushing furiously. I daren't look at my prize, but know they're moist, to put it mildly. I can smell myself (and I'm pretty ripe because it's been a long day waiting for this) and I'm sure he can too.

He nods towards his desk, but I play dumb. He raises his eyebrows like some playful demon and my sex clenches.

'On the desk, please, Miss Lewis,' he directs as if it's a folder full of fiscal projections.

Both my ears and my clit are pounding by now. Semi-manufactured embarrassment and total horniness in equal measures. I spread my little thong out neatly in the middle of his blotter, just the way he prefers, sticky side up.

He folds his arms.

He unfolds them and then rubs his bristly chin.

He paces up and down behind his desk, head cocked, perusing my offering.

He pauses, taps his pursed lips with his knuckle, nodding.

Boy, is he making a meal of it today!

He crosses his arms around his body, looks first at the crotch of my knickers, then at my face, and goes, 'Hmm . . .'

Not once yet has he looked at my bush, which is still in plain sight beneath the hiked-up hem of my skirt.

'Pretty conclusive evidence,' he observes, in a passable impression of my favourite television detective, who I've told him more than once he resembles.

For several minutes, he just stares at the manifestation of what he so effortlessly does to me, as if seeking the meaning of life in that dark pink diamond shape.

Just when I think I might pass out, he moves towards me. The smell of Dior and the wolfish tang of perspiration grows stronger, and without thinking I breathe in deep. He watches the lift of my breasts beneath my top as he stops, just inches from me, but doesn't yet touch me.

'So,' he murmurs again, head tilted to one side, all nervy again, yet somehow also less fazed by the situation than I could imagine any other man in the world would be.

I'm still holding up my skirt with one hand, but the other just hangs down at my side as if I have no bone, no muscle tone to support it. It stays there when he reaches down summarily between my legs and begins to manipulate me.

Touchdown, the crowd goes wild! Or at least all the nerve-endings down there do. The ones that have been screaming for just this delicious bit of business since before I even arrived in the outer office. I start to make little gasping, grunting noises, and to wiggle my hips to

his rhythm, but he shakes his head slightly, and goes 'Uh oh!' beneath his breath.

I bite my lip, and his eyes narrow and go all sultry and heavy-lidded, the skin at the corners of them crinkling in a way that's both boyish and indicative of the grip of middle age. My arousal ramps up another notch just from that one single thing.

It's hard to stand up and it's hard to stand still. I feel as if I'm in some weird place that's a million miles away from the Director of Finance's Office in Borough Hall. I'm in some parallel universe with new rules and new people. I'm fighting to control every muscle in my body, and there's a little wetness slipping down the inside of one of my legs.

And still he fingers me.

'I think I might fall over,' I gasp, in an odd, light, high-pitched voice that doesn't sound a bit like me.

'Well, hold on to the chair, you silly girl,' he chides, increasing his rhythm, getting a little bit rough.

My clit sings, gathers itself. I grab on to the chair back with my free hand. He continues to rub, his own free hand hanging loosely at his side, quite relaxed, as if unconnected with what's going on down below.

And then I come. Come in massive wrenching waves, and his free hand isn't unconnected any more because it's around me, cradling and supporting me when I can no longer support myself.

'Oh, Bobby,' I whisper, completely out of it, but he doesn't chide me for my impertinence. He just holds me for a little while longer while I descend again.

But he's hard. Very hard. I can feel it jabbing into my bare thigh, through the cloth of his trousers. And a moment later he hustles me towards his desk and drapes me over it face down.

There's a rustle, and the familiar music of a very

smooth-running, expensive zip whooshing down. A hand presses on my back, flattening me against the blotter, and against my own fragrant, incriminating knickers, then the same hand manhandles my thighs apart and prises open my sex.

'Oof!'

The air rushes out of me as his cock rushes in, and as he begins to thrust, hard, he mashes my clit against the desk.

I come again, and I'm seeing stars.

Oh, Clever Bobby!

1 The Borough of the Damned

Another day working in the Borough of the Damned. I've only been here an hour and I'm bored out of my mind.

I glance up at the clock and it's like we're in one of those Fifties psychological B-movies, and the second hand is crawling at quarter speed. I look around the room and we're still in the 50s. Massive old desks, a great big marble fireplace, discoloured magnolia wash on the walls – where you can see it for project planners and dog-eared information posters – even potted plants on the window-sill. It's as if someone had to sell off their unwanted mansion or something, and a whole bunch of us local-government office drones, complete with our various accoutrements, have been beamed in to take up the space. The only signs of twenty-first-century progress are the VDUs with their floating, bobbing Borough-coat-of-arms screensavers, and their keyboards and assorted peripherals and other gubbins. And the cabling that Health and Safety have supposedly checked and approved, but which isn't safe at all. The prospect of seeing somebody I don't particularly like trip and go arse over tit is one of the few bright moments in my day.

Sigh.

This is a crap job, but I suppose I should be grateful. With a CV like mine – questionable to the point of non-existence – I'm lucky to be working at all. I still can't believe they offered me a post, but against the odds and all the laws of reason they did, and I accepted. And now I'm here.

But I'm bored, bored, bored.

Suppressing the urge to lay my head down on the desk amongst the assorted paperwork and have a snooze, I apply myself to filling in codes on forms for Small Business Loans. I really have no interest in what I'm doing, and I'd far rather speculate about the lives of my work colleagues. Or at least I would if the ones in my immediate vicinity were even the slightest bit interesting. Unluckily for me, they're all depressingly diligent and into their work. But still, the evil sex pixies of my imagination can't help extemporising.

I wonder if Sandy's getting any? And if so, how much? Her boyfriend Nigel, who works in another section of this godforsaken department, looks as if he might be a bit of a cocksman, but she's too prissy looking and self-consciously nice for me to imagine them getting up to anything exciting. He probably has to fill in a form in triplicate if he wants to get his leg over. She looks up and gives me a puzzled smile, because I'm staring at her, and I try to picture her on her hands and knees while Nigel gives it to her, doggie style. Interestingly, she's still wearing her prim white shirt and her grey pencil skirt, pushed up to her waist to reveal a pair of slutty red split-crotch panties.

Wild!

'Are you okay, Maria?' Sandy asks, looking a bit spooked, as if she's seen what I'm seeing.

'Yeah, fine, thanks,' I answer, plastering on a bright team-player smile and putting my head down again.

But the damage is done now. Those pixies are really on the case and I can't seem to resist the erotic thoughts. Damn! It's bad enough working here in the desert of not getting any, without my overactive imagination tormenting me about it. I haven't had a boyfriend since I left London and, because I'm supposed to be economising to pay off my debts, I've actively resisted going out anywhere to look for another one.

Consequently, no sex. Which I didn't think was bothering me. Well, not any more than my trusty Magic Rabbit can accommodate. But now it seems that it is. Worse luck.

Unable to summon any enthusiasm for loan forms, I gaze upwards. If only I could see what was happening in the offices across the central courtyard. There might be all manner of funky stuff going down. I've been told that despite its stuffy, dusty, thoroughly repressed facade, Borough Hall is a actually steaming hotbed of horny licentiousness, but I can't say I've seen the evidence of it with my own eyes yet. Unfortunately the windows in these ground-floor offices are high, and I can only see obliquely into offices on the second and third floors across the way. A couple would have to be bonking on the actual windowsill for me to see them from this angle.

Fifteen minutes pass. I drift into a coma. And then Sandy says, 'Fancy a walk? These timesheets need taking to admin.'

It's minion work, but I smile and leap up cheerfully. Anything to break the tedium.

Outside, clutching the timesheets, I opt for the scenic route, which means promenading all the way round the four sides of this humungous old warren of a building instead going directly to an office which is only actually a few doors away. I can always say I called for a pee.

There's not much to see, though. The wood panelling, though surprisingly well polished, isn't particularly interesting to look at, and the paintwork above it is the same uniform shade of grimy dun as the offices. The whole place needs jazzing up a bit. Or burning down.

Maybe I should suggest a makeover to my new boss, Mr Stone, the Director of Finance? Not that a lowly cockroach like me gets to speak to 'the exalted ones' all that often. Frankly I'm amazed that he interviewed me in

person in an establishment that's as hung up on hierarchies and pecking orders as this one.

But he did. And it was weird. Him and the Human Resources guy, William Youngblood, the head honchos of their departments, conducting the interview of a temporary, supernumerary Clerical Assistant, Grade 2. I would've thought that they'd have plenty of mid-range bods to do a job like that. Let's face it, I'm only one of the department's bottom feeders.

When I've dumped my timesheets in an office that's no more exciting than my own, apart from a few people standing round swearing at a Xerox machine that's spewing paper out as if it's possessed by the devil, I decide to treat myself to an extended side trip.

I'll go and see Mel.

Mel's an acquaintance. Well, more like a friend. I think. I don't know. I haven't actually known her that long and I'm not quite sure what to make of her yet. But suddenly I think it would be nice to see her.

You could say that she and I live together, although that's not exactly true. We actually have flats in the same house, but I didn't realise that until I met her, quite by accident, elsewhere. I was browsing in the market round the corner, looking for some sensible work clothes on a factory seconds stall, when I stepped back into the light to see whether a basic black skirt I wanted to buy was in fact basic black, and not cheap, institutional navy. There was a bump of bodies and I knocked into her and the carton of coffee I was carrying in my free hand went all over her jacket.

Auspicious meeting or what? If the roles had been reversed, I might have flipped, and got cross and told her to bloody well be careful, but she just said 'No problem. Let me buy you another coffee. I know a place just around the corner.' As if it were her fault. Which it wasn't.

What I didn't realise at the time was that she was trying to pick me up.

Luckily, when I reach the main entrance foyer, Mel is in her little security cubby-hole, just where I've been hoping she'd be.

'Hiya, soldier, how's it hanging?' I greet her, feeling a little bit nervous, and she turns from hanging keys on a pegboard to give me a sexy once-over. I can see she appreciates my shortish skirt and my tight little embroidered cardi and camisole. (I never actually bought those sensible work clothes after all, and until somebody calls me on it, I'll take my chances with what I've got!)

Mel looks pretty hot too. Boy, does she love that uniform! Dark blue shirt (with epaulettes, no less), tie, crisply pressed pants, Doc Martens polished like mirrors. It plays right into her army bitch/policewoman fetish. All she needs now is handcuffs, a long-handled night-stick and a piece!

She's a dyke, of course.

'It's hanging okay, babe,' she answers with a wink, stepping out into the foyer. 'How about you?'

Mel works shifts, and has an active social life as far as I can tell, so I don't really run into her that much around the house. This is the first time I've seen her in several days. She's at Borough Hall for seven, on her Kawasaki, while I've started getting lifts in with Greg, a guy who also has a flat in the house with us.

'I'm bored out of my mind, Mel. When's all this hot action you keep telling me about going to start?' I joke, referring to her own joke, when she originally told me that this job was about to come up. It was that first day when we were chatting in the café and, for no apparent reason, I'd just spilled my life story in addition to my cappuccino. 'I haven't seen anything juicy at all yet. And it's not for want of looking!'

I pout a little. It's fun to flirt, even if I'm not sure whether I'll be able to follow through on it. For a moment, I remember the sudden realisation – which came not long after the job news – that Mel was a girl who liked girls. I thought (and almost said!) 'Wow! A lesbian, that's interesting.' I'd never had any openly gay friends before, not even at Uni, but I'd always wondered if I could fancy a woman.

I can tell she likes me. She makes no secret of it. And, to be honest, I *am* tempted. Quite a bit, in fact. I've never been with a woman, but there's a first time for everything. And Mel is desperately cute in that outfit with her short-cropped blond hair and her fresh rosy complexion.

'Be patient, love. You'll happen on something when you least expect it,' she says sagely, all the time looking as if she'd like to make some of that action happen right now, there in the cubby-hole behind us. I feel a twitch of reaction, a definite frisson, and I'm almost on the point of opening my mouth again and saying something really stupid, when we hear the sound of raised voices coming to us from down the long diagonal corridor to our left.

Two men are approaching, deep in conversation, and even from a distance it's obvious they don't like each other very much. They're not shouting, they're not gesticulating, but there's antipathy coming off them in waves and crashing right over me and Mel.

The shorter guy is William Youngblood, the Borough's Human Resources Manager, who is seriously cute. Lean, blond, very groomed and urban in a dark suit, dark shirt and tone-on-tone dark tie. My totty detector goes 'Ping! Ping! Ping!' like active sonar.

But the other man. Oh, the other man! With him it's 'Battle stations!' and the siren's whooping. 'Dive! Dive! Dive! ARROOOBAH!!!!'

Mr Robert Stone. Director of Finance. The top of my particular food chain in Borough Hall.

By the book, Youngblood should be the more fanciable. He's younger, prettier and cooler. But Mr Stone beats him hands down in the expert opinion of my hormones.

Yet I can't explain why.

He's middle-aged, actually quite grey at the temples, big and kind of stocky. His complexion is a tad on the swarthy side, and he almost always looks as if he needs a shave, even at 9 a.m., when he sweeps in, his long dark overcoat flying, while I'm loitering around the time-clock, just hoping to catch a glimpse of him passing by.

My daily fix.

Compared to smooth, sleek Youngblood, Stone is Mr Average, just a chunky managerial bloke in a suit. But every time I look at him both my autonomic nervous system *and* my nether regions go on red alert.

To put not too fine a point on it, I'd give him one!

Though they're actually barrelling quite smartly along the corridor, we're back in the B-movie slo-mo phenomenon from the office again. I've no idea what they're at odds about, but Youngblood looks mad as hell. And even madder for the fact that Stone isn't showing *his* annoyance at all, even though I can somehow sense he's just as pissed with Youngblood as Youngblood is with him.

Stone's only give-away is that he's tapping his fingers on the edge of the leather document folder he's carrying. And yet my Scooby sense where he's concerned tells me that this particular bit of nonsense is more about winding Youngblood up than an expression of his own nervousness or stress.

As the two bear down on us like a pair of municipal Reservoir Dogs, I realise that I'm standing around in the foyer, just doing nothing and making the place look untidy. At least Mel is actually supposed to be here, on duty.

I babble something like 'Thanks for letting me know about that. I'll pass the message on.'

Mel says, 'No problem' in an official-sounding voice, even though she's actually grinning at me out of the eye-line of the two big chiefs.

Now, to speak or not to speak? That is the question. Theoretically the Borough is a progressive, open-door-policy, equal-opportunities kind of employer, not a feudal demesne. But some of the youngest school leavers daren't even utter a syllable in the presence of the head honchos, and try their best to blend into the panelling whenever the likes of Stone and Youngblood pass by.

Me, well, I'm a bit older and I've been around men a bit more, so I smile brightly and say, 'Good morning!' in their general direction, as they draw alongside us.

Youngblood gives me a grudging nod and doesn't break his stride.

Mr Stone, however, stops, right in front of me, and favours me with a slight smile, followed by an unashamedly quantifying look. The whole sequence lasts less than a second, and I might even be imagining it, because his expression barely alters from sober and serious. But somewhere in the back of his eyes there's a twinkle, a kind of spark that says, 'Watch out, little girly, you don't know the half of it!'

It's like being thumped in the solar plexus. That, and feeling as if his hand has just slipped inside my knickers!

My mouth drops open but, before I can say something irredeemably imbecilic, he answers, 'Good morning, Maria. Settling in OK?' His head cocks to one side in a birdlike expression of genuine or cleverly bluffed interest. His fingers are still tap, tap, tapping against his document case, but now it's me he's playing games with because I'm drowning deep in my masturbation fantasy and that long forefinger of his is the one that's doing the business.

'Yes, fine, thank you.'

I sound like a robot, but there's nothing robotic about my eyes, which defy all logical control and drift down-

wards towards the crotch area of his charcoal-grey suit trousers.

Moron! How could I possibly have imagined that a hawk-eyed guy like Mr Stone wouldn't notice that unsubtle manoeuvre? And he most certainly has, because the slight smile is a good deal less slight now, and he shakes his great head infinitesimally and almost but not quite laughs.

'Excellent!' he says roundly. 'Well, must be off. No peace for the wicked. Nice to know you're happy here.'

With that he turns quickly and with an elegance you wouldn't expect in a big, beefy guy, and strides off toward Youngblood, who I come out of my stupor to realise is standing a few yards away, looking impatient and even more miffed than ever. Then he too shoots me a look, antagonistic but in a strange way also quite sexy, and the two of them waltz off, resuming whatever the high-powered squabble was that they'd been embroiled in when I first set eyes on them.

It's all over in about half a minute but, as the two men disappear around the corner, Mel laughs softly and observes, 'Uh oh, it looks like Clever Bobby likes you.'

She's right. I think. Unless my finely honed instincts are deceiving me. I've always been able to tell pretty accurately when a bloke fancies me and, at the risk of sounding clichéd, there's definitely 'chemistry' between me and Mr Stone. Not that there's much chance of being able to do anything about it. He's my head of department, and I'm the newest and lowliest of his many employees. The sediment in his pond.

But that doesn't stop me fantasising.

I've never been with a guy that big. He's both tall and stocky with it. Is his dick in proportion? I muse. I imagine him on top of me, inside me, overwhelming me with his flesh while his bright, clever eyes bore into my soul.

Snap!

I jump when Mel clicks her fingers next to my ear.

'Hey! Where were you?' She grins at me as I transition back to reality. 'Away with the fairies? Or was it with our esteemed Director?'

'How did you guess?'

'You've got that starving-castaway-eyeing-up-a-fish-and-chip-supper look,' she says sagely, as usual summing things up more tellingly than I ever could.

'Yeah, he's quite something, isn't he?'

It's a surprise when she agrees.

'But he's not your type, obviously.' I narrow my eyes, studying her. Is there something I've missed? Have I read her wrong?

'No, but I can still see the attraction on a purely scientific basis. He's big, powerful, impressive, and he's got status.'

But it's more than that. She knows it. I know it. I'm just about to launch into a debate about the real reasons why a woman might want to shag the Director of Finance when the Borough Hall clock boings out the hour and I realise just how long I've been out of the office.

'I'd better be on my way or Sandy will send out a search party,' I say, rifling through a sheaf of pathetic and implausible excuses for my long absence. 'See you ... er ... sometime.' It's a bit awkward, living near to someone yet in some ways inhabiting an entirely different planet.

As I flip my fingers at her, Mel darts forward, and right out of the blue, plants a quick kiss on my cheek. I'm so flabbergasted for a moment that I completely forget to look around and see if anybody's watching us. Fortunately, there's no one else in the entrance hall, but immediately my mind throws out Mr Stone, complete with that flare of secret amusement in his eyes.

You'd love that, wouldn't you? I say to him in absentia.

I bet you like to watch. I bet it really gets your rocks off.

So I have two things to obsess about and speculate on for the rest of the day.

1. Having sex with Director of Finance Stone.
2. Having sex with a woman, i.e. Mel.

Great! Either way I'm in trouble. If I attempt to make a move on Mr Stone, there's massive potential for screwing up a job that I really need, and I might not easily get another. If I make a move on Mel, I might end up in a hugely embarrassing and stupid situation if I don't actually like girl-on-girl action when it comes down to it. It wouldn't be the first time I'd thought I fancied something, or somebody, only to realise I was so, so wrong.

It's a lose-lose, lose-lose situation. Because, basically, I *do* want them both.

Needless to say I'm making plenty of mistakes on the loan application forms, and if I don't shape up I'll probably get the sack anyway. It's a merciful release when Allsopp, the 'grey man' who's in charge of our section, tells me I'd better take an early lunch, then maybe come back with a sharper, clearer mind?

Not much chance of that, but it's such a relief to get out of the office again that I favour him with my best smile and assure him that he's 'so right' and I'm sure I can do better this afternoon. Not too sure I like his slightly over-enthusiastic reaction to this (not *more* complications!) but, what the hell, I'm out of jail, if only for an hour.

It's raining outside, and the streets are slippery and even greyer than usual. Not for the first time, I wonder what I'm doing back in this town, but then I remind myself that I'm skint, and it's a lot cheaper to live here than a big city. And somehow 'grey' here seems welcom-

ing and familiar and rootsy, whereas in the metropolis it's just cold and rather frightening on your own.

Still, it's actually quite cold here today, and the chill and the wetness quickly seep through a mac that's designed more to be looked at than to serve any practical purpose. I scuttle into the Cathedral Shopping Centre and promise myself that there'll be no actual shopping, just looking.

The shops are tempting though. M&S, BHS, Body Shop, Miss Selfridge. But, in my new spirit of sensible spending only, I resist the expensive designer sandwiches in Marks and settle for a cheese-and-pickle from The Butty Bar, and, as a special treat for my frugality, I allow myself a celeb mag in W.H. Smith.

I take a quick scan of this as I hover just inside the Centre's automatic doors, hoping the rain will abate. It's all the usual stuff, mindless really, but I can't stop being fascinated in a watching-a-car-wreck way. Here they all are, the usual mix of pop stars, footballers, footballers' wives and people who are famous only for being famous, like reality-show contestants. I remember my own brief and equally meaningless fifteen minutes of fame when I appeared in mags like this for a week or two while I was dating a man who had a bit of a profile.

But nobody would remember me now, I decide, grimacing at my reflection in the glass, especially the image of my soggy mac and my bedraggled hair. I'm just a moderately pretty blonde with a half-way decent figure, and a smile that was always nervous for the camera. A common phenomenon in mags like these, and as instantly forgettable and throwaway as they are.

Uh oh! Potentially gloomy thoughts! I banish them and smile at my own reflection. Not nervously, because despite the rain, the greyness and the less than stellar job, I'm glad to be back. Home.

And there are other compensations, I think, my mind

flicking back to the images of Stone, and of Mel, and suddenly seeing them both as delicious challenges to be relished, not possible problems.

Go girl!

I stride out into the rain.