Lovereading.co.uk

Love on the Rocks

Veronica Henry

Published by Penguin Books

This extract is taken from an uncorrected proof

All text is copyright of the author

Click here to buy this book and read more

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

As Lisa and George celebrate their purchase of the Rocks, they are blissfully unaware of events unfolding at a rival hotel ...

Bruno Thorne was sitting with his feet up on his desk, one arm curled around the back of his head, the other holding the phone to his ear. He didn't like what he was hearing.

'I don't think I understand,' he said slowly, his tone threatening, his black brows meeting in the middle.

'The other side upped their offer by ten grand at the last minute.'

'You should have got back to me.'

'You told me categorically that was your best and final offer!' The estate agent was indignantly defensive. 'Anyway, it was sealed bids. I'm not supposed to know what's in the envelope, remember?'

'Come off it,' Bruno laughed. 'At the end of the day all you want is the best price for your client, surely?'

'I'm sorry, Mr Thorne. There's nothing I can do about it now. It's a done deal.'

Bruno sighed.

'Any idea what their plans are?'

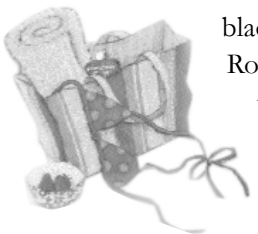
'I've no idea.'

'Come on!' Bruno couldn't hide the impatience in his voice. 'You must have shown them round, for God's sake. It's off the record. I'm going to find out sooner or later.'

'They're talking about a "boutique" hotel, whatever that is.' His tone was disparaging. 'No competition for you. They've got eight beds max. And between you and me I don't think they've got much of a clue.'

'Then let me know when it comes back on the market,' Bruno replied smoothly and put the phone down.

The agent hung up at his end, palms sweating slightly. There were rumours, nasty rumours, that you didn't cross Bruno Thorne. But he hadn't crossed him, not deliberately. He'd done his best, but you couldn't fiddle a sealed bid. He was an estate agent, not Paul bloody Daniels. Frankly, why on earth anyone wanted The Rocks at all was beyond him. Every time he'd shown round a client, he'd felt sure he was wasting his time and his breath lamely trying to point out its potential. He knew Mariscombe was supposedly on the up but in his opinion it had a long way to go. There were too many caravan parks, stuffed with Scousers and Brummies in string vests crying out for chips and lager. They wouldn't thank anyone for tian of crab with a mango and coriander salsa. One boutique hotel does not a Padstow make, the agent mused. Still, it would be interesting to watch them try.



Bruno swept through the foyer of the Mariscombe Hotel, raking his hand through his black curls. He should have played it straight. If he'd just made a decent offer, The Rocks would have been his by now. He was pretty sure he could have second-guessed the top offer, then added on a few thousand that, let's face it, he could afford to



lose. But old habits die hard; Bruno was used to getting a bargain. He'd never paid over the odds for anything in Mariscombe. But it looked as if the tide was on the turn. People in search of a lifestyle were moving in with cash. The fiasco with The Rocks meant the goalposts were moving, and Bruno wasn't quite so sure of the rules any more. He needed to take stock.

A cleaner dodged out of his way, dragging an ancient vacuum in her wake. He watched her with distaste – no one should be cleaning in the middle of the day, for heaven's sake. She'd vanished through the double doors that led to the dining room, and something made him follow her. He stood in the doorway, surveying his surroundings as if for the first time. The carpet was a deep maroon, showing up the crumbs from breakfast that still hadn't been cleared away even though it was nearly lunchtime. The white tablecloths still displayed coffee rings and splodges of ketchup from the full English breakfast enjoyed by the coachloads of pensioners who filled the hotel in the winter months. Although full English implied something generous and satisfying, Bruno knew it consisted of a shrivelled piece of bacon, a slender sausage, a tinned tomato and a spoonful of watery scrambled egg. He sighed and walked back through the foyer to the receptionist.

There was no doubt about it, things had slipped badly. He hadn't kept on top of the hotel at all. Looking around it now, he couldn't imagine why anyone in their right mind would want to stay there – apart from the staggering view, of course. It was tired, old-fashioned, dreary. Until recently, he'd been able to get away with it. But people expected more these days. Facilities. Luxury. Design. Even the most demographically challenged seemed to want skin peels and seaweed wraps, fresh mango for breakfast and broadband in every bedroom. Not eighties chintz curtains and a black and white portable telly.

The bookings spoke for themselves. According to the Mariscombe tourist board, they were inundated with requests for accommodation and made hundreds of bookings on behalf of people eager to indulge in the currently fashionable British bucket-and-spade holiday. But analysis showed it was young families heading for the self-catering apartments that were springing up all over the place, or overworked couples keen to de-stress by indulging in the myriad physical activities the coastline offered: surfing, kite-flying, walking, kayaking, paragliding – the opportunities were endless. For what it offered, the Mariscombe Hotel was expensive, and didn't pass muster. It was a dinosaur, redolent of a bygone era. Its very atmosphere sapped your energy. It just didn't appeal to the new breed of visitors. They didn't want three-course dinners in a stuffy, formal dining room. They wanted casual suppers where they could sit down with a beer or a glass of wine, unwind and enjoy the view.

Bruno ran an expert eye around the foyer. The furnishings and the fixtures were all heavy and old-fashioned; the air was stale. The occasional guest crawled through en route to morning coffee on the terrace. Two or three others sat behind the *Telegraph* by the fireplace. Outside, a wintry sun shone, valiantly attempting to lure the inhabitants of the hotel into its rays.

Bruno knew he only had himself to blame. He'd deliberately stayed away from Mariscombe over the past two years, apart from the occasional duty visit to his parents, when he'd slipped in and out of the village unannounced. But he couldn't bury his head in the sand any longer. If he carried on neglecting the hotel it would start to fall down around his ears. And it should be the jewel in his crown. It was a prime piece of real estate, the best position in the village. He owed it



to himself, and to Mariscombe, to restore it to its rightful place before it became a laughing stock. Before he lost so much money that he wasn't in a position to do anything positive, and the decision-making process was taken out of his hands.

He walked behind the reception desk and settled himself down at the computer. There were no staff in evidence, but Bruno was familiar with the system. He clicked rapidly on the mouse, moving the cursor over the bookings for the next three months, muttering softly under his breath as he did some rapid mental arithmetic, his brows drawing further and further together. The advance bookings were even more dire than he had imagined. He knew that people's holiday habits had changed, and that they were leaving it later and later to book in order to assess the weather or take advantage of late deals, but even taking that into consideration, surely by now there should be a healthy sprinkling of rooms taken up?

Bruno picked up a nearby pencil with 'The Mariscombe Hotel' stamped in gold along its length, and started doing sums on the back of a brochure. If there was one thing Bruno was good at, it was thinking on his feet. Working as a bond trader in his twenties had given him the power of his convictions; the ability to put his head on the chopping block and stand by his decisions. He'd missed that thrill recently. Now he was an independent financial adviser, working from the capacious basement of his house in Kew. Of course, there was always a risk involved in financial advice, but the stakes weren't as high as they were on the floor, when millions could be lost in a split second, when a moment's hesitation could cost one dear. Nowadays his risks were calculated, spread, considered. The work was rewarding, but not necessarily exciting.

It was time for a change.

Now, in a split second, Bruno made a decision. If the Mariscombe Hotel wasn't going to become a millstone round his neck, he had to do something positive. He could sell it, but it went against the grain to sell something which was clearly on its knees. Even if he went down that route in the long term, he had to fatten it up first. He wasn't going to let somebody else have a bargain at his expense, no way. He put his pencil down decisively as the receptionist walked back into the foyer, clutching a mug of coffee. She started in surprise when she saw Bruno behind the desk.

'I'm sorry, sir. I didn't know you were here.'

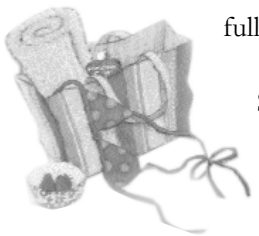
'Lucky I wasn't trying to book a room.'

He smiled up at her, but his eyes were hard. Granite grey. Unforgiving.

'There's a bell.' Hannah pointed it out, determined to stand her ground. 'I would have heard it.'

Bruno waved a dismissive hand.

'Don't worry about it. I want you to phone everyone who's unfortunate enough to have booked in here. Tell them there's going to be building work going on over the next few months and that some of the facilities might not be available. Give them the chance to cancel, but if they still want to come tell them they can't complain about the noise and the mess because they've been warned. If they really kick up, offer them a discount.' His eyes narrowed thoughtfully. 'Twenty per cent. No more. And anyone else who books, tell them the same.'



He strode out from behind the desk. Hannah was still staring at him in disbelief. She knew he was the hotel owner. She'd seen him once or twice before – and let's



be honest, once you'd seen Bruno Thorne, you didn't forget him in a hurry. Even in a polo shirt and jeans, he had presence. There'd been a rumour in the staffroom that he was back – the staff were all jumpy. And it seemed they were right to be nervous.

'What's happening then, exactly?' Hannah wasn't one to beat around the bush.

'Let's just say the honeymoon is over.'

He gave a ghost of a smile, looked her cursorily up and down, then turned on his heel and walked back through the reception area, through the revolving door and out on to the steps that afforded him a panoramic view of the bay. He breathed in the salty tang, felt the ozone hit his lungs and immediately felt exhilarated. God, he loved it here. Whenever he had so much as a glimpse of the wild, craggy rocks, contrasting with the softness of the sand, with the sea either crashing or lapping, depending on its mood, he wondered why he'd ever left. The place was stunning. What had he been doing, stuck in the city, penned in by traffic and pollution and people? Why had he ever gone away? This was where he belonged.

He looked out across the water, as if seeking a sign that what he was about to do wasn't utter madness. On the other side of the bay, tucked on the edge of a far cliff, he saw the outline of The Rocks. For a moment he tensed as he remembered his earlier conversation with the estate agent, but then he relaxed. Perhaps it was a good thing that he hadn't won the bid. He was going to need all the money he could get his hands on, if he was going to turn this place round.

He marched back inside, along the corridor, past the dining room and the kitchens, which smelt of over-boiled soup, then ran lightly down the back staircase that led to the laundry area that doubled as a staffroom. He pushed open the swing door to find seven startled faces staring up at him. Three chambermaids, two waiters and the kitchen porter were sitting round a baize-topped table, drinking coffee, smoking cigarettes and looking in awe at Hannah, who had wasted no time in running down to deliver the latest bombshell. In the background, industrial tumble-dryers whirred.

'Cigarettes out, now. If I catch you smoking again in here, you're fired,' Bruno snapped, sweeping an open packet off the table and crushing it in one hand.

'Hey!' One of the waiters dared to protest, leaping to his feet, ignoring a warning glance from one of the chambermaids. 'You can't do that.'

'I think I can,' replied Bruno mildly. 'Who the fuck wants their sheets smelling of stale tobacco? Where's Caragh?'

'Um...'

There was a panicky exchange of complicit glances. Bruno raised an eyebrow, looking from one to another. One of the chambermaids looked down at her fingernails in confusion, obviously not wanting to split. Bruno analysed her. She was a pretty little thing. She didn't look much older than fourteen. He peered at her name badge.

'Molly?' he asked gently.

The girl blushed, self-conscious at being picked out.

'Sorry. I don't know. I saw her first thing, but...'

She trailed off. Bruno, secretly admiring her loyalty, turned his gaze to Hannah.

'Hannah?'

Hannah glanced momentarily at her colleagues, then squared her shoulders.



'It's her coffee break.' She straightened her cuffs before looking up defiantly. 'So you'll probably find her in one of the Tower Suites.'

Raising an eyebrow, Bruno nodded his thanks, pulled a pass key off one of the hooks and was gone as quickly as he'd arrived. The others turned on Hannah.

'What did you go and tell on Caragh for? She'll go ballistic!' exclaimed Molly.

Hannah bit her lip, slightly worried about the consequences now she had let the cat out of the bag.

'Because it's about time somebody knew. She can't get away with the way she behaves forever. And he ought to know...'

'Who was that bloke, anyway?' Ed, the young kitchen porter, pink with acne and confusion, was flummoxed by the exchange.

One of the waiters looked at him witheringly.

'For God's sake, Ed. Keep up. That's Bruno Thorne. He owns this place. And the chip shop. And the arcade. And the caravan park.'

'Oh. Roight.'

'Looks like he's on the warpath. I don't fancy Caragh's chances if he catches her with her pants down.'

Hannah looked pleased. Ed looked worried.

'Shall I phone up the suite and warn her?'

Hannah leaned forward.

'You do that, Ed, and I'll shut you in the walk-in freezer.'

Ed blanched – as much as a boy with chronic acne could blanch – while the others fell about laughing. Except Molly, who looked rather pale.

'You OK?' asked Hannah.

'Yeah.' Molly bent down to tie up her shoelace, letting her hair fall over her face so Hannah couldn't see her confusion.

'You don't fancy him, do you?' The other chambermaids were already preening themselves, slapping on lip gloss.

'Course not.' Molly stood up straight and pushed back her shoulders. 'He's way too old.'

'Who cares, if he's rich? And he's well fit.'

Across the room, Hannah looked in the mirror on the back of the door and sighed. She was an ungainly girl, with a large nose and small eyes rather too close together, giving her a sly, untrustworthy look, although she was actually perfectly honest. In fact, she had a reputation for plain speaking – you didn't ask Hannah if your bum looked big if you couldn't cope with the truth.

'He'd never look at me, would he?' she sighed. 'It's no good. I'll have to try and get some overtime. I'm never going to save enough at this rate.'

Molly put a reassuring hand on her shoulder.



'I think you're crazy, Hannah. You don't want to go having plastic surgery. It might not look right. Anyway, it's personality that counts.'

'Oh yeah. That would be why Frank's shagging Caragh. Because she's got such a great personality. Not because of her looks.'



Hannah sounded bitter. Molly bit her lip. It was true. Caragh was gorgeous, and an utter cow, whilst Hannah had a heart of gold underneath her bumptious exterior. But the truth of it was, life wasn't fair. If anyone knew that, it was Molly.

There were two Tower Suites, east and west, one at each end of the hotel. The laundry trolley was outside the second. Bruno took out his pass key, unlocked the door and walked straight in. He didn't bat an eyelid as Caragh, skirt round her waist and stockings round her ankles, squealed and wriggled out from underneath Frank, the head chef.

'Haven't you heard of knocking?'

Bruno ignored her. Instead he tossed her a set of keys.

'I want you to open up my house. I want it cleaned from top to bottom. Fresh linen on all the beds. Towels, toiletries, light bulbs – everything double-checked and replenished. And the fridge and the freezer filled. I'll get you a list. And I want somebody to come in every day from now on to clean.'

Frank was fumbling, pulling up his trousers and tucking his shirt in. As Bruno turned to walk back out of the room he pointed a finger at him.

'And you're fired.'

'What?' Frank looked at him in outrage. 'You can't do that!'

'I just did.'

'I'll take you to an industrial tribunal.'

'See you there. As far as I'm concerned, shagging on my time on my premises is a sackable offence.'

Moments later the door clicked shut. Bruno was gone. Frank looked close to tears.

'He can't sack me, can he, Caragh?'

'He can do what he likes. He's the boss.' Caragh had an overwhelming sense of self-preservation and no compassion whatsoever. She smoothed her skirt down over her hips and inspected her appearance in the mirror, patting her auburn bob into place, then picked up Bruno's keys, suddenly the professional. Totally ignoring Frank's mews of panic, she ran down to the reception area, where Hannah had installed herself back behind the desk.

'I've got to go and open up your man's house,' she announced, jingling the keys Bruno had thrown at her. 'Want to come and have a snoop?'

Hannah turned to face her, trying not to look guilty.

'I don't think I'd better. I've got to phone all the future bookings. Warn them about the noise.'

'What noise? What's going on?'

'Sounds like we're having a refurb.'

'Nobody told me,' said Caragh indignantly. 'But then, why would they? I'm only the manager.'

'Probably because you won't be here.'

The deep voice behind her made Caragh whirl round. Bruno was standing there, gazing at her stonily.



'Unless you stop gossiping and get on with the job. Here's my grocery list.' He handed her a list, handwritten in black capitals. 'I want fresh flowers, too. No chrysanths, no carnations. And no yellow.'

Seconds later, he was gone.

'Bloody hell,' said Caragh. 'He doesn't take any prisoners, does he?'

'He could tie me up any day of the week,' sighed Hannah.

Caragh looked at her sharply for a moment, then looked down at the list she had been given. 'Serrano ham. Ice cubes. Limes. San Pellegrino – what's that?'

Hannah shrugged.

'Haven't a clue.'

'Vine-ripened tomatoes. Fresh coffee – coarsely ground. Blueberries.' She rolled her eyes in exasperation. 'I'm not exactly going to get this lot around here, am I?'

'You'll have to go to the supermarket in Bamford.'

Caragh puffed herself up like an angry cobra.

'I don't think this is my job. I'm management. Not some skivvy. I'm going to tell him to shove his shopping list up his arse.'

'I don't mind doing it.' Hannah stretched out her hand for the list, but Caragh suddenly thought better of it.

'Actually, no. You're right. It could be interesting.'

They both gazed outside, where they could see Bruno pacing up and down on the terrace, raking his hands through his black curls, talking into his phone. They both admired the broadness of his back, his athletic stride.

'Has he got a wife? Or a girlfriend?' asked Caragh casually.

'I don't know. I've never seen one. Or heard of one.'

'Maybe he's gay.'

The two of them surveyed his retreating figure, then looked at each other.

'Nah,' they chorused, grinning.

Later, Frank held court in the staffroom, complaining bitterly at his treatment. His jaw-length strawberry-blond hair looked the part when he was stripped to the waist with a surfboard under his arm, but at the moment the shock of the morning's events had made his skin pale and his eyes pink.

'What am I going to do if he really does sack me?' Frank was filled with righteous indignation. 'I'm not going to get another job round here, am I? Not without a reference, and he's not going to give me a reference, is he?'

Hannah put her arm round him.

'Listen, he can't sack you just like that. Not without a written warning. And, anyway, if he sacks you he has to sack Caragh too. It would be sex discrimination if he didn't.'



'Sex discrimination,' Frank echoed gloomily. 'Maybe I should have had a bit of that before I shagged her.'

'Well, don't say I didn't warn you,' answered Hannah briskly.



'She's just using me for my body.'

Hannah looked him up and down with hungry eyes and shuddered. She couldn't bear the thought of the rapacious Caragh getting her claws into him.

'Anyway, what are we all supposed to do while this place is being pulled apart?' he demanded.

'We're still open for business,' Hannah pointed out. 'And there's going to be staff training, apparently. And brainstorming sessions and stuff like that. All dedicated to putting the customer first.'

'Blimey. There's going to be big changes, then,' said Frank in wonder. 'I can't remember the last time anyone gave a toss about what any of our customers wanted...'

Satisfied with his morning's work, and mildly amused at the thought of the consternation he had caused inside the hotel – although he reminded himself that he must tell Frank that he was going to get a second chance – Bruno opened the boot of his Range Rover. Out trickled Hector, his Rhodesian Ridgeback, his sleek fur the colour of the golden sand, the ridge on his back that gave the breed its name bristling with the excitement of being released from his temporary jail.

'Come on, boy.'

Hector shot joyously over the lawn towards the path he knew led to the beach, even though it had been several months since his last visit. Bruno followed after him. Hector was another reason why his decision to come back was a good one. It was madness having a big dog like that in London. Although Hector was better than a burglar alarm, and although Bruno paid a local girl to take him out for walks twice a day, then took him for a run in the park every night whatever the weather, Hector needed freedom.

Within a minute, they were on the beach. The tide was on its way in and a few intrepid surfers stood up to their chests in water, waiting for the waves to pick up, but apart from that there was no one to be seen. Bruno strode across the sands, enjoying the sensation as his calf muscles stretched themselves further than they were used to. By the time he reached the little path that led up the cliff to Higher Mariscombe, he was breathing heavily. Far more heavily than he would have liked. He determined to get up every morning and go for a run on the beach. By the end of two weeks he would be fit again. The extra few pounds he knew he was carrying, courtesy of Christmas and the dull weather of January and February that took the edge off one's enthusiasm for anything involving exertion, would soon melt away.

At the top of the cliff was a stone wall, and set into it was a faded blue gate with a twisted iron handle. He hesitated for a moment before pushing it open. Inside was a tiny graveyard, belonging to the church at Higher Mariscombe. It looked out across the ocean towards infinity, the grass between the stones rustling in the breeze. For some, it would be too exposed, a cold, harsh resting place. But for others, with its magnificent view, its oneness with the elements, it was the perfect place to be laid to rest. And for visitors, it was the ideal spot to contemplate one's mortality, with the vastness of the sea and the sky, the gorse-covered cliffs, the mighty rocks beneath and the clouds scudding overhead.

Bruno and Hector wandered amongst the stones, Hector sniffing curiously, Bruno feeling



the heavy dread he always did. It was at this point that he hoped he would arrive at the plot in the far right-hand corner and find that the huge granite slab was not there after all, that the whole thing had been a terrible dream. But no, as ever, there it was, standing square and tall and proudly proclaiming the reason for its presence in bold white letters: 'In loving memory of Joseph Mark Thorne [Joe]. A much loved son and brother. Sadly missed.'

How bald and insufficient those words still seemed.

Bruno stood for a moment, fists clenched. Hector somehow sensed his angst and sat down by his master's feet, nudging his calf gently with his nose as if to remind him he was there for him. Bruno had been hoping, naively perhaps, that the supposed great healer had done its job, and that this time his despair might have abated. Every time he was confronted by the stone, he was filled with rage and anger, incensed by his impotence. Furious that he couldn't express how he felt – for even if he could have analysed his feelings, Joe wasn't there to listen. Two years later, the urge to justify his actions was still as strong as ever.

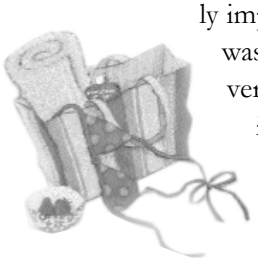
He touched the stone gently.

'OK, mate?' he muttered, feeling foolish, for he knew Joe couldn't hear. Yet there was a part of him that hoped perhaps he could. It provided him with a crumb of comfort, the infinitesimal chance that Joe knew how much he had cared after all. The wind whipped, making Bruno's eyes water as he looked out to sea, trying to measure his pain. Was it his imagination, or was the knot in his stomach slightly less sharp than usual? It was three months since he'd last been here – had the suffocating tightness in his chest subsided? He took a shaky breath in and decided that perhaps it had.

And then, of course, felt guilty. He didn't deserve to recover. He deserved to suffer for the rest of his days. What right did he have for a reprieve, when Joe wasn't going to get one? Joe, after all, was six foot under, worm fodder, and unless you believed in reincarnation, which Bruno was fairly certain he didn't, had no hope of a second chance...

Growing up in Mariscombe had been idyllic for Bruno. His parents had a small farm, twenty-five acres of rolling fields that butted right up to the cliff's edge, overlooking Mariscombe one side and the wild Atlantic the other. They had a dairy herd, which gave the air a sweetness, and a flock of sheep. The farm, with its cream Devon longhouse, had been in the Thorne family for generations, and provided a lifestyle more than a living. There might not be much spare cash, but there was good food aplenty, beautiful surroundings, a social life and, as the area filled up with incomers looking for a new life, they were afforded a certain respect for being genuine locals.

In the seventies, Bruno's parents made a radical decision to supplement their meagre income by letting out their fields for camping, which given the spectacular location had proved more lucrative and less responsibility than sheep and cows. Initially, all they provided was a single tap for water, but as the site became more and more popular through word of mouth, they gradually improved the facilities. By the eighties, they had converted one of the barns into a washroom, had hook-ups for electricity and had opened a small farm shop selling the very basics. Bruno spent his teens helping out on the site, mowing the fields, keeping the washrooms scrupulously clean, bringing round milk and eggs and fresh





bread to each pitch in the morning. He also gave guests surfing lessons – his guarantee was that he could get anybody standing up on a board after half a day, and he generally succeeded. And all the time he built up a rapport with the customers, making sure they booked in for a return visit the following year before they left the site.

By the time Bruno was eighteen, he had a vision. The building of a new dual carriageway linking the North Devon coast to the motorway was imminent. He could see that the caravan site had enormous potential, and they had to strike quickly, before other developments overtook them and grabbed their market share of the tourists who would come down in their hordes once at least an hour was cut off their travelling time from Birmingham or Liverpool or London.

The expansion Bruno had in mind involved a significant sum of money for investment, but he had done his projections. It was a sound business plan. But his father was stubborn. He'd never borrowed any money in his life and he wasn't going to start now. No matter how many charts and graphs and diagrams Bruno thrust under his nose, outlining the potential for growth and profit, his father steadfastly refused to budge. And Bruno didn't have any experience or any track record to convince the bank by himself. In the end, he did a deal with his dad. If he could raise the initial sum over the next five years, his dad would hand the business over to him.

Bruno decided that going to university was only going to delay his ability to earn money. So he went off to London, where he invested in a smart suit and a good pair of shoes, and had his mop of wild black curls tamed by a Jermyn Street barber. He looked as stunning suited and booted and clean shaven as he did stripped to the waist in his board shorts. He soon learned to lose his soft Devon burr and the quaint idiosyncrasies of the local speech. He understood figures: money didn't frighten him – he could add up a row of figures in his head. To him, the world of high finance was no different to working a market stall, there were just more noughts involved. Looking back now at the risks he took, he shuddered. But maybe ignorance was bliss.

By the end of five years, he had enough cash accrued. His London friends had never understood why he chose to live so modestly, why he didn't have a flash car and a flash pad to go with it, but Bruno hadn't seen the point in conspicuous spending, preferring to invest wisely and quietly.

His father couldn't argue with his bank balance and his revised business plan. By now he had seen the light and agreed it was madness to stand still. In the intervening five years he had been approached countless times to sell the site, and had been rather shaken by the sums of money he'd been offered.

Over the next two years, they bought twenty static caravans, built a timber-framed club house and a swimming pool, a children's adventure playground, a new shower block and toilet facilities, and a designated barbecue and picnic area. Business boomed, for the site was large enough to have extensive facilities yet still retained an air of individuality and, thanks to Bruno's parents, a sense of being family run – some of the other sites were ruthlessly commercial and suffered from a lack of identity as a result.

Eventually, Bruno had enough money to buy his parents out, keeping his father on as manager. This gave them not only capital but a regular wage, which meant they had enough in the kitty to build themselves a new bungalow on the edge of the village. Living on the site was becoming too much of a hassle for them, so instead the old longhouse was divided up into self-



catering apartments. With the business now officially his, Bruno had more than enough equity to borrow and increase his portfolio. In the next five years he added a chip shop and amusement arcade, both of which he immediately leased out. His pièce de résistance was purchasing the Mariscombe Hotel. By the time he was twenty-eight, he owned more freeholds than anyone else in the village. Not that he ever advertised this fact. Bruno was the soul of discretion, as were his secretly proud parents. He didn't come down and swank around. He knew he had to keep his trading job until he'd earned enough money to pay off a substantial amount of the loans that were propping up his deck of cards. By the time he was thirty-two, he had got his borrowings down to thirty per cent of his portfolio, a ratio he felt comfortable with.

It was at this point Bruno felt that the time had come to be more hands on in Mariscombe. The original leases on the arcade and the chip shop were coming to an end and he would have to decide whether to renegotiate or find new tenants. The manageress at the Mariscombe Hotel was leaving to have a baby, and despite her protests that she would return as soon as was humanly possible, Bruno suspected it was unlikely. He left his job on the floor, setting up as an independent financial advisor working from home, with a view to an eventual three-day London, four-day Devon week.

That June, he gave himself some time off to put an offer in on one of the much-coveted Art Deco houses perched on the dunes, appoint a new manager for the hotel and decide what to do with his other interests. It was only then, on spending more time than usual with his family, he realized that his younger brother had turned into something of a tearaway. Joe had been born when Bruno was ten – a late and unexpected arrival, but a most welcome one. Bruno was never jealous. By the time the baby arrived he had his own life – he was at school and had his friends – so he never resented him. By the time Joe was eleven, and starting senior school, Bruno had left home for London. Over the years, his mother had occasionally hinted at Joe's high spirits and lack of responsibility, but Bruno hadn't realized to what extent. Privately, he felt that Joe had been spoilt and indulged, never made to toe the line. Perhaps their mother feared an empty nest so much that she had clung on to Joe and made his life too comfortable, with the result that she'd spawned a monster.

Joe hadn't done particularly well at school. The lure of the beach was too great, and there was little discipline at the community college in Tawcombe where he had ended up. And his parents didn't push him. Besides, he was too useful on the site. He was good with his hands, was Joe, in more ways than one. At sixteen, his father put him in charge of maintenance – painting and decorating, mowing the fields, doing the little repair jobs that were inevitable with the amount of human traffic that passed through. And the work suited him. He got up early, spending the first four hours of the day working before the sun was too high. He had energy. He could do more in that time than most people achieved in a full day. By midday, he was done, ready for the pub or the beach, depending on the condition of the waves.

He became a familiar sight, in his baggy combat shorts and baseball boots, hair covered with a bandana pirate-style, his stepladder over one shoulder and a pot of paint in the other. He was always whistling, as well he might, for he was blessed with looks that casting directors and model scouts sought the world over. Light brown almond-shaped eyes, with dark lashes and brows. Lethal bone structure. A wide, full mouth, with a





wicked smile that showed perfect, even white teeth. His hair was long, tousled, bleached by the sea and the sun. He was slight, but his chest and arms were toned from surfing and working. Even when he was in his scruffiest clothes, his hands smothered in paint, eyes followed him hungrily.

He should have come with a health warning. Girls who knew no better were warned not to fall under his spell, for it would only end in tears. But they never heeded the warning. He was utterly irresistible. For as long as his attentions lasted, his victims seemed to glow from within, radiating happiness, convinced that they would be the one to tame him, because at the time he made them seem so special, like the centre of his universe. But suddenly, without warning, his attention would wander, his eyes would fix on someone else, he would become infatuated. And then he would move on, leaving behind heartbreak and devastation. Yet he couldn't be criticized, for he never made anyone any promises. He was totally hands up about his inability to maintain a relationship or stay faithful. So there was rarely any sympathy for his victims. They had repeated warnings, not least from Joe himself.

The summer in question, nearly two years ago now, was glorious. The sea shimmered for weeks on end, its metallic surface almost too bright to look at with the naked eye. Mariscombe was a mini paradise, bathed in a permanent golden glow, a slight breeze keeping the temperature from being insufferable. The aura became sensual, sleepy, languid. The air hung heavy with the sweet scent of illicit cigarettes – the atmosphere was so chilled that people were smoking openly – and the sound of reggae. Skin turned gold, dark hair became streaked with blonde, blonde hair turned white. There was a gentle rhythm to the days. Rain seemed impossible: a distant memory from a far-off time.

Joe held court outside the Jolly Roger, the pub just off the main drag in Mariscombe. The landlord had him as well as the sun to thank for his meteoric rise in profits, as legions of girls hung around buying Reef after Reef, waiting for Joe to appear with his surfboard, wetsuit unzipped to the waist. And although no other male stood a chance with Joe around, he was popular with the blokes. They didn't seem to hold it against him; they were happy enough with his cast-offs. He reigned supreme, with no pretender to the throne.

The only person immune to his charms was Bruno. Mariscombe was small. There was gossip. Rumours. Plenty of people ready to stir things up. It wasn't long before Bruno was putting together a picture of his younger brother that he found disturbing. It seemed that he was something of a ringleader. There was a spate of impromptu raves on the beach, attracting an undesirable element – cars with booming bass noise zoomed up and down the hills, litter was left behind, there were camper vans on the car park overnight that disgorged unwashed, unkempt bodies who were off-putting to families pottering down to the beach. This was exactly what Mariscombe didn't want to become – a playground for decadent youth. Joe seemed to be at the centre of it. And it was generally acknowledged that if you wanted a bit of skunk for the weekend, or a couple of Es, then he was the person to ask.

To Bruno, Joe just seemed to cruise round oblivious to the chaos he left in his wake – the emotional fallout, the bad feeling. He seemed to have no regard for his parents' feelings, or the reputation of the family, something which Bruno regarded very highly indeed. The Thornes were one of the few families left to have been born and bred in Mariscombe – they went back at least five generations. Bruno felt pride in that, but Joe seemed happy to blot the family escutcheon at



every opportunity.

Yet when Bruno confronted him, Joe was infuriatingly blasé.

'I'm not entirely sure what you're accusing me of. Seems to me you've been listening to local gossip.'

'Come on, Joe. There's no smoke without fire.'

'There is when people are jealous.'

'How do you think Mum feels, to know people are pointing their fingers at you?'

'She's got enough sense to know it's just tittle-tattle.'

'So why am I hearing these things about you?'

Joe shrugged, pushing his long shaggy fringe to one side.

'Dunno. I just want to work hard and play hard.'

Teenage girls who had been dragged on a camping holiday by their despairing parents soon snapped out of their sulk when they clapped eyes on Joe. It was like bees round a honeypot. And how could he resist, when they threw themselves at him, these long-limbed, firm-skinned creatures in their tiny bikinis? It was inevitable that there would be trouble, when he treated them so casually, and one afternoon Bruno was interrupted from his paperwork by an irate father threatening to call the police.

'I can't get her out of the van. She's breaking her heart in there. She's only fifteen. If I find out he's laid a finger on her, I'll have him locked up.'

It took Bruno the rest of the day to placate the father, coax the young girl out of the caravan to get her side of the story, and promise to remonstrate with Joe.

Joe was almost callous.

'What am I supposed to do, take her back out of pity? I never made her any promises.'

'At least talk to her, for Christ's sake.'

'What good would that do? It'll only get her hopes up.'

'You can't scamper through life shagging like a flopsy bunny on Viagra. Getting away with it just because you're cute. It's not fair, Joe!'

'I can't help it if they throw themselves at me.'

'You can say no.'

'I'm a bloke!'

'They can't handle it, Joe. You can't just love them and leave them.'

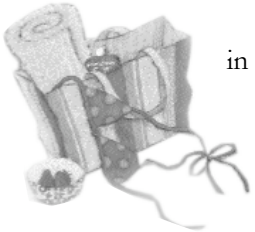
'That's the point. I don't love them. I've never told anyone that.'

Bruno looked at him stonily.

'OK. I might not be able to force you to behave like a decent human being. But I can ban you from liaising with customers.'

'What do you mean, liaising?'

Joe tipped back in his chair insolently, chewing gum and looking at his brother defiantly. For a moment, Bruno knew how it felt to be a teacher faced with a class of uncontrollable adolescents. He tried to remain calm.



'Chatting up, flirting, touching up, snogging, shagging ... do I have to spell it out in words of one syllable?'

'What if I meet her on the beach and don't realize she's a customer?'