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Ordinary Joe

Written by John Teckman

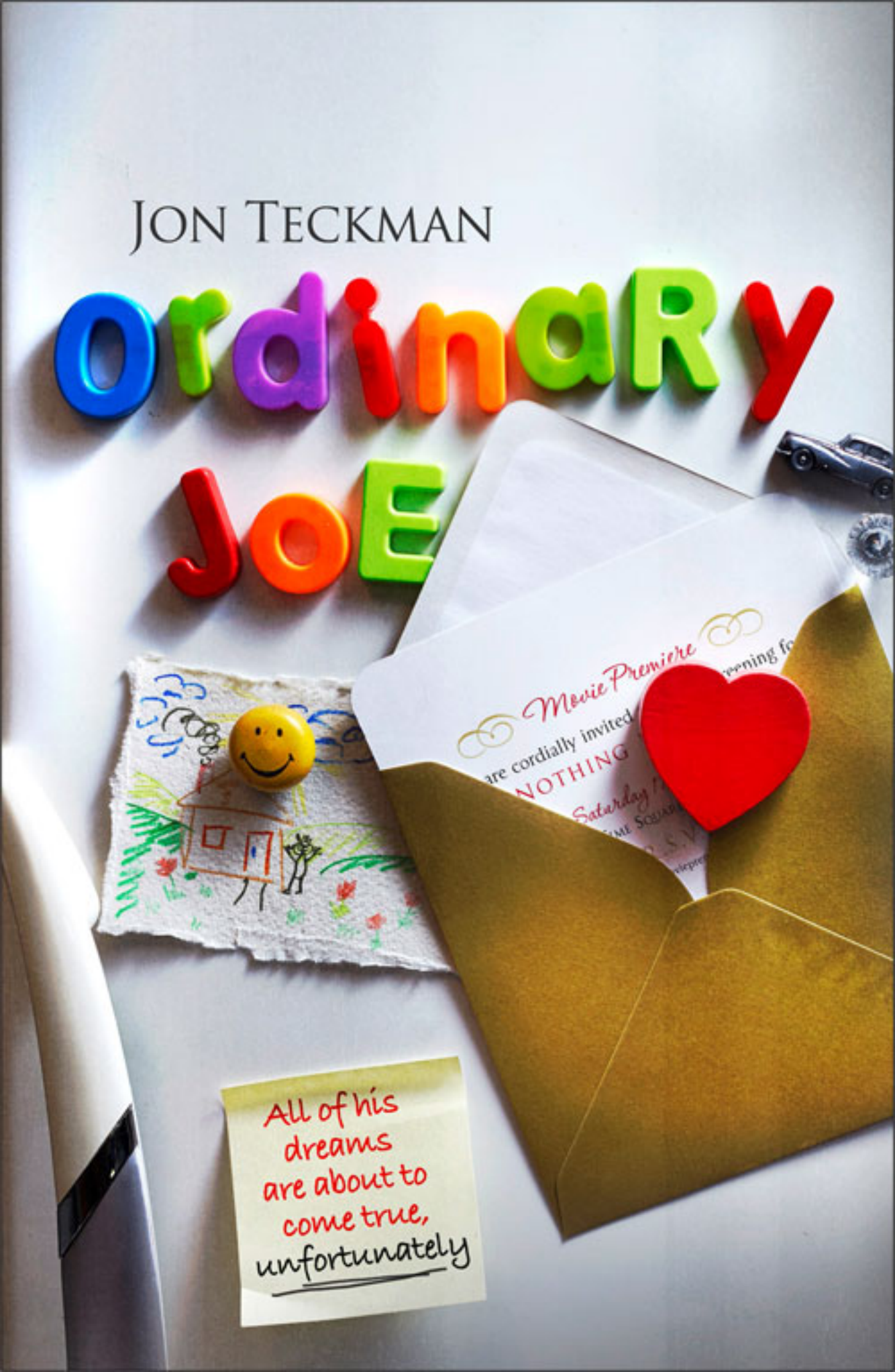
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Ordinary Joe

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QUEENS, NEW YORK

The first thing I noticed about Olivia Finch – that very first time I saw her in the flesh – wasn't her breasts bouncing like pale pink pomegranates as she worked herself into a frenzy on her lover's lap, nor even her 'billion-dollar backside' – an epithet conferred upon her in a recent article in *Variety*, which reported that 'Olivia Finch's rear end is now a bigger box office draw than the faces of most of her Hollywood rivals.' No – God's truth – the first thing I noticed was the small, amateurish tattoo scratched into her left bicep in blue ink. 'John 3:16' it read. I looked it up in the Gideon when I got back to my room that evening: *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life*. I asked her about it later – when all the madness was at its maddest – and she told me it was just a stupid thing she'd had done when she was a kid and off her face on cheap booze. But, she said, she still liked the message: the idea that one person

could love another so much that they would give up everything for them.

That first time, all I could think about was how come I'd never noticed the tattoo before. It certainly hadn't been apparent in her Oscar-nominated role as Cleopatra in the recent remake of *Antony and Cleopatra*. They must have CGI-ed it out in the edit. It's impossible to know what's real and what's faked in the movies these days. Olivia's breasts looked real enough, but who knows what work she'd had done to them. And what she was doing to her co-star Jack Reynolds – while a small group of us stood watching in spellbound silence, occasionally nodding our appreciation as the couple pulled off a particularly complex manoeuvre – looked real too, but, of course, was only acting.

I was standing in a makeshift studio in Queens, dressed in a set of ill-fitting blue overalls, watching top director Arch Wingate re-shoot scenes for his latest movie, *Nothing Happened*. Standing next to me, his huge frame squeezed uncomfortably into a similar outfit, stood the film's producer, Buddy Guttenberg, beaming like a spoiled child on Christmas morning. The overalls had been his idea. 'I've been in this business twenty-five years, Joey,' he'd told me as we put on our costumes in an empty trailer in the studio car park, 'and I still haven't been allowed on a closed set unless I've been togged up as a gaffer or fucking electrician.'

Wingate had a justified reputation for being a perfectionist. The joke in Hollywood was that he would still be re-editing the film while the posters were going up outside the cinema. His passion and attention to detail made him one of the best film-makers in the business but also one of

the most expensive. As one of the people responsible for raising the money for this film and ensuring a return on our investment, I should have been concerned about how much he was spending on almost imperceptible improvements to his creation. As a film buff, though, I was delighted by the chance to watch the great man in action.

'Bit more passion, please, Olly,' Wingate shouted as the couple cavorted wildly on the oversized bed. 'Jack, move your left leg across to the right half a foot so I can get a better view of Olly's butt as she straddles you. That's it! And give it a bit more energy, guys, OK? You're supposed to be enjoying this!'

Somehow, it seemed the most natural thing in the world for this beautiful couple to be making mad, passionate love in a tandoori-hot building on a warm October afternoon while Buddy and I looked on like spectators at a lawn tennis championship.

'So what do you reckon, Joe? Happy with the way we're spending your money?' Buddy whispered from the corner of his mouth, elbowing me sharply in the ribs to make sure he had my full attention.

'It's amazing, Buddy,' I replied. 'The camera angles Mr Wingate is going for are incredible. No one else would dream of shooting it like that.'

'Camera angles?' Buddy laughed, 'Fuck the camera angles, Joey – have you ever seen tits like those? Jesus, Mary and Joseph! She's like the Venus de fucking Milo with arms! That girl is so hot she's melting the polar ice caps all by herself. Those UN Climate Conference guys are considering having her banned to save the fucking planet.'

After half an hour of repeated takes of the same scene

– each one, to my untrained eye, exactly the same as the last – Arch Wingate announced a break. The actors were handed robes and bottles of water and did a few warming-down exercises, Jack Reynolds flexing and admiring his biceps while Olivia laid the palms of her hands flat on the ground six inches in front of her feet, stretching her hamstrings.

'Hey Arch,' Buddy bawled, 'meet my good friend Joe West from Askett Brown in London. He's the guy who raised all the money you're now chucking away on this meshugganah movie. He was just admiring your camera angles!'

Wingate smiled and shook my hand. 'Glad to meet you, Joe, and thanks for all your work on this. I really appreciate it. Tell me, is there enough cash left in the budget to hire a hit man to get rid of this fat putz?'

I stammered back that I was pleased to meet him and how much I enjoyed his work, but stopped short of agreeing to his request for extra funding. I stood and listened to these Hollywood legends as they exchanged further insults, speaking only when spoken to like a well-behaved child. When the actors walked past on their way to their make-shift dressing rooms, Buddy called them over too.

'Hey folks, come and meet the guy who's paying your wages!' The actors smiled indulgently at me, enjoying the joke. They knew as well as Buddy that it was their names attached to the production that pulled the money in, not me. Everyone was, in effect, on their payroll.

Close up, Olivia Finch had an aura that transcended her physical beauty, lighting up the room more brightly than the thousands of kilowatts of energy pouring from the hot

studio lights. Even her feet, peeping out from beneath her long robe, seemed perfect.

'Hi,' she purred in a soft Southern whisper, taking my hand momentarily in hers, 'nice to know ya.'

I tried to reply with an intelligent comment about her work, but all I could manage was an adolescent grunt. While I blushed and burbled, Olivia showed no sign of concern that I had just seen her knicker-naked, throwing herself around in mock ecstasy. There was no more reason for her to be embarrassed by me watching her work than if she'd caught me poring over a particularly complex set of accounts.

MILL HILL, LONDON

'Are you sure you've packed everything?' my wife Natasha called up the stairs. 'Passport? Dollars? Socks?'

'Yes, yes, yes,' I called back, reaching into my underwear drawer to pull out a couple more pairs of socks and throwing them into my suitcase, then checking inside my jacket to confirm that my passport was, indeed, in my pocket. I travelled to the US – either to Los Angeles or, as in this case, New York – seven or eight times a year, but each time we would still go through this pantomime as if, for Natasha, two small children weren't enough and she was intent on treating me like a third.

I zipped and locked my suitcase, then wrapped a personalised red, white and blue luggage strap around it, ostensibly for extra security but also to help me identify it when it belly-flopped onto the baggage carousel at JFK. I stuffed a few final papers and the latest Stephen King novel into my briefcase and switched off the light as I headed out of

the bedroom and down the stairs. Natasha was waiting for me at the bottom, ready to give me some further instructions, while also keeping an eye on Helen and Matthew as they wrestled on the ground nearby.

'You're sure you have your passport, love,' she asked, 'and your tickets. Remember what happened last time.'

'It wasn't last time, Nat, it was three years ago. And since then I've made loads of trips abroad and never forgotten anything.'

'What about a travel plug? We must have dozens of the bloody things upstairs because you have to buy a new one every time you get to Heathrow.'

Damn! She had me there – and she knew it. Without saying another word, she slipped back up the stairs, returning a few moments later with a plug to meet the needs of the New York electrical system.

'Thank you, love,' I said, then, 'my taxi's here. Better get going.' The children interrupted their version of *The Hunger Games* just long enough for me to give them each a hug and plant a kiss on their perfect wrinkle-free, unblemished foreheads.

I kissed Natasha on the lips, more dutiful than romantic now after so many departures. The runway scene from *Casablanca* this was not.

'Have fun,' she said as I turned to make my lonely way out of the house.

'What? With Bennett there? I can't imagine it being a barrel of laughs, can you?'

'Fair point,' said Natasha. 'Well, try not to let him annoy you too much. It's only a few days.'

The door clicked behind me and I took a couple of steps

down the path before I was stopped by a thought – an important thought – that ambled up from my fingers through my nervous system to my brain. I fumbled for my keys and turned again to face the house. Before I could insert the key in the door, though, it opened and there stood Natasha, a grin splitting her face from ear to ear.

'Travel safely, you schmuck!' she said, as she handed me my briefcase and closed the door.

MANHATTAN, NEW YORK

I still loved New York. Every time I cleared the airport and drove into the city in the back of a yellow cab, I could hear the strains of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* and the opening lines of Woody Allen's *Manhattan* playing inside my head. I had been here many times since my first visit – not long before 9/11 changed the skyline forever but did nothing to dent the pugnacious, optimistic spirit of the natives. Even from that first visit, the city had been a curious mixture of the new and the familiar. So many of the sights and sounds, even, bizarrely, the smells, were already known to me from movies and TV programmes that I never felt like a stranger here. And yet, even after many visits, I could still be startled by something unforeseen: the hidden squares, an eagle soaring over Central Park, even the sight of a thief on a bicycle stealing rolls from a hotdog van and pedalling off down Broadway like an Olympic competitor while the vendor hurled Bronx-tinted insults at his departing form.

And I still loved the movie business. The whole crazy, over-the-top, passionate, extraordinary process of turning stories into frames of film (or, these days, pixels) with which to captivate millions of strangers sitting silently in the dark. I was one of the money men – one of the guys behind the scenes who helped to introduce the money to the story and hoped they'd enjoy a long and fruitful relationship. That was why I'd been invited by Buddy Guttenberg (the most over-the-top and passionate movie man of them all) to watch the final re-shoot of *Nothing Happened* and that was why I was back in New York for the film's world premiere. I had been to a lot of these fancy industry events – but I'd yet to grow tired of them. Whatever the films themselves were like, the parties were usually great, dripping with celebrities, money and Hollywood's trademark extravagance.

One thing threatened to spoil my enjoyment that night. My new boss, Joseph Bennett, was my 'date' for the evening. Bennett was living, walking proof that God could not possibly have created man in His own image. He was an over-ambitious, untrustworthy, supercilious, arrogant prick (Bennett, I mean, obviously), who had been identified early in his career as someone destined to climb to the very top at Askett Brown.

I had never been on anyone's list of those most likely to succeed, but I'd found my niche in the growing media sector and had done pretty well. It was only in the last few years that Bennett's superior confidence and connections had seen him rise above me. Now he had been promoted to head the Entertainment and Media Division – my division. Having spent his entire career in the mineral extrac-

tion sector, Bennett knew plenty about oil and gas, but less than zilch about the movie business.

This would be Bennett's first – and, as it turned out, last – film premiere. After all the build-up and hoop-la and the standing ovations as the talent arrived and took their seats, the film itself was disappointing. For all Arch Wingate's attention to detail, he seemed to have missed the most important element for any film – a decent script. When it was over, I left the cinema as quickly as possible to avoid having to tell anyone intimately involved in its conception and delivery what I thought of their efforts. Nobody wants to hear they've given birth to a disappointing baby. I didn't even wait in my seat long enough to see my name flash past at the end of the credits, or join in the over-enthusiastic applause. I grabbed Bennett and we made our way quickly up Broadway to the aftershow party at a glitzy restaurant near Central Park.

I had been there for lunch once before, but now, all done up for a top Hollywood event, the venue had been transformed. Multicoloured flashing lights bounced off the mirrors that adorned every possible surface, reflecting back on themselves, making it seem like we were in the middle of a newly discovered constellation. Beyond the elaborately decorated tables there was a small dance floor, beside which an aged six-piece band were playing gentle swing tunes, easing people into the evening.

I hate the opening moves of any formal social occasion – having to find someone to talk to who'll find me interesting too. Not easy for an accountant, I can assure you. Bennett shared none of my inhibitions. Within seconds of our arrival he had attached us to a group of bewildered studio employees,

introduced us and, on discovering they were junior back-office staff, made our excuses and moved on. This process was repeated several times as he swept through the party desperate to find someone of suitable seniority to engage in meaningful conversation.

Eventually I spotted a couple of people I knew from Buddy's production company, Printing Press Productions, and persuaded Bennett they were worth talking to.

'Hi Len, Di,' I said as we approached, shaking his hand and giving her a hug. 'How's married life, then? Carl still treating you OK?'

'Fantastic, thanks,' Len laughed, 'but don't they say the first year is always the easiest? Besides, I only got married so I can treat myself to a *fabulous* divorce when I get bored with him!'

Bennett coughed loudly, inviting me to make the introductions. 'I'm sorry,' I said. 'This is Joseph Bennett, the new Head of Entertainment and Media at Askett Brown. Joseph, this is Len Palmer, Buddy Guttenburg's Executive Assistant, and Diana Lee who works with Len. These two guys are Buddy's eyes and ears. Between them they—'

'Hi, guys. How're you doing?' Bennett cut in. 'I guess West's already given you the low-down on his new boss.' He emphasised the word 'boss' like a plantation owner addressing his slaves. 'I was a bit miffed when they told me I was moving to film. Thought it might be a bit of a backwater if I'm honest with you. But, you know what, I'm starting to think it could actually be pretty cool.' He looked around the room loftily, like an owl perched high in a tree's upper branches, then nudged Len, spilling some of his champagne. 'A lot better-looking crumpet here than out on the rigs, I can tell you,

Les! Only one kind of woman tends to go into the oil business and they're the ones who aren't much interested in men, if you know what I mean!' He gave a short blast of his dreadful braying laugh, like a donkey that's seen a cow sit on a thistle. 'But seriously, I'm really looking forward to working with your Mr Goldberg and the other top guys at the office. Bring you a little of the old Bennett magic. Do you know, when I was in oil, I achieved 300 per cent growth in net billings in four years? Three hundred per cent! I mean, I know this is a completely different ball game but it's got to be a damn sight easier than oil. There, you're lucky if every fifth or sixth project makes you any money.'

Had Bennett paused for breath, any one of us could have pointed out to him the similarities between making movies and drilling for oil. In both businesses you have to throw truckloads of money into highly risky ventures without knowing if you'll see any return at all. Every film is, in effect, a prototype – the exploration of a virgin field. Filmmakers try to mitigate their risk by reusing elements that have been successful in the past– top stars, top directors, proven storylines. That's why they make so many sequels.

Diana had developed models and spreadsheets that could help translate Buddy's more instinctive approach to filmmaking into something closer to a science. They couldn't guarantee the success of a film any more than a man with a geological survey map and a big drill could guarantee striking oil. But they could ensure that the studio maximised its returns if it did strike screen gold. She could have told Bennett all this, if he'd stopped talking long enough to let her. And if he hadn't already written her off as the secretary's secretary.

'So you're both assistants, are you? That must be fun! Are you invited to a lot of these parties or is this a special treat? I think it's great that companies on this side of The Pond have such an open policy on who they'll employ as secretaries. At our place, we mainly get pretty young things like you, Diana. It might be a laugh if we had a few blokes as well, don't you think, West?'

'Actually, we're not—' Di began, but Bennett wasn't looking for answers.

'That's not to say I don't like having the pretty ones around, mind you. I'm not saying I'd like some old poofter sitting on the edge of my desk taking dictation, or firtling around under it looking for a bonus, if you catch my drift! But it would be a bit different, wouldn't it, West? Blokes as PAs? Might even be an opportunity for you!' He let out another rattle of his machine-gun guffaw, entirely oblivious to the fact that, as usual, he was laughing alone.

Di flashed Len a glance that could only be interpreted as asking the silent question: 'Who is this jerk?' Len passed the look onto me as if it were the parcel in a child's party game. I could only shrug apologetically. When a waiter penguined past with a bottle of champagne, I stopped him and invited my three companions to replenish their glasses. This caused Bennett to pause long enough to allow Len to spot an imaginary acquaintance somewhere over my left shoulder. 'Oh, Di, look – there's um . . . Frank and, er . . . someone else we know. Shall we go and say hello?'

Diana needed no second invitation. Waiting only to flash me a sympathetic smile, she prepared her escape. Bennett looked confused for a second but then remembered his professional training. 'It's been lovely to meet you both,' he

said, pouring out the charm he usually kept buried under thick layers of crassness like his beloved oil beneath the strata of the earth. 'Do keep in touch.' He handed them each a pristine new business card as if it were a communion wafer blessed by the Holy Father himself. 'And here's one for you too, Mr West,' he said with a barely suppressed snarl as he stuffed the sliver of stiff white paper into the breast pocket of my dinner jacket. 'Joseph Bennett, Head of Entertainment and Media Division. Try not to forget it!'

As soon as I could, I made my own excuses and put as much distance between myself and Bennett as was physically possible without actually leaving the party. I found myself walking past the VIP area, roped off to provide a sanctuary inside which the top talent could enjoy their evening unmolested by the rest of the guests.

'Hey, Joey,' I heard someone call from inside the rope, 'over here.' Turning, I saw Buddy Guttenberg beckoning to me to join him at his table. With the casual flick of one eyebrow, he alerted the bouncers to let me through, and with the other he indicated an empty chair next to him and invited me to sit down. I didn't realise until I pulled back the chair that sitting with Buddy were Arch Wingate, his partner, the multi-Oscar-winning actress Melinda Curtis, and the two people I had recently watched feigning fornication: Jack Reynolds and, peering shyly out of the shadows, the impeccable Olivia Finch.

'Arch, you remember Joey West,' Buddy said, brooking no argument as to whether or not that bold statement was correct. 'I brought him over to Queens last year to watch you burning my money on all those unnecessary fucking

pick-up shots. Joey, you remember Arch, of course, and this is Melinda Curtis who I don't believe you've met.' Judging by his expression, Arch Wingate was pretty sure he'd never clapped eyes on me before either. He managed a disinterested half-smile while his wife raised a limp hand in unconscious impersonation of a royal wave, then returned to haranguing a waiter who had put a little too little ice in her mineral water. She looked thoroughly miserable. It was bad enough having to turn up to these events to support her own movies – sheer hell for a film she wasn't even in. Undaunted by their lukewarm reaction, Buddy clapped one of his enormous paws on my shoulder and continued: 'And I'm sure you remember our wonderful stars Jack and Olivia. Guys, this is Joe, my pal from London.' Jack Reynolds looked right through me with dead eyes as if my very existence was an affront to his celebrity. Olivia, though, looked up and smiled in my direction.

'Hi, Joe,' she said before returning to inspecting her nails, an operation which seemed to require all her attention.

I blushed and told the table I was pleased to meet it. Buddy laughed at my shyness but did his best to make me feel part of the group, keeping my glass filled and pitching me time and again as *the* man who had got the film made – repeated references which did not go down well with the *auteur* Arch Wingate. 'Hey, Joe,' Buddy said, when the conversation lulled, 'why don't you tell the guys about that Irish tax deal you did? I love this story. I tell you, this guy is a fucking genius!'

'It really wasn't that complicated,' I began modestly. 'All I did was tap into a bit of the tax write-off money that's sloshing around over there, leveraged it up by linking it

into a corporation tax offset, and then underpinned it against their enhanced capital allowances to maximise the cash flow impact and net bottom line benefit . . .'

Jack Reynolds couldn't contain himself. 'Jesus Christ, Buddy, where did you find this guy? Fuck's sake, if I wanted to be bored shitless, I'd have stayed home and watched one of Olivia's old movies on cable.'

I felt myself reddening to the very tips of my ears. To my even greater embarrassment, while Buddy laughed heartily at my discomfort, Olivia Finch sprang to my rescue. 'Leave him alone, Jack,' she insisted, before fixing me with her angelic gaze. 'You must be so clever to do all that stuff. I am just so dumb with numbers. I bet I'm getting ripped off from here to Christmas with all my money stuff.'

'Not just numbers, sweetheart,' Reynolds mumbled, grabbing a half-empty bottle of champagne and struggling to his feet. 'Not just fucking numbers.'

'Oh, go screw yourself,' Olivia shouted after him as he lurched off towards the dance floor. 'Asshole!' She turned to me, the anger instantly drained from her face, one expression replaced by another like the swapping of masks. 'Hey, Mr Money Man, why don't you shift over here so we can talk properly. I bet it's real exciting dealing with all that high finance, isn't it?'

I did as I was told, then sat there dumbly, wondering whether my next comment should be about European tax harmonisation or her film.

'I loved the movie, Ms Finch,' I told her, an exaggeration that teetered close to being a lie, 'and,' steering closer to the truth, 'you were sensational.'

'Oh, do you really think so?' she said, playing down her

acting talents which were almost on a par with her beauty. 'Thank you so much. And please, call me Olivia.'

The waiter returned with another bottle of champagne and refilled the glasses of everyone at the table. 'So, tell me,' Olivia continued after taking a small, delicate sip from her glass, 'what did you really think of the movie? It kinda sucks, doesn't it? Go on, you can be honest with me, English.'

'No, I wouldn't say that,' I replied as evenly as I could. 'OK, I'll admit, it's not the best film I've ever seen but it's far from the worst.'

'So what is the best film you've ever seen? You must have seen hundreds in your time.'

'Oh, you know,' I said, 'I like a lot of the old classics. Stuff from before you were born. From before I was born, even.'

'Like what?' she persisted. 'Go on, try me. I might not be quite as dumb as I look.'

'No, I didn't mean that,' I replied, a little too quickly. 'I'm just trying to think of something that you might have seen as well. They made some great films in the nineties, you know.'

Olivia shifted to a more upright, more rigid, position. 'Just answer the goddamn question, English – what is your favourite movie?' She spelled the words out slowly as if talking to a child. Or an idiot.

'OK, then, if you must know, it's *Sullivan's Travels*. It's an old—'

'Preston Sturges movie!' Olivia almost screamed, 'Joel McCrea and Veronica Lake. Oh God, I love that film! It didn't do as well at the box office as Paramount hoped but that

might possibly have been because they released it right about the time of Pearl Harbor! I guess that's what's known in the business as bad timing! And I absolutely adore Veronica Lake. When I was a kid, I grew my hair real long and tried to get it to flick like hers, you know? Sturges made some great movies, didn't he? *The Great McGinty*, *The Lady Eve*. But you hardly ever hear about him these days, do you? These kids today coming out of UCLA and NYU think cinema began with Quentin Tarantino. They don't know anything about Sturges or Hawks or Frank Capra. And that's just the Americans. Try talking to them about Fellini or Pasolini and they'll think you're trying to sell them a foreign car.'

'Better not mention Ford, then,' I said with a smile. Olivia looked at me blankly before she got the joke and laughed with far more gusto than my witticism deserved.

'Yeah, you're right there, Joe. John Ford would definitely be off their radar.' Olivia paused for a moment and took another sip of her drink. A broad grin spread slowly across her face as if she'd just had a really naughty notion. 'Do you know who my real all-time favourite actress is? The one I would have loved to have been? Go on, have a guess, Joe. You'll never guess.'

I had no idea. A few minutes earlier I'd have gone for a banker like Marilyn Monroe or perhaps Elizabeth Taylor, but Olivia's knowledge and enthusiasm had floored me. 'Tell me. Who?'

'Hedy Lamarr!' Olivia announced, then looked at me, her eyes alive with anticipation, eager to gauge my reaction as if she had just revealed the ultimate secret to the meaning of life. 'She had it all. She was beautiful. She was a really

talented actress and she was so clever. She actually invented the gizmo that makes wi-fi work – did you know that? Isn't that amazing? When this is all over, I would love to be remembered for something more than having a great body and being able to read out lines that someone else has written for me.'

'How do you know all this?' I asked, without fully thinking through the implications of my question.

'What?' Olivia blazed back. Her moods, I was discovering, could change like traffic lights at a busy junction. 'You think I can't appreciate great movies because they're in black and white? I was born poor English, not stupid! But I'm one of the download generation. When I was a kid, my dad got hold of a knocked-off laptop and I used to carry it around with me wherever I went, like it was my favourite doll. Any chance I got to hook up to the Internet, I'd see what movies I could find. There wasn't much point watching *Die Hard* or *Mission Impossible* or big-budget wham-bam shit like that because the connections were so bad you couldn't see what the hell was going on. So I'd watch all the old classics. At least then I could hear what the actors were saying even if I couldn't see what they were doing. I could probably give you the whole of *The Apartment* or *All About Eve* by heart.'

Before she had a chance to deliver on this promise, we were distracted by a commotion and the staggering figure of Jack Reynolds hoving back into view, pursued by one of the doormen who was controlling access to the VIP enclosure.

'Come on, Olly, we're going,' he slurred, grabbing Olivia by the arm and attempting to pull her from her seat.