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Written by Freya North

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FREYA NORTH

Home Truths

HARPER

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1

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Prologue

‘How do you say goodbye to a mountain?’

From her vantage point, Cat York looked across to the three Flatirons, to Bear Peak and Green Mountain. She gazed down the skirts of Flagstaff, patting the snow around her and settling herself in as though she was sitting on the mountain’s lap. ‘It’s like a giant, frozen wedding dress,’ she said. ‘It probably sounds daft, but for the last four years, I’ve privately thought of Flagstaff as *my* mountain.’

‘There’s a lot of folk round here who think that way,’ Stacey said. ‘You’re allowed to. That’s the beauty of living in Boulder.’

The sun shot through, glancing off the crystal-cracked snow on the trees, the sharp, flat slabs of rust-coloured rock of the Flatirons soaring through all the dazzling white at their awkward angle.

‘When Ben and I first arrived and I was homesick and insecure, I’d walk to Chautauqua Meadow and just sit on my own. It felt like the mountains were a giant arm around my shoulders.’ Cat looked around her with nostalgic gratitude. ‘Then soon enough we met you lot, started hiking and biking the trails and suddenly the mountain showed me its other

side. You could say it's been my therapist's couch and it's been my playground. It's now my most favourite place in the world.'

Stacey looked at Cat, watched her friend cup her gloved hands over her nose and mouth in a futile bid to make her nose look less red and her lips not so blue. 'This time next week, the only peaks I'll be seeing are Victorian rooftops,' Cat said, 'grimy pigeons will replace bald eagles and there'll just be puddles in place of Wonderland Lake. Next week will be a whole new year.'

'Tell me about Clapham,' Stacey asked, settling into their snow bunker.

'Well,' said Cat, 'it's a silent "h" for a start.'

They laughed.

'God,' Cat groaned, leaning forward and knocking her head against her knees, 'I'm still not sure we're doing the right thing – but don't tell Ben I said so. I can't tell you about Clapham, I don't think I've ever been.' She paused and then continued a little plaintively. 'God, Stacey, I have no job, my two closest friends don't even live in the city any more and I'm moving to an opposite side of London to where I used to live, where my sisters still live.'

'It's exciting,' Stacey said, 'and if you don't like it, you can always come back.' She tore into a pack of Reese's with her teeth, her chilled fingers unfit for the task. 'And there's some stuff that's really to look forward to.'

Placated and sustained by the pack of peanut butter, the comfort of chocolate, Cat agreed. 'I've missed my family – by the sound of it, my middle sister Fen is having a tough time at the moment. And it's going to be a big year for Django – he'll be seventy-five which will no doubt warrant a celebration of prodigious proportions.'

'I'd sure like to have met him,' Stacey said and she laughed a little. 'I remember when I first met you, I thought you were

like, so exotic, because you came to Boulder with your English Rose looks and a history that Brontë couldn't have made up. You with the mother who ran off with a cowboy, you who were raised by a crazy uncle called Django, you and your sisters brought up in the wilds of Wherever.'

'Derbyshire's not wild,' Cat protested, 'not our part. Though there are wallabies.'

'What's a wallaby?'

'It's like a mini kangaroo,' said Cat. 'They were kept as pets by the posh folk in eighteenth-century Derbyshire – but some broke free, bred, and now bounce happily across the Dales.'

Stacey took a theatrical intake of breath. 'So we have you and your sisters, living in the countryside with your hippy dude uncle and a herd of mutant, aristocratic kangaroos because your mom eloped with J. R. Ewing?' She whistled. 'You could sell this to Hollywood.'

'Shut up, Stacey,' Cat laughed. 'We're just a normal family. Django is a very regular bloke – albeit with a colourful dress code and an adventurous take on cuisine. I'm starting to freeze. Let's go into town and get a hot chocolate. My bum's numb even in these salopettes.'

'Weird, though,' Stacey said thoughtfully.

'What is? My bottom?'

'Your butt is cute, honey,' Stacey assured her, as they hauled each other to their feet. 'I mean it's a little weird that your mom runs off with a cowboy from Denver when you were small, right?'

'Yup.'

'And you've been living pretty close to the Mile High City these last four years, right?'

'Yup.'

'But you never looked her up?'

'Nope.'

‘Never even thought about it? Never went shopping in Denver and thought, Hey, I wonder if that lady over there is my mom?’

Throughout Cat’s life, it had always been her friends who’d been far more intrigued by her family circumstances, her absent mother, than she. ‘But I never knew her. I was a baby. I have no memories of her,’ Cat explained. ‘I’m not even curious. We had Django, my sisters and I – we wanted for nothing. Just because we didn’t have a “conventional” mother or father didn’t mean that we were denied a proper parent.’

Stacey linked arms with Cat. ‘Conventional families are dull, honey – stick with your kooky one.’

‘Oh I’m sticking with my kooky one all right!’ Cat laughed. ‘I love them with all my heart. And now that Ben and I want to start our own, it feels natural to want to be within that fold again.’

At the time, Cat and Ben York had argued about putting the set of three matching suitcases on their wedding list. Cat had denounced them as boring and unsexy and why couldn’t they peruse the linen department one more time. Ben told her that some things in life were, by virtue, boring and unsexy and he pointed out there were only so many Egyptian cotton towels a couple could physically use in a lifetime. Three years later, Ben and Cat are contemplating the same three suitcases: frequently used, gaping open and empty, waiting to be fed the last remaining clothes and belongings. The process is proving to be far more irksome than the packing of the huge crates a few weeks ago, now currently making their passage by sea back to England.

‘Weird to think that this time next week we’ll be back in the UK,’ Ben says.

‘Weird that we both now refer to it as “the UK” rather than “England” or simply “home”,’ says Cat. ‘Stacey and I

went for a fantastic walk this morning.’ She looks through their picture windows to the mountains, a huge cottonwood tree in its winter wear with stark, thick boughs boasting sprays of fine, finger-like branches, the big sky, the quality of air so clean it is almost visible. ‘God, it’s stunning here.’

‘Hey,’ says Ben, ‘we’ll have Clapham Common on our new doorstep.’

Cat hurls a pillow at him. He ducks.

‘We can always come back,’ Ben tells her, ‘but for now, it is time to go. We have things to do. That was the point, remember. That’s why we came here in the first place. It’s the things we do now which provide a tangible future for our daydreams. That’s why it’s timely to return to the UK.’

‘Do dreams come true in *Clapham*?’

Ben hurls the pillow back at Cat. She hugs it close and looks momentarily upset. ‘I don’t even have a job to go back to,’ she says, ‘and not from want of trying. And I’m not pregnant yet – not from want of trying. I feel like I’m just traipsing behind you.’

‘We’re a team,’ Ben states, ‘you and me. I’ve been given a great job which will be big enough for both of us. I’ve taken it – for the both of us – so you can take your time and think about you.’

‘I know,’ Cat smiles sheepishly. ‘But what’ll I do in Clapham all day? Are we packing the pillows?’

‘I don’t know – do furnished flats come with pillows?’

‘I’m not sleeping on pillows used by God knows who,’ Cat protests, though she calculates that three pillows will fill an entire suitcase.

‘You do in hotels,’ Ben reasons, with a frustrated ruffle through his short, silver-flecked hair. ‘It’s not as if we’re going to some boarding house – I told you, the flat is really quite nice. And when I’m up and running, we’ll look for somewhere to buy.’

‘In *North* London,’ Cat says and Ben decides not to react to the fact that this is emphatically not a question. ‘Pip says she’s worried about Fen.’

‘Your eldest sister worries about everyone,’ Ben says, remembering that, actually, these pillows came with this apartment. He doesn’t comment.

‘But she says that Fen and Matt aren’t getting along. Since the baby.’

‘You’re not your sisters’ keeper,’ Ben says carefully.

‘Oh but I am,’ Cat says, as if she’s offended, as if Ben’s forgotten to understand the closeness between the McCabe girls, ‘we all are. It’s always been that way, it had to be.’

Ben decides to change the subject. He knows that when his wife is emotional, the legend of her family can be detrimentally overplayed. But he knows, too, that once she returns to their fold again, all the normal niggles and familial irritations will surface and Cat will no doubt be glad of Clapham. He wedges socks into spaces in the cases and then crosses to Cat. ‘Your family won’t recognize you,’ he says. ‘They’ll be expecting that blonde girl with the pony-tail they saw last summer – not this auburn pixie. Mind you, they won’t recognize me – you couldn’t call my hair “salt and pepper” any more, it’s just plain grey.’

‘Makes you look very distinguished,’ Cat says, brushing her hand tenderly through Ben’s hair. She tufts at her elfin crop with a beguiling wail. ‘Do you think mine’s too short? I told them to cut it shorter than usual, and colour it stronger than normal because I wouldn’t be coming back for a while. It’s like I forgot that the UK basically *invented* places like Vidal Sassoon and John Frieda.’

‘You look gorgeous,’ Ben says, ‘really sexy and cute and fuckable.’ He’s behind her, nuzzling the graceful sweep of her neck that her cropped hair has exposed. He fondles her

breasts and then takes his hand down to her crotch and cups at it playfully.

‘Dr York!’ Cat says. ‘I have packing to do.’

‘And I want to fuck my wife,’ Ben whispers, with a titillating nip at her ear lobe.

Cat resists theatrically but he catches her wrists and suddenly he’s tonguing her hungrily. ‘Come on, babe. Procreation is top of our list after all, remember.’

‘Making babies is a very serious matter, Dr York,’ says Cat with mock consternation though she is wriggling out of her clothing.

Ben plugs her mouth with a kiss and takes her hand down to his jeans where his hard-on wells at an awkward angle. ‘Well then, we’d better commit ourselves to honing our technique.’

‘You’re the doctor,’ Cat says, dispensing with her knickers. Ben’s hands travel her body, he gorges on the sight of her. He loves her naked when he’s still fully clothed, the tantalizing interference of fabric between him and his wife’s silky skin. She squats down and unbuckles his belt, makes achingly slow progress with the flies of his trousers, easing down his boxer shorts as if it’s the first time she’s done so. She’s on her knees. His cock springs to attention. Her mouth is moist but teasingly just beyond reach.

‘Christ, Cat,’ Ben says hoarsely, clutching her head and bucking his groin to meet her.

‘Blow-jobs don’t make babies,’ Cat tells him artlessly, but she kisses the tip of his cock and follows this with swift, deep sucks that make him groan. She stands and looks up at him. His height has always turned her on and when he dips his face down to kiss hers it darkens his brown eyes. ‘Isn’t there some position that’s meant to facilitate fertility, doctor?’

‘Yes, Mrs York,’ Ben confirms, turning her away from

him, running his hand gently up her back, pushing between her shoulder-blades so that she is bent forwards, 'there is. Just. Like. This.'

He takes her from behind. The sensation is so exquisite that, for a while, they are silent, motionless.

'Dr York? Are you sure doggy-style is medically proven to assist conception?'

'No,' Ben pants as he thrusts into her, his hands at her waist to haul himself in, 'but I'm quite certain that the sight of your immaculate peach of an arse improves the quality of my load.'

Django McCabe

Often, making light of the dark makes good sense. When Django McCabe was trekking in Nepal in the early 1960s, en route to some saffron-robed guru or other, he came across a man who had fallen down a screed slope along the mountain pass.

‘Need a hand?’ Django had offered.

‘Actually, wouldn’t mind a leg,’ the man had responded. It was then that Django saw the man in fact had only the one leg, that his crutch had been flung some distance. Django learnt more from his co-traveller than from the guru: not to let hardship harden a person, to keep humour at the heart of the matter, to make light of the dark. A decade later, when Django found himself guardian to three girls under the age of four, the offspring of his late brother, he thought about his one-legged friend and decided that the circumstances uniting him with his nieces would never be recalled as anything other than rather eccentric, strangely fortunate and not that big a deal anyway. ‘I know your mother ran off with a cowboy from Denver, but . . .’ has since prefixed all manner of events throughout the McCabe girls’ lives.

I know your mother ran off with a cowboy from Denver,

but crying because I accidentally taped over Dallas is a little melodramatic.

It was mid-morning and Django McCabe felt entitled to a little sit-down. But there wasn't time for forty winks. It was Monday and if the girls were coming home for the weekend then he needed the week to prepare for their visit; he couldn't be wasting time with a snooze. However, to sit in a chair and not nod off was as difficult, perhaps even as pointless, as going to the Rag and Thistle and not having a pint of bitter.

'I'll multi-task,' Django muttered. 'Apparently it's a very twenty-first-century thing to do.' And so he decided to combine his little sit-down with doing something constructive, in this instance scanning today's runners. After all, studying the form would stop him dozing off.

And there it was. Staring him in the face. 2.20 Pontefract. Cool Cat. Rank outsider – but what did they know.

'It's a sign,' he said, patting himself all over to locate his wallet which, after an extensive grope through the collection of jackets draped over most of the chairs in the kitchen, he finally found. 'I'll put a tenner on the horse. In honour of Cat. I need to pop into town anyway so either way, it won't be a wasted trip.'

Django would never place a bet by phone. He doesn't trust the telephone. He says, darkly, that you never know who may be listening. But his Citroën 2CV he trusts with his life and, along the lanes of Farley Moor and the roads around Chesterfield, the little car filled to bursting with Django is a familiar sight. At seventy-four, Django is physically robust. Tall and sturdy, affably portly around the girth and crowned by a mane of grey hair always pony-tailed. He toots and waves as he drives. He thinks fellow drivers are slowing down

to let him pass, to wave back. Actually they're swerving to keep out of his way, holding up their hands in protest.

There are people in every continent who regard Django as their friend, though his travelling days ended with the arrival of his three small nieces some thirty years ago. He has rarely left Derbyshire since and it is the area around Farley Moor, on the Matlock side of Chesterfield, where his warmest clutch of friends are massed.

'Morning, Mary, and don't you look divine for a Monday,' Django says, entering the bookmakers.

'And don't you look colourful for January,' Mary says, wondering if he's warm enough in his paisley shirt and tapestry waistcoat.

'From Peru,' Django tells her, opening his waistcoat wide, like a flasher. 'I had to trade with bandits on a mountain pass.'

'And what did they get of you, duck?'

'My passport,' Django says and he roars with laughter. 'A tenner on Cool Cat, if you please.'

'Rank outsider,' Mary warns him.

'I know,' Django shrugs, 'but the odds were worse for Fenland Star yesterday and truly terrible for Pipistrelle last week and they both won.' He hands over a ten-pound note. 'She's flying home as we speak, you know. Cat. I have all three girls descending on me for the weekend.'

Mary knows Django's girls. They were at school with her daughters. 'No doubt you'll be cooking up a treat for them, then?'

'She's been in America for four years,' he says, leaning on the counter and beckoning Mary closer. 'That's an awful lot of McDonalds. Apparently her hair is now red.'

Mary can't see the connection between McDonalds and hair colour. If she remembers correctly, Cat is the sporty one who married the doctor of a professional cycling team.

‘So I am indeed preparing a Spread to welcome her home and put back some nutrients,’ Django is saying. ‘Oh, and let’s have a tenner on Three’s Company at Fakenham. Good little horse, that.’

Django McCabe hasn’t had a beard for over twenty years, yet still, in moments of contemplation, he strokes his chin with fingertips light and methodical as if his goatee still sits proud on his face. The habit is one that he uses for all manner of pontification, from selecting horses according to their names or the form given them by the *Racing Post*, to his choice of the next domino at the Rag and Thistle. Currently, he is toying with his chin while wondering what to cook. Laid out before him are all the foodstuffs from the fridge, most of those from the larder, and a few from the capacious chest freezer too. He doesn’t believe in shopping according to a recipe, he cooks to accommodate available ingredients; he invented food combining in its most oblique sense. He fingers his invisible beard and begins to make his considered selection, as an artist might choose pigment for the day’s palette. Indeed, Django feels at his most creative when cooking – he sees blending, mixing, combining, concocting, as art, not science. Thus he never measures or weighs and he believes cookery books are to cooking what painting-by-numbers kits are to painting.

Whenever his nieces visit from London, it warrants a Spread. And as the forthcoming weekend is to be not just an ordinary visit, but a homecoming celebration, it has to be a Monumental Spread. Django hasn’t seen Cat since the summer. None of them has. Christmas was peculiar for her absence. She’d turned thirty-two years old in the autumn and he hadn’t been able to make her a birthday cake. On top of that, Pip implied recently that Fen has been a little down. He knows of no way better to warm the heart and feed the

soul than to fill the stomach with all manner of home cooking first.

Django is at his happiest when cooking for his girls, even though they are all in their thirties, with homes of their own, and their health has never been of concern.

‘It’s habit,’ he’ll say when they say he needn’t have, when they say a pub lunch or ready-meal supper would be fine by them, when they say they are too full for seconds let alone thirds. ‘I’m old and stuck in my ways,’ he’ll declare. ‘Humour me.’ He’ll say the same thing when presenting them with carrier bags bulging with Tupperware containers when they leave again for London.

Django McCabe is their family tree. The desertion of their mother, the death of their father gave him no choice – but ultimately gave him his greatest blessing. His arms, like great branches, have been the protective clasp, the loving embrace of mother, father, confidant and mentor to Cat, Fen and Pip. He provided the boughs in which their cradles were rocked. His are the roots which have always anchored them and kept them safe.

Tuesday

Fen McCabe used to enjoy looking in the mirror. Far from it being a vanity kick, she'd found it an affirming thing to do. In the scamper of a working day, to grasp a private moment to nod at her reflection was sustaining. Hullo you, she'd sometimes say, what a busy day. And in the heady period when Matt Holden had wined, dined, wooed and pursued her, she'd frequently nip to the loo in some restaurant or bar, for a little time out with herself. He likes me, she'd beam at her reflection, you go girl! She'd wink at herself, give herself the go-ahead to party and flirt and charm the man who, soon enough, wanted to be with her for life.

Since having a baby six months ago, Fen has hated looking in the mirror. Not because she finds the sight depressing but because she finds the sight so strange. She doesn't so much wince away from the sight of a few extra pounds, the limp hair, the sallow skin, the dark and puffy eyes, as glance bewildered and wonder who *is* that? How can this be my reflection when I don't actually recognize the person staring back? And mirror mirror on the wall, wasn't I once a damn sight fairer than *this*? So it's something of a relief not to have the

time during the day and to be too tired in the evening to face the facts staring back from the looking glass.

The phone is ringing, the baby is crying. Fen is nearer to the phone and Matt is nearer to the baby. Matt knows that Fen can find little wrong with the way he answers the phone so he's happy to swap places here in the kitchen.

'Hullo?' he answers. 'Well hullo!' He looks over to Fen. She's wearing truly awful pyjamas. Even if they'd been a matching set they'd have little to commend them. The bottoms have polka dots on a sickly lilac background. The top is littered with cutesy cartoon animals, a strange hybrid love child of a dog and a rabbit and even some teddy bear chromosomes somewhere along the line. 'Hold on, I'll just pass you over.' He holds out the receiver.

'Who is it?' Fen mouths but Matt will only cock his eyebrow and grin. As Fen shuffles over to the phone, the placated baby at home on her hip, Matt notes her slippers. The grey, felted monstrosities he once termed 'eastern-bloc lesbian clogs'. He'd had her in stitches at the time, she'd done a bastardized folk dance in them and had him in hysterics, before she'd banished them under the bed. For good, so he'd thought, until just then.

'Hullo?' says Fen.

'Boo!' says the voice.

'Cat?'

'I'm back! We're in a cab, on the M4. Heading for Clapham.'

Matt watches the smile warm her face. He thinks how clichéd it sounds to say that the sun comes out when Fen smiles. But in his eyes, it does. And suddenly he forgives her the pyjamas and the clogs and he feels bad for having felt irritated with her and now he wants to go to her and put his arms around her and kiss the asymmetric dimples on her

cheeks, brush her overlong fringe away from her forehead and kiss her there too, scoop her hair into a pony-tail and bury his nose in her neck. She's hanging up the phone and he thinks that, though he's now ready to leave for work perhaps there is time for a little spontaneity, for affection, for physical and emotional contact. The baby can stay on Fen's hip. They're a family after all. Group hug and all that. So he crosses the kitchen and he's about to reach for her when her nose wrinkles.

'Gracious,' she's saying to the baby, 'how can someone so little and cute make such a revolting smell.'

'I'll change her,' Matt offers.

Fen falters. 'It's OK,' she says, 'I'll do it. I want to check that her nappy rash has cleared.'

She may only be six months old but Cosima Holden-McCabe has decided, quite categorically, that she will not be eating anything unless it is orange in colour. Fen is fretting over whether puréed carrot and mashed sweet potato for the fourth day running – and currently for breakfast – might give her baby carotene poisoning. Or have caused the nappy rash. Or created the current extreme pungency of the nappies.

'Wouldn't you rather have a nice squidgy banana? Are you OK, pumpkin?' Keeping her eyes on her baby, wagging a spoon loaded with orange mush, Fen speaks to Matt. 'Does she look orange to you?'

'Pumpkins are orange – you're probably giving her this complex.'

Fen looks at him for a loaded moment.

'Joke?' Matt says with a sorry smile. 'She looks bonny – she has a lovely glow to her fat little cheeks.'

'She's not fat!' Fen protests.

'It was a compliment,' Matt assures her. 'I meant it affectionately.'

‘But do you think the glow to her cheeks is a bit orange?’

‘No, Fen, I don’t.’ Matt peers in close to his baby and kisses her cheek. ‘She looks fine.’ He glances at his girlfriend. ‘I think Cosima is happy and healthy and that carrot-and-sweet-potato mush is her favourite food of the moment. I reckon it’s because you look peaky in comparison, Fen.’

‘If I do look peaky,’ Fen says defensively, ‘it’s because I’m so bloody tired.’

‘I know you are,’ Matt says and it irritates him that Fen heard an insult instead of the concern intended. He wants to say, I’m tired too, you know; but he hasn’t time for a petty dispute over who is the more exhausted. ‘Why don’t you ask your sister if she’s around today? You can have a little time to yourself?’

‘She’s only just got off the plane!’

‘I meant Pip.’

Somewhere, Fen knows Matt’s intention is sweet. But lately, unbridled sensitivity has lain far closer to her surface than sense. ‘You don’t think I’m coping, do you?’ she says.

‘You’re doing brilliantly,’ Matt says, because the books and the magazines have instilled the sentence in him and advised him to ignore the ironing mountain, piles of toys and general debris. ‘I’m late. What are you doing today? Is it Musical Minis?’

‘No, that’s Thursday.’

‘TinyTumbles?’

‘No, that’s tomorrow. I may meet up with the baby-mums this afternoon.’

‘That’ll be nice.’

Fen shrugs. ‘I always come away feeling a bit insecure,’ she confides. ‘Their babies apparently sleep through the night and most have at least one tooth. And I’m not really sure about the women – I can’t find a connection apart from the babies being the same age. They’re forever trying to out-

purée each other with increasingly exotic organic recipes. But all my baby wants is orange stuff.’

‘You’re being unnecessarily hard on yourself,’ Matt says, ‘and on Cosima. And possibly on that bunch too. Stop being silly. You’re wondermum and we love you.’

Fen can’t hear the last sentence. Her ears are ringing with the fact that Matt says she’s silly. She wants to say, Well fuck you. But they’ve made a pact not to swear in front of their child.

‘I’m late.’ He gulps his coffee. ‘Work is mental at the moment – I’ll try and leave early, cook us something nice.’ He kisses the top of Fen’s head and brushes his lips over the peach fuzz adorning Cosima’s. ‘Bye, girls. Have fun.’

* * *

Tom Holmes likes Tuesdays very much. He doesn’t like the fact that at school Tuesdays mean dictation followed by football. Tom finds it difficult to coordinate hearing a word, then assessing its meaning in context and having to write it down, all in the space of about two seconds. It thus seems entirely logical that instructions for rigging a yacht could well be ‘Pacific’ instead of ‘specific’. It frustrates him that he never does well in dictation and that there’s no opportunity in dictation to saliently reason that ‘Pacific’, taken contextually, is just as appropriate as ‘specific’. He’s slightly taken aback that Miss Balcombe won’t at least acknowledge that ‘Pacific instructions for rigging’ sounds fairly logical. He doesn’t like it that there’s no room for manoeuvre with meaning where dictation is concerned.

Football makes Tom miserable, more so because he’s acutely aware that a nine-year-old should never admit to being miserable in the context of football. He supports Arsenal, which has won him friends at his North London

prep school, but he hates playing the game. He hates playing because his limbs are often sore from eczema. Mud can actually sting but tracksuit trousers can catch and snag on chapped skin. Though his teammates are pals enough not to comment, Tom still catches them glancing at his body, unintentionally repelled. However, what makes dictation and football bearable is that, on Tuesdays, he stays with his dad and stepmum at their cool place in Hampstead.

They actually only live a mile or so from his home in Swiss Cottage and, though Tom spends every Tuesday, Wednesday and every other weekend with them, and any time in between that he fancies, the novelty value is still high. His dad's place is closer to school than his other home so instead of his mum slaloming her Renault through the school run (which has its plus points because she appears unaware how much she swears) Tom strolls down Hampstead High Street with his stepmum. And, without actually holding hands (he's nine now, someone might see), Tom can still subliminally tug her into a detour to Starbucks for hot chocolate.

Tom's had Pip for nearly four years. Her presence at the school gates continues to provide much intrigue. Being a clown by trade, Pip is well known to many of Tom's classmates from the birthday-party circuit of their younger years. She's also been to assembly to talk about the other work she does, as a clown at children's hospitals. She did the splits and a flikflak on the stage, bonked the headmaster on the head with a squeaky plastic hammer, made a motorbike from balloons in four seconds flat and Tom was the centre of attention all that day. His friends still make a point of saying hullo to her when she collects him. Invariably, she has rushed to school from the hospital, with her hair still in skew-whiff pigtails and traces of make-up on her face. Far more exotic than the widespread Whistles and ubiquitous Nicole Farhi worn by the other mums.

*

This Tuesday was no different. There was Pip, eye-catching in orange-and-purple stripy tights and clodhopping boots, chatting amiably with the other Hampstead mums.

‘Hi, I’m starving. It was shepherd’s pie for lunch. *Heinous*,’ said Tom, keen to drag her away.

‘Dear oh dear,’ said Pip, ‘heinous shepherd’s pie? I’d turn vegetarian, if I were you.’

‘No *way*, José,’ Tom retched. ‘The veggie option is always vomtastic.’

‘Vomtastic,’ Pip marvelled, planning to use the word in her clowning. ‘How was football?’

Tom gave a small shrug. ‘Cold.’

‘Are you angling for a brownie and hot choc?’ Pip nudged him.

‘If you say so,’ Tom said.

‘Well, your dad won’t be home till sevenish,’ Pip reasoned with herself, as much as with Tom.

‘It would be very good for my energy,’ Tom said not entirely ingenuously. ‘Starbucks would *really* help my homework.’

Pip laughed. ‘Come on, tinker,’ she said. They walked towards the High Street. ‘I had a sad day at the hospital. It’s lovely to see you.’

Tom slipped his hand into hers. Just for a few strides or so.

Pip looked at the kitchen table laden with the remains of supper later that evening, then she looked at her husband and his son embroiled in PlayStation. She put her hands on her hips and cleared her throat. They didn’t look up.

‘Hullo?’ she called, as if testing whether anyone was there.

Zac glanced up briefly from the console, but not briefly enough to prevent Tom taking advantage.

‘Dad!’ Tom objected. ‘Concentrate!’

And then Pip decided she’d just smile and ask if anyone

wanted a drink. She still found it difficult to gauge her boundaries as a stepmother. Her own standards, based on her childhood and her family's dynamic, said that a nine-year-old should help clear the table, or at least ask to be excused a chore. But she also acknowledged that this father and son hadn't seen each other for a week and Zac had been first down from the table challenging Tom to a PlayStation final-of-finals. So she tidied up and allowed them their quality time.

She glanced at the clock and felt relieved that it really was nearing Tom's bedtime. Zac had worked so late the last couple of nights she felt she hadn't seen him at all. 'I'll run your bath, Tom,' she said.

'One more game,' Zac called to her.

'I'll run it slowly,' Pip said.

Despite actually trying his damndest to win, Zac lost at PlayStation. Far from being wounded, his pride soared at Tom's skill and after a noisy bathtime, he cuddled up with his son for a lengthy dip into *James and the Giant Peach*. Pip could hear the soft timbre of Zac's reading voice. She poured two glasses of wine and organized Tom's school bag for the morning.

Zac appeared and made the fast-asleep gesture with his hands. 'He was tired,' he said.

'Well, it's late for him,' said Pip, offering a glass of wine.

Zac looked at his watch. 'I just have a little work to do,' he told Pip who looked instantly deflated, 'just an hour or so.' He took the wine, kissed Pip on the lips, squeezed her bottom and disappeared with his laptop. He's happy, Pip told herself. She looked on the bright side, which was very much her wont. At least it gave her the opportunity to phone Cat, as long as her youngest sister had been able to resist the jet lag on her first day back in the country.

*

Many would say that being a high-flying accountant would have its ups and downs: financial remuneration in return for long hours and often relatively dull work; a bulging pay packet to compensate for a dry grey image. How else would accountants have become such a clichéd race? But the only things grey about Zac Holmes are his eyes which are dark slate to the point of being navy anyway, and the only dry thing about Zac is his sense of humour. If Zac's looks and his personality had dictated a career, it would have been something on the funky side of creative. But Zac's brain, with its amazing propensity for figures, decreed accountancy from the outset. Anything else just wouldn't be logical. Zac likes logic, he likes straightforward solutions and simple answers to even the most complex of problems. Consequently, he never judges anything to be a dilemma because he knows intrinsically that there is always a way to work it all out. Zac believes that problems are merely perceived as such. If you just sit down and think carefully, there's nothing that can't be solved. Problems don't really exist at all, it comes down to attitude. That goes for his personal life as much as his professional. So, when ten years ago, his on-off girlfriend announced she was pregnant a few weeks after a forgettable drunken friendship fuck, Zac welcomed the news with a shrug and easily devised a formula that would suit them all.

$$\begin{aligned} & 2 \text{ firm friends} + 0 \text{ desire to marry/cohabit} \\ & \quad (+ \text{ never } \div \text{ by } \pounds/\heartsuit \text{ issues}) \\ & = \text{great} + \text{modern parents} \\ & = 1 \text{ lucky child.} \end{aligned}$$

June, the mother of his child, can never be an ex-wife or ex-girlfriend because she was neither when Tom was conceived. She's Zac's friend and Zac is her friend and for Tom to have parents who are friends is a gift. Tom also has

two step-parents. Everyone is friends. It might appear unconventional, but it works. A large family of friends.

Django McCabe may have trawled the sixties, trekking from ashram to commune, hiking from yurt to kibbutz, in search of the same. But he was happy to admit that his eldest niece had found its apotheosis in London NW3.

Pip is hovering. Zac's hour at his laptop has turned into two.

'Coffee?' she offers.

'No, ta,' says Zac, 'need to crack on.'

'Tea?' she suggests.

'Nope, I'm fine thanks, Mrs,' says Zac. 'I have to knock this on its head.'

'Whisky?'

'No, nothing – I'm good. Thanks.'

'Rampant sex?'

'Tempting – on any other night. I have to work. Seriously.'

'One of my very special blow-jobs?'

Zac looks at his screen. He has a very good head for figures. But if there's one figure that gives very good head, it's Pip. His eyes don't leave his laptop, his finger hovers above the mouse-pad. 'A special blow-job?' Zac asks, as if it's a deal-breaker. 'Not just a standard one?'

'Trust me,' Pip winks.

'Because,' says Zac, 'if it's just run-of-the-mill sucky-sucky, I'll pass. This audit is crucial.'

'I'm not capable of run-of-the-mill sucky-sucky,' Pip clarifies, hands on her hips, chin up.

'I mean, I'm talking *cosmic*, Pip,' Zac stipulates with a lasciviously raised eyebrow. 'It needs to be mind-blowing.'

'I assure you it's not just your mind I'll be blowing.'

Finally, Zac looks from his laptop to Pip, then back again. Contriving a sigh, as if he was doing her the favour, he logs off. 'I'm sure the powers that be will understand,' he says.

‘I’ll write your boss a note,’ says Pip. ‘I’ll tell him the dog ate your homework.’ She takes Zac by the hand and leads him to the bedroom. They undress silently and have rude sex as quietly as they can.

* * *

Matt had come back from work early, made sausages, mash and onion gravy. Perfect for a cold January night and essential for his girlfriend who’d told him she hadn’t had time to eat more than toast and Marmite during the day. He’d bought a DVD too, which Fen managed to stay awake through despite snuggling up against the cosiness of Matt’s chest. Now she’s reading in bed and Matt is nuzzling the fragrant softness of his girlfriend’s neck. His cock is surprisingly responsive. He’d only intended to kiss her goodnight. He didn’t know he had the energy to feel horny.

‘How did we make Cosima again?’ Matt whispers, running his hand the length of Fen’s thigh, spooning against her, the sensation of her buttocks against his erection causing his pelvis to rock automatically, his hands to travel up along her torso. He bypasses her breasts. They’re Cosima’s for the time being. He doesn’t really mind, it’s lucky he’s always been a legs and bum man. And his hands sweep down to Fen’s thighs again, and over them, and around. And he walks his fingers up through the fuzz of her sex then attempts to tiptoe them down in between.

Fen’s hand joins his. ‘I do want to,’ she announces, a tinge of apology, a ring of reluctance, which stills Matt’s hand immediately. ‘I’m just really really tired. Sorry.’

‘I bet I can have you in the mood; bet you I can have you hollering for mercy,’ he tells her. He always used to be able to. He leans across her and kisses her, pulls her to face him, holds her against him. He rocks his groin gently against her,

takes her hand down to his perky cock and works his hands over her body. He is not sure whether he's taken her breath away or whether she's holding it to pull her stomach in. But he feels her stiffen, and a glance at her face, where anxiety is mixed with reluctance, causes him to turn away from her, to stare at the ceiling with a sigh.

'Do I feel different to you?' she asks. 'I'm still so squidgy and unattractive.' And then she mutters that she shouldn't have had all that bangers and mash.

'You look gorgeous,' Matt says, 'I keep telling you. God. Wasn't my raging hard-on proof enough how much I fancy you?'

Fen shrugs and looks downcast. 'I know you do,' she says quietly, 'but I have to fancy myself, too, to feel horny.'

'Will you give yourself a break,' Matt says. He switches off the bedside light and kisses her lightly on the shoulder. 'Stop being silly.'

Fen lies in the dark, wide-eyed and confused and wishing they had a spare room she could withdraw to. She encourages a hot, oily tear to sting its way from the corner of her eye and slick down her cheek and onto the pillow. She knows it's bizarre, but rather than being bolstered by Matt's assurances that he loves and lusts for her however she feels she looks, she's cross that he appears to trivialize her concerns, her loss of confidence, her fragile self-image.

He called me silly. For the second time today. Silly is a stupid, insensitive word to use. He just doesn't understand.

God. It's gone midnight. Cosima will wake in a couple of hours. I have to get some sleep.