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As Weekends Go

Written by Jan Brigden

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As Weekends Go

Jan Brigden

Extract

Chapter Four & Five



Where heroes are like chocolate – irresistible!

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Rebecca had pictured York station as being quaint and quiet but, although easier on the eye than King's Cross, it was swarming with tourists, some of them wielding maps almost as big as themselves.

It reminded her of the time Greg had taken her to Blackpool for the weekend. He'd refused to go and see the lights because he'd said they'd be ducking cameras and guidebooks all night. Rebecca had gone without him in the end and, thanks to an elderly couple from Bath who'd adopted her for the evening, had loved it.

She wondered if York would be as memorable.

They criss-crossed their way over to the taxi rank, reaching the front of the queue within minutes.

A bright red Citroen pulled up.

'Hawksley Manor, please,' said Abi, poking her head through the open passenger window and beaming at the driver. He had a nice face – Father Christmas-ish – and helped both women into the car with their luggage.

'First time in York, is it?' he asked, turning left out of the station.

'Certainly is. And I've heard it's lovely,' said Abi.

'Aye, it is,' he said, grinning at them in his rear-view mirror, 'especially where you're going.'

Twenty-five minutes later they reached the huge, black wrought iron gates that heralded the start of Hawksley Manor's long drive, neatly paved and shaded by legions of gold and copper beech trees.

They slowed to observe the ten m.p.h. speed limit, passing a cluster of tennis courts dotted with several people, sweat trickling from every pore, doggedly net-rushing as though their lives hinged on it.

'In *this* weather?' Abi yanked her sunglasses back down over her eyes, as if offended.

'I know. They'll have to dive in there to cool off,' said the

driver, pointing ahead to a magnificent central water fountain.

They circled it, gaining their first proper view of the manor's imposing sandstone façade. It had looked grand enough in the brochure, but seeing it up close took Rebecca's breath away – as did the acres of rolling parkland surrounding it. So, too, the lush gardens preceding it, chock-full of beautiful red and pink peonies, showy hydrangeas, snapdragons and roses, to name but a few of the blooms she recognised, and big bronze water features that made her pond and pebble stacks at home look paltry.

'This place is something else,' she said, leaping from the taxi onto the wide front steps, the aroma of sweet peas filling her nostrils.

'Awesome, isn't it?' said Abi, joining her. She pointed out the golf course, nestling beyond a huge guest car park on the right side of the manor, set in a valley populated by trees, with greens so velvety they looked synthetic.

Rebecca imagined the joy on Greg's face if he could see it.

She thanked the driver and helped him to unload their luggage, picking up her holdall as Abi settled their fare and waved him off.

A young doorman dressed in full livery raced down the steps towards them. 'Good afternoon, ladies. Welcome to Hawksley Manor.' He took charge of Abi's case, gamely trying to lift it without showing the strain, his ballooning cheeks turning as maroon as his jacket.

Rebecca and Abi exchanged doting glances and followed him up the steps into an opulent marble lobby.

'Whoa! Fancy polishing those monsters,' Abi gasped, urging Rebecca to look up at the giant drop crystals hanging from the equally giant chandeliers.

'Or hoovering *that!*' Rebecca indicated a centrally placed sweeping staircase.

'Red-carpeted especially for us, dahling.' Abi coughed demurely and patted the back of her hair.

They tailed the doorman past a row of oil paintings depicting various scenes from the manor grounds, to a mahogany front desk where a team of receptionists, dressed in maroon and black uniforms, stood busily checking people in. Beyond the desk, a richly carpeted lounge furnished with squidgy, leather armchairs played host to a clutch of guests sipping tea and coffee from dainty, white china cups.

Rebecca longed to wriggle out of her jeans and T-shirt and tidy her straggly ponytail, and sighed with relief when a receptionist became free.

Violet Sharp, the woman's name badge said.

Rebecca couldn't help mentally likening her to a Doberman.

Mid-fifties, with a pearly white French pleat and a face you could chop wood on, she glared at Abi through pink-rimmed varifocals. 'How may I help you?'

'Huxley and Stafford,' Abi replied, meeting the receptionist's gaze full on. 'We're booked in for three nights.'

'One moment, please.' Ms Sharp tapped the computer keys with long, bony fingers.

'Actually,' said Abi, smiling sweetly, 'I was told to ask for Jack Byrnes on arrival. Is he around?'

Ms Sharp's features juddered. 'I'll see if he's free.' She snatched up the nearest phone receiver.

Rebecca could see Abi trying not to gloat seconds later, as they were asked to wait in the lounge and told begrudgingly that their luggage would be taken to their rooms for them.

'*Rooms?* But we're booked into a twin,' said Abi, frowning.

'You've been upgraded.' Ms Sharp arched a needle-thin eyebrow at them. 'By a Mr and Mrs Murray. Regular guests of ours, I believe.'

'My boss and his wife.' Abi looked genuinely embarrassed. 'Oh, well. How lovely. Two rooms it is then.' She ushered Rebecca into the lounge.

They'd just settled themselves into two of the comfy armchairs when a chubby, suited man with a nose that could

only be termed a whopper strode over.

'*LADIES!*' He thrust out a meaty hand. 'Jack Byrnes. General Manager. Welcome t't' manor.'

'Thank you,' said Abi, avoiding eye contact with Rebecca as she leapt up to greet him. 'I'm Abi, and this is Rebecca.'

'Pleased to meet you both,' Jack gushed. 'How's Richard? Shame he and Mrs Murray couldn't make it. They'd have loved the charity golf tournament yesterday. Not that we resent having you two lovely ladies here, instead, of course.' He chuckled, allowing Rebecca and Abi to release some of their pent-up laughter.

'He's fine,' said Abi, composing herself, 'sends his regards. They both do.'

'Marvellous!' Jack led them back into the lobby. 'So, what do you think of the manor so far, then, ladies?'

'Incredible,' said Abi, answering for them both.

'Isn't it just?' Jack launched into a well-rehearsed overview.

He then introduced them to Bern*ard* – emphasis firmly on the second syllable – the concierge, who looked like he'd been there since time began and had, unless Rebecca was mistaken, a wee twinkle in his eye.

She saw Abi perk up as Jack pointed out the bar to them, before summoning over the young doorman they'd met earlier.

'Right, ladies, Sam here has your key cards, and will escort you upstairs. If you're hungry, the Regency bar does snacks, otherwise dinner is served between seven and ten in't' main restaurant. Enjoy your stay. And needless to say, if there's owt you require, just ask.'

As their rooms were only on the second floor, they took the stairs, where halfway up, they passed a man in Bermuda shorts, a vest top and an England baseball cap.

Not all suits and boots then, Rebecca was relieved to see.

Upon reaching their rooms in the sumptuously decorated West Wing, the doorman slipped their key cards into slots 218 and 219, respectively, indicating whose was whose. 'Your

luggage and welcome packs are inside,' he said. 'Any problems, don't hesitate to call reception. Enjoy your stay, ladies.'

'Bless his heart,' said Rebecca, watching him dash, rosy-cheeked, back down the corridor. She turned to Abi. 'So, what do you think? Unpack, shower and go for a nose round? Bit of lunch?'

Abi didn't respond. She was gawping at the interior of room 218.

Rebecca tried to peek.

'No, don't. It'll spoil it,' said Abi, blocking her path.

'Spoil what?'

'Just go into yours, and I'll give you a knock later,' said Abi, leaving her intrigued.

Unsure of what to expect, Rebecca nudged open the door of room 219.

And nearly fell over.

It looked more like a suite than a room. This couldn't be right, surely?

Furnished in gold and cream throughout, the bed alone seemed double the size of Rebecca's one at home. Next to this stood a stylish oak dresser, atop which sat a silver platter of fresh fruit with a little card propped against it. Emblazoned across the card in shiny gold letters were the words: ***Rebecca Stafford.*** Confirmation that this vast stretch of grandeur was her home for the next three days.

She stepped over her holdall, cupping her hand to her mouth as she ventured further inside and discovered an alcove around the corner, boasting a chaise longue, glass topped coffee table and top-notch sound system. French doors opened onto a balcony, complete with table, four chairs and a buttercup-yellow parasol. They'd even thrown in two sun loungers. All that was missing was the paddling pool.

Rebecca peered over the railings and gasped. Paddling pool? That was an understatement. Directly below, set within a perimeter of pruned hedges and surrounded by grass, shimmered a beautiful, kidney-shaped swimming pool. An

archway, shrouded in pink clematis, bore entry onto a covered terrace, where people sat sipping fresh orange juice and eating ice creams. It made Rebecca's mouth water just looking at them.

She shook off her gold mules and padded back inside. She'd already clocked the mini bar next to the trouser press, so opened the door and removed a bottle of ice cold water, wondering, as she sat on the chaise longue to drink it, how much this upgrade, 'mates rates' or not, must have cost Abi's boss. According to her welcome pack, this room was superior. Lord knows what the deluxe ones were like. The hotel plan showed them as being situated on the floor above, along with the bridal suite.

Rat-a-tat-tat.

Abi at the door, hyperventilating.

'Can you believe our rooms?' she screeched, flying past Rebecca. 'The bathroom's bigger than my lounge.'

'Oh my word! The bathroom!' Rebecca tore across the room.

White with gold accessories, it had a walk-in shower, an abundance of creams and lotions in miniature bottles with exotic sounding names like frangipani and passionflower, and bath towels like duvets.

'Richard sounded so pleased when I screamed down the phone at him how fabulous it all is,' said Abi, laughing.

'You've spoken to Richard?'

'Don't worry. I thanked him from both of us. After giving him some more stick for not warning us about big-nosed Jack, of course. Not too much stick though, I wanted to cheekily ask him if I could have Tuesday off too, extra day to recover. He only went and agreed!'

'Nice one!'

'I know,' said Abi, bounding back towards the door. 'Look, the sooner we unpack and freshen up, the sooner we can do the grand tour.' She let out a parting squeal. 'Give me a knock when you're ready.'

The second she'd gone, Rebecca unearthed her phone to call

Greg. He hadn't asked her to, but she was so used to him ringing her from the various destinations he'd reached, she thought it would be nice to do the same. No point in dwelling on his actions or, rather, non-actions earlier that day. She couldn't change anything.

She hadn't expected him to answer, he rarely did, so she left a message explaining that she'd arrived safely, and could he call her back when he was free.

She then set about stowing her clothes in the mammoth floor-to-ceiling wardrobe and, after fiddling with every dial and button in sight, delighted in an invigorating power shower.

An hour later, she and Abi headed back downstairs. Abi was dressed in her least-creased black shorts and a vintage T-shirt, Rebecca, having gleefully found an iron, parading a pair of flawlessly pressed brown combats and a turquoise vest top. She'd stayed with the ponytail, twisting it into a pretty blue and gold bulldog clip big enough to keep it tethered.

When they entered the lobby it buzzed with New Yorkers shrieking, '*Awe*some!' at the décor and slavering over the oil paintings.

'First stop Regency bar, I think,' said Abi, hustling Rebecca past them.

Inside, the polo shirt brigade was out in force, its smiling members standing at the oak-panelled bar, *phwah phwahing* over their cognacs and comparing scorecards whilst their good ladies – suitably tanned and buffed – sat chatting in their wicker-chaired enclave beyond.

A man of about thirty, with a dimpled smile, greeted Rebecca and Abi as they approached the bar. 'Afternoon, ladies. What can I get you?' He was wearing a white shirt and black trousers teamed with a maroon waistcoat and a black bow tie and looked every inch the perfect barman.

'Vodka and tonic, please,' said Abi, giving him a sexy smile.

'Ice and lemon?'

‘Yes, please.’ She turned to Rebecca. ‘Bex?’

‘Coke with ice, please.’

He nodded politely, before mixing their drinks.

‘So is it Daniel, Danny or Dan?’ said Abi, pointing to his shiny gold name badge.

Here we go, thought Rebecca. Then again, this guy had curly, black hair. Abi didn’t usually do curly.

‘I prefer Danny,’ he said, grinning at them. ‘Makes me sound younger.’

Abi gave a girly laugh. ‘I’m Abi,’ she said, extending her hand. ‘And this is Rebecca.’

Danny shook hands with both women. ‘Nice to meet you. Have you just arrived?’

Rebecca could see his female colleague peeking at them through her blonde, wispy fringe, over the espresso machine behind him.

‘Yes, today,’ said Abi, sliding onto a vacant bar stool.

‘Thought I hadn’t seen you before. How long are you here for?’ He placed their drinks on the bar.

‘Three days. My boss and his wife couldn’t make it so offered us their room. Or rooms, I should say. Richard Murray. Do you know him?’

‘Ah, yeah. I know Richard. Nice bloke. Good golfer too. As is his wife. Do either of you play at all?’

‘God, no.’ Abi laughed, savaging her vodka and tonic. ‘Bex does though.’

‘Only pitch and putt,’ said Rebecca, feeling her cheeks burn. She grabbed herself a stool. She could shake Abi sometimes.

Danny laughed so heartily that several heads turned. ‘Ah, well. It’s a start.’ He proffered some nibbles. ‘Which part of London are you from, if you don’t mind me asking?’

‘That obvious, huh?’ Abi scooped up a handful of Bombay mix. ‘Want some, Bex?’

‘No, thanks,’ said Rebecca, more concerned that she’d left her phone upstairs.

‘Sorry, Danny. We’re from Croydon,’ said Abi. ‘Well, Purley, to be precise.’

‘I know Purley,’ said Danny. ‘I used to drive through there to see my girlfriend, now ex-girlfriend. She lives near Gatwick.’

‘Bloody long drive,’ said Abi.

‘Oh, no, I was working in Fulham at the time. That’s where I met her.’

‘Gosh! Small world.’ Abi’s phone beeped. ‘So are you from York originally then?’

‘No, Manchester. Can’t you tell?’ said Danny, emphasising the twang.

‘Excuse me, Danny,’ said Abi, as the lure of her inbox called. She nudged Rebecca’s knee. ‘Nick’s sent me a grovelling text. Says he’s sitting by the pool with a rank hangover and will call me later.’ She scrunched up her shoulders, affectionately. ‘What’s he like, eh?’

Danny half-smiled at her.

‘Nick’s her boyfriend,’ Rebecca informed him, as Abi texted Nick back. ‘He’s on a stag do in southern Spain.’

‘Ah … gotcha!’ Danny moved to serve four polo shirts leaning over the bar, brandishing their empty brandy glasses.

Rebecca fished out her key card. ‘Won’t be a minute,’ she said to Abi, seizing the moment. ‘Just need to get my phone.’

‘Use mine,’ said Abi, waving her Blackberry at her.

‘Oh, no, you’re all right. I want to check if Greg’s called me back.’

‘Oh, well, I’ll get us in another round then. Get the lowdown on York’s nightlife from our friendly barman here.’

Back in her room Rebecca tried and failed to return a missed call from Greg. Why wasn’t he answering his phone? He must be able to see it was her. He’d only rung three minutes ago.

Keen to tell him about Hawksley Manor, she made herself comfortable on the bed and tried again.

Result.

But Greg's response was lukewarm. He didn't have time to fart, he said, let alone listen to a description of some remote northern pile, however stately it was.

Deflated, but determined to at least induce some form of good cheer – after all, it wasn't her fault he was crap at delegating … well, at work, anyway – Rebecca mentioned Abi's text from Nick.

'Ha! Gotta pity the other poor sods on *that* flight,' Greg scoffed. 'Can you imagine the state of him by Tuesday? They'll have drunk Fuengirola dry. Don't ever ask me to go on holiday with him. It'll be a resounding no.'

Well, that went well …

'Don't be unkind,' said Rebecca, pulling a face at the phone. 'Nick was good enough to fit a couple of extra power points in our place at short notice when you needed them.'

'Yes, well, that was business …' Greg paused as if distracted. 'Look, sorry to cut you short, but I'm wanted at reception. I'll give you a call later, when it's less hectic, okay?'

'No worries. Just make sure you eat something. I know what you're like when you're rushing from A to B.' Rebecca made her way across the room to open the door.

'Yes, yes, all right. Look, I really need to go. It's mayhem here.'

'Okay. Bye—'

She realised he'd already hung up.

'Oh, lovely! Two brush-offs in one day,' she said aloud to herself, staring down at her phone. As she did so, a casually dressed man walked past her doorway. He was talking on his mobile and briefly looked at her before wrapping up his conversation.

It couldn't be, could it?

She pulled the door closed behind her and tiptoed down the corridor after him, catching him face-on as he rounded the staircase.

Good grief. It was.

She descended the last flight of stairs close enough to prod him in the back, but missed the third step completely which, had her ankle not buckled, would have meant her losing nothing more than her dignity. Instead she almost ripped her arm from its socket, clinging onto the banister to steady herself.

She dropped her phone. It bounced past him, the back cover pinging off, as it clattered across the lobby like a golf ball on cobbles. She also lost a shoe, which he had to sidestep to avoid treading on.

He spun round as he reached the last stair. And in the few seconds it took for the frown to leave his face, Rebecca was sure she'd stopped breathing.

She rubbed her shoulder.

'Are you all right?' he asked.

She managed a small nod, and prayed that he was as sincere as he appeared in television interviews.

He walked across the lobby, picked up her phone, retrieved the back cover from under an antique carver chair and slotted it back on for her. He then scooped her gold mule off the bottom step and ascended the stairs towards her with the makings of a smile on his face.

The closer he came, the wider she could feel her eyes opening. She knew she should meet him halfway but her feet seemed to be glued to the floor.

He proffered the shoe like Prince Charming. 'Yours, I believe?'

'Thank you,' she mumbled, taking it from him.

He glanced down at her bare left foot.

Go on, say it, she thought. *'Nice plaster!'*

Of all the people to make a tit of herself in front of, she'd gone and picked Alex Heath. The Doberman along with several other people in reception had witnessed the lot.

'Everything all right, sir?' Jack Byrnes called up the stairs, thundering, ashen-faced, towards them. 'You're not hurt at all, are you?'

The look he received back from Alex Heath left Rebecca in no doubt that this was one Premiership footballer who didn't like having his arse licked. And one who also, she observed, slightly puffing out her chest, seemed quite annoyed with the general manager's blatant disregard for her.

A blush crept up her face, more for Jack Byrnes than for herself, who, having realised his double gaffe, suddenly couldn't do enough for her. 'Was madam injured? Did madam need to see a doctor? Would madam care for a glass of water? A brandy in the lounge?' Hopping about like an imbecile.

'Honestly, I'm fine,' she cut in, putting her shoe back on.

She wasn't, of course, she was mortified, but the sooner she got downstairs, the sooner she could skulk away from the circus that had befallen the lobby. Heads bobbing, fingers pointing, eyes bulging in recognition, the more subtle of the two dozen or so Scottish coach party members who were checking in exchanging faint, 'Is it or isn't its?' whilst The Doberman, amidst throwing Rebecca icy glances, endeavoured to feign indifference.

'Shall we?' said Jack Byrnes, stepping aside to let her pass.

Alex Heath did likewise. Rebecca couldn't look at him, she felt too intimidated. Not nasty intimidated, but heart thumping, throat constricting, awe-struck intimidated. He seemed broader, taller, older in the flesh, certainly older than twenty-nine – a factoid she'd clearly casually previously logged.

As the three of them reached the lobby, Jack headed straight for the reception desk, arms flapping open in welcome; a desperate ploy to divert the spotlight away from the man who, in Rebecca's mind, due to her sheer nosiness and stupidity, had lost all hope of departing the hotel fuss-free.

Oh, heavens, now the youngest Scot, a boy of about sixteen, dressed in jeans and a shapeless green T-shirt was requesting a photo, shouting: 'Mum … Mum. Take a picture of us!' His mother's 'dear God, please don't show me up in this fancy establishment' expression was lost on his youthful exuberance.

What was Alex Heath doing here? Rebecca wondered, standing to one side. Not here, as in plush surroundings, he must be used to those, but here, as in Hawksley Manor plush surroundings? Now. *Today*. Was he staying here? Just passing through?

She stole a quick peek at him: silver grey tracksuit, dark blond hair, wet from showering, possibly, or swimming, hint of stubble on his chin. And that tan? Product of Dubai, perchance? That's where some footballers seemed to congregate these days, wasn't it? Florida, perhaps? Barbados?

Her stomach went into free fall as he caught her staring at him. She couldn't go anywhere, he still held her mobile phone.

The dull ache in her right shoulder persisted. She willed Abi to emerge from the bar, wave a magic wand and cast her off to some far-flung island with a palm tree big enough for her to wallow in shame beneath.

Two men standing near the entrance, one sporting an atrocious comb-over, glared at her. How to make an impression, huh? Good job Greg wasn't here. Oh, the old Greg, maybe? The new one would disown her.

She glanced back at Alex Heath, his intense yet impassive gaze leaving her stranded somewhere between fear and reassurance. Poor thing must have posed for at least five identical group shots already.

With a final flurry of handshakes, he extricated himself.

'One mobile,' he said, handing it to her. 'Forgot I still had it. Sorry.'

'No, no. It's me who should apologise.' Rebecca felt the warmth from his hand still on it as she curled her fingers around it to insulate the connection between them. Never again would she mock grown men for vaulting four rows of seats at the end of a match to catch his sweaty shirt.

'No problem,' he said, offering her said hand to shake. 'I'd better go. My mate's waiting for me in the car park. I'm Alex, by the way.'

‘Rebecca,’ she said, trying to keep her voice steady, thinking how nice it was of him to formally introduce himself. ‘Pleasure to meet you.’

‘Likewise.’

‘I’m sorry if I embarrassed you at all.’

‘You didn’t,’ he said, slowly stepping backwards. ‘Look after that shoulder, yeah?’

‘I will,’ she said, watching him walk away.

Chapter Five

Alex took the scenic route to the car park to try and fathom the effect she'd had on him. Those eyes, so rich in colour, like a tiger's eyes, sparkling back at him.

As much as he hated how big-headed it sounded, even to himself, he was used to people staring at him. Fact. He also knew that what had happened back there was in no way premeditated on her part; the deep blush and dip of her head when he'd first spoken to her had told him that. How small she'd tried to make herself appear during the ensuing chaos in reception, standing there nervously pulling on the bottom of her ponytail, looking so desperately sorry.

He'd felt like an ogre deliberately holding on to her mobile, but if he'd given it straight back to her she might have fled before he'd had a chance to find out her name.

Rebecca.

He'd certainly never seen her at the hotel before.

What was it his granddad had told him during their precious heart-to-heart the day before he'd died?

'You'll know when she's special. Your heart will sing out to you like mine did when I met your grandmother. Time will stand still and nothing else in the world will matter more to you at that moment than being with her. Believe me, Alex, you'll know when you've met "the one".'

Trouble is, Granddad … What do I do if she's already married?

Abi had been so busy gassing to Danny that the first she knew of all the drama was when Rebecca skulked back into the bar, looking in dire need of a double Scotch.

Danny had just finished telling Abi that Alex Heath – a name she'd heard but couldn't think where from – was staying at the

manor until Monday. When Danny had said he played for Statton Rangers, Abi still hadn't clicked, but when he'd mentioned him also playing for England, she'd twigged that he was the guy Nick always praised on the telly.

Even Abi took some interest in the national side.

Upon breaking the bad news to Rebecca, however, now sitting slumped before her in a quiet area of the bar, traumatised with shame, that Mr Heath hadn't just been visiting for the day, she was glad that Danny was on hand to offer some moral support.

'Hey, I'm trying out a new cocktail tonight,' he said, straightening his bow tie. 'You won't believe what it's called.'

Rebecca looked at him, forlornly. 'What?'

'Sweet Rebecca,' he said, winking at her. Abi could have hugged him.

Rebecca smiled at him. 'That's lovely, Danny. Thank you. Although I think that should be Clumsy Rebecca.'

'Hey, none of that, lady. It was an accident,' said Abi, cuddling her. 'Anyway, Danny says Alex Heath's really nice so I'm sure he won't sue you for drawing attention to him. You're the one who hurt yourself, remember.'

'Yeah, he's a top bloke, is Alex,' said Danny. 'Comes here with his mate Kenny sometimes. More so in close season.'

'Close season?' Abi's brow furrowed.

'*Football* season,' chimed Danny and Rebecca together.

'Alex's elder brother comes here now and again too,' Danny added. 'They play golf together. Pretty good, all three of them. Kenny gets a bit lairy sometimes – you didn't hear that from me though. Alex is really quiet, not like some footballers I could mention.'

'Yes, well, let's face it, he could have thrown a right old hissy fit,' replied Abi.

'That's true.' Rebecca shuddered. 'Even I was surprised he stayed there for the duration.'

Danny beamed at them, shaking his head. 'I'll tell you what, Rebecca, the girls on reception will be green with envy. Most of

them would give their right arm to get that close to Alex Heath. No pun intended, of course.'

'Yes, I did notice The Doberman looked rather smitten. After she'd finished giving me dirty looks, I might add.'

'*Doberman?*'

'Oh, sorry. That's what Abi and I nicknamed your head receptionist.'

Abi stifled her laugh.

'Oh, you mean Ms Sharp,' said Danny, sniggering. 'Well, to be truthful, the old bag's been called worse. Don't worry about it. *Doberman!* That's genius.' He gave Rebecca a high five before going off to collect some glasses.

'Fancy a bar snack before a couple of hours soaking up the sun round the pool?' said Abi, thinking she and Rebecca ought to eat something to keep them going until dinner. 'A man sitting at the bar earlier on was eating crispy chicken strips with a mayo sauce. Smelt delicious.'

'Sounds good to me,' said Rebecca, the glow returning to her face. 'Do you know, I dread to think what Greg would say to me if he was here. It doesn't bear thinking about.'

The only thing Greg Stafford was thinking about after dinner in his hotel that Friday evening was the state of his teeth. He'd almost called for a chainsaw, his steak was that tough.

Citing a headache, he'd left his colleagues, most of whom had endured equally ropey meals, to brave the bar without him, reminding himself as he opened the door to his room that although they were slumming it in the outer reaches of town – what with the five star centre of Brighton hotel they'd originally booked having been flooded – at least there was a decent golf course nearby. They'd been lucky to rebook anything at all at such short notice. He'd certainly miss the sea view though. And his stroll along the beach.

He kicked off his shoes, glancing round at the tired décor, at furniture not even the local hostel would entertain. Without air

conditioning, the room felt unhygienically stale.

It was only nine thirty, but having spent most of the day sorting out other people's cock-ups, Greg craved a bit of hush.

Still chewing gristle, he tore off his clothes and dived into the shower. Thankfully the conference suite was adequately aired. Looking at Saturday's weather forecast it was set to get even hotter. Although even under the most challenging of work circumstances, Greg knew he'd cope.

What he wasn't so sure about, as he towelled himself down and ducked back into his fetid room, was how he'd react when he saw Nina. By comparison, presenting a speech to the top brass and forty sales reps would be a cinch.

He slipped on his tracksuit bottoms, lounged across the bed, and flipped open his briefcase, taking out the little card Rebecca had bought him.

'*Dear Greg,*' it said, in her neat, blue handwriting. '*Good luck (as if you need it) for the conference tomorrow. I'll be thinking of you at 10.30, wowing everyone with your presentation. Can't wait to hear all about it. See you on Monday night. Love Bex. xx*'

A twinge of guilt niggled as he placed it on the bedside table. He'd been truth-dodging for months. Work had been manic. As well as organising this conference, he'd had to spend more time on the road than usual, training up new reps and attending exhibitions. Bit of a blessing Abi had taken Bex away for the weekend. Come Sunday, who knew what frame of mind he'd be in.

He should call Rebecca back, really, especially having fobbed her off on the phone earlier. On the other hand, she was probably having dinner …

Back in work mode, he accessed the spreadsheet that listed who, apart from their own Rutland Finance staff, would be attending tomorrow's conference, his eyes drawn to the third name down.

Nina O'Donnell – Torrison Products and Solutions.

Rumour had it she'd been headhunted, which even Greg had

to admit was quite a feat. Torrison had a first-rate reputation. If he could impress Nina and Torrison's other two reps sufficiently enough to secure Rutland these leasing contracts, the benefits would be colossal.

He thought back to when he'd last seen Nina five years ago at a seminar in Bristol. She'd taken great pleasure in boasting about her fiancé to him – some ageing tycoon she'd met in Sardinia some years earlier.

Probably whilst she was with me, Greg had thought, remembering what she'd written to him in her goodbye note.

He'd first encountered Nina at the age of twenty at a mutual friend's birthday party. Tall and slim, with hair the colour of rich coffee beans tumbling to her waist, the elegant nineteen-year-old standing before him had seemed so sophisticated that when she'd agreed to go out for a drink with him he'd almost punched the air and done a side-kick.

Within four years they were engaged and living together. Whilst Greg gradually charmed the bosses with his sales technique, Nina bagged herself a prime job in marketing. They were earning more money than most people their age could dream of, until Nina's obsession with status had intervened.

Influenced by the city crowd, it peeved her that they couldn't stretch to a townhouse like two of their friends owned and she started questioning Greg's ambition.

Blinded by love, he assumed that once they were married and had kids, she'd settle down a bit, but the wedding plans seemed to be wedged in reverse. What was the rush? Nina would whine. They were only in their twenties.

When it hit Greg that, actually, Nina didn't even like children, let alone want them, it was too late. Rather than lose her, though, he'd convinced himself that being a father wasn't that important. As long as he had his Nina, he could live with it, couldn't he?

Which he did.

Until one day, almost ten years after they'd first met, she'd

dumped him, informing him via a Dear John style letter that she'd moved out and that he could keep the flat because she wouldn't need any money. Greg had drunkenly stumbled through Christmas and New Year, then spent most of the following year shackled to his desk at Rutland Finance. Women had come and gone, invariably one night stands, until he'd met Rebecca at Butlins. He'd only gone there to duck out of attending his cousin's wedding.

Next to Nina, she'd seemed almost saintly. Instead of fielding temper tantrums, Greg had been smothered in love. Uplifted by Rebecca's support and compassion, especially before their relationship had fully blossomed, he'd seen her as the model wife. She was someone who'd back his enterprise and, unlike Nina, someone young enough for him to influence. He'd be the boss for sure this time, he'd thought.

No sweat.

Greg closed down the spreadsheet. Tomorrow would be the first time he'd have to socialise with Nina since they'd parted. Although obtaining the contracts for Rutland was his first priority, he was also fired up at the thought of diplomatically rubbing her nose in his accomplishments, so much so that he couldn't concentrate properly. The way she'd flaunted her business card at him at that Bristol seminar grated on him even now, yet there it sat, languishing, in the glove compartment of his Lexus.

Still, however many reasons and reminders he fed himself to fully milk his moment of glory, Greg couldn't deny that his overriding feeling regarding seeing Nina the following day was excitement.

'Sod it,' he said aloud, opening the pathetically stocked mini bar. 'I need a whisky.'

Lager, not whisky, was what Nick Jordan had been drinking over three thousand miles away in Fuengirola. Copious amounts of it, too, hence him lying half-naked on his bed in a white-walled apartment, grumbling and groaning.

He eased himself into a sitting position and was about to let rip, when his best mate Deano popped his head round the door.

'Oh, you're up then?'

'Why? What time is it?' Nick rasped, grabbing his packet of Marlboros off the bedside table.

'Half ten,' said Deano, coming further into the room.

'What? At *night*?' Nick's brain engaged before his legs did. 'Why didn't you wake me, man? I need to call Abi.'

'Relax. You sent her a text, remember? Now shift your arse, or the others will piss off without us. We were supposed to meet them at nine.' The 'others' being a twelve-strong stag party, inclusive of two ex-cons and a hyper groom-to-be.

Nick rolled sideways off the bed, wincing, his back red raw with sunburn where he'd fallen asleep by the pool earlier without oiling up. He stubbed out his cigarette in the overflowing ashtray – stark evidence, along with the strewn clothes and empty San Miguel bottles, that he was sharing the apartment with three other blokes – before skidding across the beer-soaked tiles into the shower.

Dressed and good to go ten minutes later in jeans and his red England polo shirt, he dabbed on some of his Calvin Klein aftershave and checked himself in the mirror. Not bad, considering how rough he felt.

'Vain bastard,' said Deano, slapping the top of Nick's near-shaven head.

'Says he with the bleached hair and poncey pink shirt on. At least I look like a bloke,' said Nick, flexing his tattooed arms in defiance.

'Nothing wrong with this shirt.' Deano smoothed down the front of it. 'Your Mrs raved over it when I wore it to that do in Greenwich last month. How you ever managed to pull a stunner like Abigail, I'll never know.'

Nick flashed him a toothy smile. 'Well, as they say, Deano, my old mate, you've either got it, or you ain't. Anyway, she's not my Mrs *yet*.'

‘Aye, aye. Do I detect the smell of marriage?’

Nick smiled coyly. He was useless at keeping secrets. He also knew what it felt like to finally be in love. Okay, he and Abi argued a bit, but who didn’t? Anyway, it added spice to things and the ‘make up sex’ was amazing.

During the flight to Spain, Nick had glanced round at his fellow stags, most of them married, realising that he was nearly thirty and still acting the court jester. Good old Nick. Always up for a laugh. Well, he wanted more than that. He wanted a wife and kids, like his brother. Jeez, he was half-Italian, it was expected, or so his mother kept telling him. And Abi was certainly ‘long term’.

Thoughts of his late father entered Nick’s brain. He’d have loved Abi’s zest for life, her raucous laugh, her mint-green convertible Beetle.

‘So have you bought the ring yet?’ Deano yelled, hauling him back to reality. ‘We could have a double stag do.’

‘Yeah, right! Don’t go mouthing off about me and Abi. Come on, let’s get a burger, I’m starving.’

They headed out onto the paseo maritimo, home to the main strip of bars and clubs in Fuengirola. If their first night was anything to go by, it would be another heavy one. They’d crawled in at five a.m., after ending up in some dodgy back street pole-dancing club. Abi would flip if she found out. Still, no doubt she was ripping it up in York. As was Rebecca, hopefully. Poor cow could do with a good laugh, being married to that stuck-up tosser.

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