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Opening Extract from...

Weekends of You and Me

Written by Fiona Walker

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SPHERE

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FRIDAY EVENING

The Arrival

Harry's choice of music for a weekend of arguments was a deliberately growling, sexual and melancholy anthem. *Caustic Love* had played through twice in the car, and Jo knew that it would be this year's background music in the cottage too. When Harry discovered an album he liked, he listened to it incessantly. She'd sneak in the odd old favourite, but whenever the iDock went unguarded, he'd change it back.

First came the Friday-night rituals: the Best Indian Takeaway in Shropshire had to be visited to order more than two people could hope to eat; they patronized the Six Tuns while they waited for their food, and ordered a plastic flagon of local ale to imbibe later. The narrow lanes of Castle Craven had to be walked and shopfronts studied, closures noted, the high street's higgledy-piggledy, half-timbered history admired. And then – cardboard box wedged between coats and bottles in the boot, its corners softening from rising steam and leaking sauce – they drove the ten miles on to the cottage, winding through tight hedge-hugged lanes then climbing high above the valley into which they dropped briefly to roll along its side, like a roulette ball. They rattled over the potholes and the cattle grid on to the track, climbing higher again, scattering sheep, cursing the deep ruts left by the farmer, back wheel spinning as they lamented the sale of Harry's beloved Range Rover. At last the tyres gripped hard-core for the

final hundred yards beside the roaring brook and they drove into the woods to find Morrow waiting. As soon as he saw it, Harry's face burst into the smile that he seemed to have held back all year.

Even after a decade, Jo struggled to remember her way through the narrow lanes of the south Shropshire hills to the hidden valley that the cottage overlooked. She could never have found Morrow as instinctively as Harry did. Summer, winter, daylight, darkness, snow, rain or sun, he forged the straightest line to the place he had loved since childhood.

The arrival rituals were also deeply ingrained. The only things they carried inside were the takeaway, the ale, and wine for Jo: her taste for hops had faded after she'd hit forty. The stove had to be lit, even in a heatwave, although the back boiler no longer bubbled into life with eerie ghost farts from the tank housed in a bedroom cupboard: the ancient solid-fuel system had given way to eco-friendly biomass. But the wood-burner was still a vital part of their arrival: its crackling glow brought the cottage to life, with fat candles that smelt of hot dust and flickered as Harry gathered plates and glasses, grumbled about how the place had been left by other visitors, put on music loudly and flipped forward to his favourite track. He was so excited to be there that he had almost forgotten Jo was with him.

She felt a familiar tightening of her sinews, the irritation of the neglected wife. Morrow was always Harry's gig, even though he complained that it was hardly recognizable these days. It didn't matter how many hints Jo dropped about needing a cosmopolitan weekend of culture to remind them that there was intelligent life beyond hamster-wheeling, hard-working parenthood: Harry wanted to go to just one place.

The takeaway was spread on the pockmarked table – it

had been sanded and waxed by a restorer in recent years but was still as deeply grained and liver-spotted as an old man's hand. The ale was poured, the wine uncorked and the stove flues closed to calm the kindling as it ignited seasoned logs. Paolo was singing his heart out through 'Iron Sky', Harry's phone like a little tombstone in its iDock. There had been a time when the phones had stayed in the car, Jo remembered. There had been no point in bringing them in, so far from any signal. But we had talked to each other then, she thought bleakly.

She watched Harry devour the food, still complaining about the paying holiday guests and the housekeeper who came from beyond Craven Castle to clean and strip bedding on changeover days: 'Why fold the tip of the bloody loo roll?'

'People like that sort of thing. It's boutiquey.'

'It's all about authenticity, these days. Give them a stack of ripped farm-auction catalogues hanging on a piece of string.' His eyes narrowed as he spotted a bare nail poking from the wall above the door. 'She's put away the stag's head again.'

'It is a bit scary.'

'Brian's been here since the seventies. He sees off evil.'

'The cottage has been here since fifteen hundred. It can see off evil on its own.' Even your bad temper, she added silently. Morrow always soothed it away, eventually, although it took longer each time they came. And I'm not sure I want to wait any longer, Jo's silent voice added.

He was studying the visitors' book, tutting and snorting at any critical comments. '"The ice tray is cracked" . . . "Could do with fluffier towels" . . . They should have tried coming here when you had to start the generator to turn on a light. "The cafetière leaks coffee grounds, and please mend the broken shaver sockets. It was most inconvenient

that we couldn't charge our toothbrushes." Well, screw you, Barry and Debs Newton from Reading.' He reached across and crammed a blade of poppadum into his mouth. 'I hope the coffee grits are still giving you hell between your unbrushed teeth.'

My heart leaks love, Jo thought wretchedly. She imagined writing in the book: 'Please mend my broken marriage and charge it up.' Morrow had always obliged before, but now she couldn't see how it might possibly help them. Once, Harry's extraordinary warmth and generosity, which had melted her heart from deep-frozen cynicism, had counteracted his anger. Now it eclipsed any affection and the frost had returned. She was suffocating with unhappiness, trapped beneath the slow-moving glacier of co-dependent domesticity. Visiting Morrow had once been a magical escape, but now it was as much of a routine etched with mutual rancour as loading the dishwasher.

'Man alive, people are unoriginal,' Harry ranted on, dropping lime pickle on the page he was reading. 'If I had a quid for every time someone writes, "The food at the Hare and Moon is very good", as though they were the first to discover it, I'd be able to send every local hare round the moon on their own purpose-built rocket.'

'They're being kind.' Guess how much I love you? Jo looked at his face, the deep frown softened by candlelight, remembering the book they'd read to the children as babies. The answer used to be, 'To the moon and back.' Now it rarely made it up the stairs to bed.

'They're stupid. People are stoopid.' He reached for the ale flagon to top up his mug. Harry always insisted on drinking his beer from the same mug, a running joke that dated back to the year the cupboard with the glasses in it had fallen off the wall, its weight too much for the damp old lime plaster.

Jo watched the beer foam into the mug. It always surprised her how many of her life choices had depended on tiny triggers. The decision to make a life with Harry, to move away from London, to have a second child, had all revolved around practical catalysts, straws balanced on a camel's back.

Now he picked up the little plastic tubs containing the pickles – the Best Indian Takeaway in Shropshire made their own, sweetly spiced Utopia for the taste buds – and scooped out the rest on to his plate, then looked around for something to load them on to. Jo had counted six poppadums when she was putting them out. Harry had eaten four. She had had one. If he takes the last without offering it to me, our marriage is over, she decided.

He looked across at her, beer foam and crumbs in the summer-holiday beard she'd thought so sexy the first year he'd grown it. Unsmiling, he reached for the plate.

PART ONE

2006

Music: Howlin' Wolf, John Lee Hooker, Kaiser Chiefs, Arctic Monkeys

Car: 1990 Golf GTi, very battered

Season: Spring; sunny

FROM THE VISITORS' BOOK, MARCH 2006

What a rare find! When something is this beautiful and unspoilt, taking it for granted for a minute is unforgivable, and years of neglect are a capital offence. I plan to revisit regularly. And also come back to the cottage.

Harry Inchbold, London

FRIDAY AFTERNOON

The Journey

The car was screaming along to 'Smokestack Lightning'. Jo was convinced a part of the exhaust had fallen off somewhere near Oxford.

'It's my sister Titch's banger,' Harry explained, as they trailed a snake of fumes on the M40. 'She never uses it.'

'Can't say I blame her.' The Volkswagen was roaring like an amorous elephant seal. I'm escaping from London for the weekend with a man I barely know, she reflected happily, as she studied Harry's profile, enthralled by its unfamiliarity. All she knew for certain about him was that he was sensational in bed, and that he made her laugh nonstop. As Muddy Waters took over the airwaves, proclaiming that he had his mojo workin', she shared his sentiments entirely.

They'd met at one of Fi and Dom's dinner parties in the Islington love nest, a regular diary date since the couple's wedding, with guests reunited by the dozen to admire the new twelve-place Denby tableware. Newly-wed Fi possessed a Cupid urge to set up unattached friends with Dom's banking buddies, however little they had in common. Recently reclassified as single, Jo was towed across the seagrass carpet upon arrival to meet a tall, handsome-but-dull thirty-something futures trader called Matt, who regarded her with polite indifference despite – or possibly as a result of – their hostess's gushing introductions: 'You're in for

such a treat, Matt, because Jo's a *hugely* talented artist who runs her own company and still finds time to globetrot to the world's most glamorous beaches.' Translation: arty-farty overachiever with skin like leather. 'Matt is a *brilliant* "scalper" with a mind like a razor, who climbs mountains on his days off.' A.k.a. an adrenalin junkie with something to prove. Poor Fi. It was like introducing two noble gases and hoping for chemistry. As far as Jo could tell, Fi's sole criterion for their compatibility had been height; it would have been more honest had she said: 'Matt and Jo, I think you'd suit each other perfectly because you're both ridiculously tall. Go and start a super race!'

Jo was still far too raw to be in search of love. She saw little of Fi these days, so it wasn't Fi's fault that she had added Jo to her singles database while her split from Tom was still in progress, the scar tissue painfully shared. Fi wasn't to know how delicate a process it was to dismantle a long-term relationship in which one half had gradually become sole breadwinner, social secretary and housekeeper. Three months after they had officially called it a day, Tom was still occupying the spare bedroom of the flat they had shared for five years, working his way through his stash of birthday and Christmas malt whisky as he watched National Geographic and played poker online, stubbornly in denial, dependent and depressed as his world crumbled beneath him. To avoid being at home, Jo accepted every invitation that came her way.

Now that she was back at the start in the dating game, she'd lost all faith in it. It was a snakes-and-ladders fairy-tale for the young based on castles in the air, priapic beanstalks bolting from cold frame to hothouse, familiarity and infatuation growing too fast on the same vine. She knew from bitter experience that the rot set in eventually under the weight of expectations. But, right now,

Jo wanted to do something she had never done before, something born of uncharacteristically cool cynicism, and it didn't involve being set up with husband material at dinner parties. In her twenty-year active sex life, Jo had never had a one-night stand. She'd never wanted one until now, but a bloody-minded horniness had gripped her during those sleepless post-Tom nights. Her body was firm from working through her anger at the gym, slim from weight loss caused by break-up stress, and she was eager to take pleasure again. She wasn't looking for a date or even much of a conversation. Instead she was determined to have one final fling before resigning from the game indefinitely.

And that night in Islington, she'd heard a man's laugh across the room, a sweet, feral sound that made her pulse points tighten.

Craning to see who it was, she'd casually asked Indifferent Matt whom he knew there. He'd reeled off a list of Dom's usual City-boy suspects, adding, 'And my disreputable brother is the prodigal guest leading our host astray. Bad form to muck up Fi's numbers, but Harry's staying with me right now, and I don't trust him on his own.' He made it sound like he'd got an unruly Labrador in tow.

The unruly Labrador turned out to be lounging on a sill with Dom. They were smoking out of the open sash window as that fabulous laugh rang out. With his mop of blond hair, black linen shirt and houndstooth bags, he stood out in a room full of sharp suits, a devilish Disney prince with an over-eighteen certificate. Glancing over his shoulder, his hair buffeted by the sharp February wind, he'd spotted Jo and shared with her a smile of such unbridled sensuality that she sensed her long stint of piety might be under threat. It was about time: her vintage copy of *Fear of Flying* had been by her bed for a while now, Janis Joplin's

'One Night Stand' on her iPod, and her mind was made up. Jo Coulson needed to flirt again.

'You're brothers?' she'd asked her companion, incredulous that one was as louche and languid as the other was frosty and formal.

'I'm afraid so.' Matt looked pained, as their hostess darted between them to top up glasses and check the chemistry.

'Dom says you Inchbold twins were once known as the Saint and the Sinner,' Fi conversation-hijacked brightly. 'And I know what an angel you are, Matt, so I don't need to ask who the Saint was.' She'd cast an encouraging look at Jo.

But Jo's gaze had strayed back to the man by the window. She was more interested in sin. As their eyes crossed once more, her lock was sprung. The mutual attraction was intoxicating.

A social gathering with Fi and Dom usually cast Jo as inadvertent comedy-fashion turn, never more so than at their big church wedding the previous year, where her striped red fifties' dress had resembled a lifebuoy amid the grey, teal and cream sea of morning suits and dresses. Within her own circle of friends, Jo was the vintage-loving conformist, but in Fi's world she was the opposite: a scruffy bohemian imposter, her hair always longer and wilder, her lipstick redder, and inevitably a head taller than almost everyone. For the newly-weds' dinner party she'd toned down her style, with a dark grey wraparound dress, hair blow-dried straight, her cuffed highwayman boots low-heeled, but one look around the room had told her she still stood out as alien. The other women were all in high-necked, figure-hugging pale tailoring, matched with high-maintenance glossy bobs. Jo's dress kept flashing her raspberry-coloured bra and was one badly tied bow away from a full frontal. Yet when the blond stranger had looked

at her again and continued looking, she was grateful she stood out. And when he started to make his way over to her, she'd found heartbeats starting up in parts of her body she'd forgotten about . . .

Now Jo turned to look at him in the driver's seat, a latter-day James Hunt cutting through the motorway traffic, his profile ridiculously well proportioned, the long dimples that ran from his laughter lines to his jaw constantly animated with flirtation and amusement. Late thirties, self-assured and in possession of eyes so dark blue they were almost black, Harry Inchbold was, quite simply, sex on legs, and he knew it.

The fact that he'd clearly been half-cut on the night they'd met had done nothing to diminish his charisma. Acutely aware of his presence as he'd moved towards her through the room, Jo had tuned into his voice – the same husky timbre as the laugh and slightly transatlantic – responding to a barrage of 'How the devil are you?' and 'How's America?' from other guests, all of whom appeared to know him.

The closer he'd got, the more Jo had found their eyes catching. She'd forgotten how good it felt, that unspoken overture. His gaze was so seductively predatory, it was as though he was regarding her across a few inches of creased pillow, not a crowded room. Although equally tall and athletic, he was clearly a world apart from his neatly barbered brother Matt, who hadn't looked her in the eye once, talked in a nasal monotone and finally introduced her to Harry as 'Jane'.

'It's Jo, actually.'

As he landed a kiss by her ear – most men had to stand on tiptoe, but Harry Inchbold bent his head – he smelt intoxicatingly of Terre d'Hermès and danger. The tiny hairs on the nape of her neck had done a Mexican wave.

'Enchanted to meet you, Joactually. I'm Basicallyharry.' It hadn't been the greatest joke – and he'd slurred his words slightly – but the ripped-silk voice and come-to-bed eyes meant that pretty much anything he said sounded fabulously intimate. 'How d'you know Dom and Fi, Joactually?'

'Fi and I shared a flat once, Basicallyharry.'

'Joactually, that's really interesting.'

'It's not, Basicallyharry.'

With this silly patter, the smile they were sharing across an imaginary creased pillow grew ever more conspiratorial.

'As I'm sure my brother's told you, I'm gate-crashing.' He'd dropped his voice.

'I've said no such thing,' Matt said starchily. 'You know everyone here.'

Now, encouraging his guests towards the table, Dom was standing beside them. 'Harry's just moved back after a decade wowing the States as their *enfant terrible* of branding,' he explained to Jo.

'What brought you home?' she asked.

'I fell out with my boss,' Harry said lightly.

God, but his smile was disarming. She hardly took in Dom's sympathetic aside to Harry: his boss had apparently pulled the purse strings so tight she'd must have been hoping his balls would drop off. From the message she was seeing in Harry Inchbold's eyes, his balls were still firmly attached.

When they'd made their way to the table, one saintly Inchbold twin had moved ahead to hold out her chair while the other placed a sinful hand on her back to steer her towards it, his thumb turning a barely perceptible circle on the bare skin above her neckline. It was a sensation she would never forget, bringing with it a physical bolt of response so sudden and exposed that every other guest seemed to be playing voyeur. Jo understood only too well

how sexual attraction had the power to bring down empires. Her own little empire had already fallen, so it hardly mattered that she already wanted to sleep with Harry Inchbold without knowing who he was or caring where he went. Final flings needed no interview or job description.

Now the Volkswagen engine roared a bass note as John Lee Hooker sang 'Bang Bang Bang Bang', and Jo watched Harry squinting at a passing road sign, the creases around his blue eyes surely engraved more by laughter than frowning. His laugh was so good that she sought it now like a fix. If they were going to share just a few hours of each other's – long, happy and separate – lives, they were going to do so with aching ribs and no regrets. He glanced across at her and the big, easy smile slotted the little tanned jigsaw pieces together at his temples, fragments of a deliciously dissolute past.

The thought of the same blue eyes looking up at her from between her legs just a few hours earlier made the pulse there quicken. This was about sex and empowerment, she reminded herself. I'm in control here. It felt incredibly good.

'Does that say M42 east or west?' Harry squinted at another road sign.

Unbothered that he couldn't read it even at close range, Jo told him it said west. When a man's expert hands could drive one's body over its pleasure edge as repeatedly as Harry's had, Jo trusted him to drive a car to Shropshire.

'That's the one.' He veered across all three lanes.

'You need glasses.'

'I have glasses. I've lost them.'

'What's your prescription?'

'God knows. Half blind. Too much wanking as a teenager. Short-sighted, I think.'

'I have mine here.' She fished for them in her bag. 'I'm minus five in each eye.'

‘Cold-eyed bitch. Hand them over. Fuck, they’re strong.’ The tyres roared as they drifted over the rumble strips.

‘You’re probably better off without them.’

‘I like seeing life through your eyes.’ He laughed his class-A laugh and put a hand on her thigh, drawing his fingers back and abstractedly flipping between pad and knuckles as he drove, a gesture guaranteed to make her pulse rocket as she remembered the things those hands had already done to her. Jo had no idea how much further Shropshire was – she had a vague feeling it was near Birmingham – but she hoped they’d arrive soon. She’d never experienced that sort of animal attraction until now. Tom hadn’t once made her feel like this, not even in the early days when they were at it all the time.

The hand was creeping upwards, thumb sliding beneath her hem to her knickers. The car was swerving wildly. A vehicle behind them beeped.

‘You do something crazy to me.’ He laughed again. ‘You are unbelievably sexy, Joactually.’

‘Keep your eyes on the road, Basicallyharry.’ She grinned, fighting the urge to grab the wheel and steer them into the nearest service station to do something immediate and illegal on the back seat in the car park.

In Islington, the twelve place settings, banked flowers and ornate candlesticks separating Jo and Harry had seemed like an impenetrable jungle through five agonizing courses showcasing Fi’s gourmet skills. Despite the complicated artistic division of twelve perfect portions into a baker’s dozen, Fi was clearly thrilled to have Harry on a wing chair to her right, holding court, while Jo was trapped between Indifferent Matt and a boiling hot radiator.

She had edged the taller tableware aside and her eyes had met Harry’s in an ever-faster silent repartee, an intense private conversation nobody else could penetrate. She hadn’t

been able to help herself: physical attraction at its most shallow could feel surprisingly deep. The radiator to her left had made sweat run beneath her dress while she feigned polite interest in Matt's monologue on his achievements in futures trading and mountain-peak scaling. The couple opposite, whose names she hadn't caught, retreated behind the readjusted flower arrangements as he moved on to his property portfolio.

The only question Matt asked Jo all night was about her flat, his face briefly losing its indifference when she told him that, yes, thanks to her parents having lent her the deposit ten years earlier, she owned a very small slice of Crouch End. (She didn't mention that her ex occupied the spare room and was demanding a quarter of the equity.) At this, Matt had outlined yield comparisons between his buy-to-lets in north and north-west London; he was clearly a mathematical genius, his finances were copper-bottomed, and his manner corroded by arrogance. Basking in the Mediterranean warmth of Harry's blue gaze, Jo wondered why he could be labelled 'Sinner' while Matt was 'Saint': surely it was a sin to be so boring.

She'd caught only fragments of the conversation at the other end of the table: a book everyone had read, a discussion of which Greek island was best – the consensus was Naxos – and a ding-dong about Hollywood and American politics in which Harry refused to participate. All the time, his eyes flirted with hers around the guttering candles.

In frustration, she'd brazenly asked Indifferent Matt to tell her more about his brother, but he was tight-lipped, eyes averted. 'Harry needs to sort his crap out, basically. More Chablis?' Because Matt was a Square Mile fine-diner who only ever poured a centimetre, Jo had held up her glass until he was forced to pick up the bottle again and add more.

Looking back now, as she watched a piece of rattling

dashboard fall off in front of her, she realized that knocking back so much wine and jumping into bed with the prodigal guest had been shamelessly disrespectful to her hosts. At the time, though, it had felt absurdly perfect. It still did.

While puddings had circulated, debate had struck up at Harry's end of the table about how long the property bubble could keep inflating. Dom was holding forth so loudly about hedge-funders pricing out the Home Counties that all eleven guests could hear. 'They say everybody's looking for a new Cotswolds bolthole. Tell me, Inchbolds, do you still have that little wreck of a place near Ludlow?'

'Morrow Cottage.' Matt had become animated with the wider table talk, his mouth full of *tarte Tatin*.

'Aren't there more Michelin-starred restaurants in Ludlow than there are in the Square Mile?' trilled one guest. 'Do you ever let friends stay there?'

'Morrow's the other side of Clun, on the Welsh border,' Harry had said, his husky voice tinged with irritation. 'Not really in the Ludlow catchment.'

'Close enough,' Matt countered. 'And *of course* friends can stay there. The place hardly ever gets used now.'

'Isn't it halfway up a mountain?' The guest giggled.

'Pretty much,' muttered Harry, picking up a fork to prod at a poached pear.

'I love places like that,' Jo said. She'd always harboured a bit of a Grizzly Adams fetish for forest huts, log fires, wildlife and week-old beards. That earned her a hot glance from Harry and an exasperated sigh from Matt.

'It's sliding down it from neglect, these days. I've got a lock-up-and-leave apartment in Ciutat Vella, which is much more practical and has a twenty-per-cent yield.'

'Why not just sell Morrow if you never go there?' someone asked.

‘I do,’ Harry snapped, fork rattling.

‘When?’ Matt had given a derisive snort. ‘You’ve been living in the States for almost a decade.’

‘I was there for New Year.’

They all looked at him in surprise.

‘You flew here without telling anyone and went to Morrow?’ Matt seemed stunned.

‘“‘Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, creeps in this petty pace,”’ Jo had breathed, realizing too late that this was clearly audible because everybody else was silent.

Harry had leaned forward, though, and turned to look at her along the table with a slow smile. ‘Seven points. Sing as Little Orphan Annie for a three-point bonus and I’ll love you for ever.’

‘For ever’s a very long time.’ She’d given him the benefit of her cynical Bacall face. ‘I know the words to “Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow” better.’

‘The Shirelles or Amy Winehouse version?’

‘Bee Gees.’

Harry’s laugh was straight-in-the-vein.

Beside her, Matt explained to the table at large: ‘Morrow Cottage has a Welsh name, which, as kids, we could never pronounce, so Dad renamed it after the stream that runs past. We used to have family competitions to recite things with “tomorrow” in them, from Shakespeare to Bob Dylan, with awards for the most obscure.’

‘“*Cras amet qui numquam amavit, quique amavit cras amet*,”’ Harry quoted, in the times-table voice of one who has learned by rote.

‘Meaning?’ Jo asked.

Still looking at her as though only the two of them were in the room, his seductive smile had widened. ‘“‘Tomorrow he shall love who has never loved, and she who has loved will tomorrow love again.”’

‘That’s beautiful,’ sighed the woman to his right. ‘Is it Catullus?’

‘Cat Stevens, you mean,’ joked a man opposite.

Harry had lifted his glass in a toast to Jo. ‘I prefer “Hard Headed Woman”.’

‘“The First Cut Is The Deepest”.’ She lifted hers back.

Their eyes had gone to bed together at that moment and hadn’t got out since.

That had been yesterday. They hadn’t slept all night. Now they were driving to Morrow.

She turned to the car window, heat in her cheeks. They were miles from London in a clown’s car that was collapsing around them, the blues replaced by Arctic Monkeys – whom she absolutely failed to get – as they finally exited the motorway, bald tyres clinging on to the slip-road camber. And she’d never felt so carefree. Her one-night stand was going on tour.

Late last night, crammed between Indifferent Matt and the scalding radiator, Jo had been desolate to see Harry lifting a hand to wave farewell as he took his leave early. His eyes had stayed fixed on hers for a long time. Peeved, trapped and overheated, she’d looked away. The fact they’d barely spoken yet she felt so betrayed by his departure had shocked her.

The dinner party had ground on through an interminable round of coffee and cognac before Jo had finally felt able to thank her hosts and bid everyone farewell, deflecting Indifferent Matt’s stiff-jawed, watch-checking offer to see her into a cab. ‘Or we could share one if you’re heading in my direction?’

‘I’m fine,’ she’d told him firmly, only discovering how drunk she was when she stood up. ‘I have a travelcard.’

‘You should get an Oyster. I have several.’

‘I don’t think aphrodisiacs will help us here.’

'It's a new travelcard,' he said, in his sinus drone. 'I'm surprised you haven't heard of it.'

'It's a joke. I'm surprised you didn't get it.'

'Ha-ha!' He'd shown remarkably good teeth and asked for her number. She gave him her work one.

Outside, reeling towards Angel tube, Jo had switched on her mobile phone. A text from an unfamiliar number had been sent an hour earlier: *Come to Birdcage on Upper Street. I'll wait there. Harry Inchbold.*

Sliding to a halt by the Underground turnstile, jostled by revellers heading for the last tube, she'd felt as though a dose of adrenalin and caffeine had been injected straight into a main artery . . .

Harry was now negotiating a series of roundabouts on the edge of an industrial West Midlands town, asking her to shout out each road sign as they passed it. When they hit a long stretch of dual carriageway, he sang along loudly to 'I Bet You Look Good On The Dancefloor', hands hammering in time on the steering wheel. He had a remarkably good voice, Jo thought.

'My brother's seriously pissed that I went off with his date last night,' he said.

'I wasn't his date. Fi just sat us together. And I left alone.' She indulged herself by reliving the moment that leaving alone had gained an unexpected bedfellow, a delicious buzz running through her erogenous zones.

'Matt knows my MO. He gave me a hard time when I said I was taking Titch's car this morning. She keeps it in his basement parking space – his is too big to fit in it.'

Now unable to think about anything but sex, Jo found this stupidly funny and battled a cramp of speechless laughter, her raging libido adding to the head rush of silly humour.

But Harry's addictive laugh didn't play along. He pushed

the borrowed glasses up on to his forehead as he negotiated a busy bypass. 'Matt's the clever, successful one,' he insisted. 'He's a good man.'

'I'm not interested in him, and he's not remotely interested in me.' She was disconcerted by the Sinner's fit of conscience.

'He always plays it cool.'

'You play it cooler.'

'If you've had your fingers burned as badly as I have, you keep them in ice all the time.'

Jo was more than happy with sub-zero commitment: she was a frosty cynic. For all the molten passion bubbling over right now, she would not allow herself to get burned again. Harry Inchbold came with a health warning, and she was still dangerously raw.

Sleazily old school by the mid-noughties, Birdcage had been the trendiest late-night drinking hole and pick-up joint in N1 during Jo's single days, its martinis her undoing on more than one occasion. Walking in again had been like stepping into a time warp. Harry was sitting in a booth at the back reading a trashy novel, his unmistakable golden shock of hair and long, lean body marking him out. Jo paused by the door, absorbing a kick of sexual energy and pure freedom.

Then he'd looked up, and the kick went G-force.

'I stole this from our hosts' pin-board.' He held up one of her promotional postcards: it was acting as his bookmark. Her mobile number and email address were printed beneath her business logo. 'And this from their bathroom.' He lifted the book to slot in the postcard. 'Fantastic garbage, full of unlikely sexual encounters. Like this one.'

She'd slid in beside him, a move that somehow threaded their fingers together with a slam of body warmth, their faces turning to start a conversation that died on their lips, eyes unblinking.

'I am very drunk,' she'd warned him, as she studied his mouth, anticipating it meeting hers. 'I don't normally behave like this.'

'Contrary to everything you've no doubt heard, neither do I.' His lips moved in.

Jo had kissed a lot in her life, from the soft good night of her mother through puckering up for great-aunts, the covert learning curve of snogging as a teenager, with lots of tongue action, the niceties of cheek-mwahs on the social scene, the thrill of sharing long, passionate kisses with boyfriends and lovers, most latterly and exclusively Tom, with whom kissing had gradually receded to farewell pecks at the door or routine foreplay in which she tried not to mention that they hadn't cleaned their teeth and she had an early start.

This kiss was different. Without affection or affectation, it was visceral and urgent and the sexiest thing she could remember. Harry Inchbold's mouth, lips, teeth and thoughts had melded with hers as they'd both known they were going to end up in bed together.

They hadn't talked much after that, except the briefest breathless conversation about where they would go. Her flat was out – Tom would be hanging tough in the spare bedroom sending disgruntled texts about the washing-up – and, wherever Harry lived, she had no desire to bump into his brother on the landing at three a.m. Still kissing, in serious danger of undressing one another at the back of the Birdcage bar, they had agreed to find a hotel.

Until that night, Jo had never imagined herself the sort of person to book into a hotel to have sex with a stranger. Signing in and getting from foyer to room seemed totally surreal: the weary, knowing look the receptionist gave them when she asked whether there was any luggage, then issued breakfast and checkout details they didn't take in, the

body-slam as soon as the lifts closed and they were kissing again, spilling out moments later and ricocheting along an endless corridor to swipe the door card and fall inside, already tearing off each other's clothes.

Now Harry exited a roundabout too fast, bringing Jo briefly back to the present with a jolt as her body tipped into the car then back towards the door. They were passing a derelict red-brick mill, the sort that would be turned into million-pound flats in London or a boutique hotel. Theirs had been some sort of industrial conversion beside the canal. When she'd held the sill of the peephole window above their bedhead for balance, Harry deep inside her, she'd stared out at the moon on the water.

Her face against the passenger's window grew hotter as she relived the previous night, her body – which should have been sated for ever – already hollow with desperation for more, the memory so vivid of sixteen hotel-room hours' pure physical pleasure, without shame, that she could close her eyes and feel it afresh.

They hadn't gone down for breakfast or checked out. Neither of them had a clue what the room rate was. They didn't even know their room number.

'This will end when we leave here,' Jo had insisted, at which Harry had tutted, covered her lips with his fingers, disappearing to do things between her legs with his tongue that she'd never imagined possible.

After plundering the mini-bar snacks, they'd slept, slotting together perfectly in crumpled sheets. Jo had woken to find him sitting in the chair across the room, watching her. No amount of full-throttle sheet-shaking could diminish the instant, craving need she felt when she saw him.

'Come to Morrow,' he'd said.

She'd stretched luxuriously, smiling. 'I'd quite like to come again today.'

'To Morrow.' He'd said it very carefully this time.

It took her a moment to remember the cottage halfway up a mountain.

'When?' she'd humoured him.

'Now.'

A car horn made her chin jerk up. Her eyelids were heavy, her head lolling. She stifled a yawn as they finally shed the industrial town and drove out into open countryside, the car exhaust deafening. Harry was wearing her glasses on the end of his nose, which seemed to give him optimum focus as they ate up the rural miles.

'Do you want to sleep?' he asked.

'Sure.' She reached down to adjust the seatback a notch and it immediately clunked into a full recline, throwing her horizontal, so she was looking up through the sunroof instead of the windscreen. She might have been at the dentist's, about to have root-canal work.

'Sorry. I should have warned you about that. Titch meant to get it fixed.'

Jo unhooked the seatbelt from her shoulder to struggle upright. 'How did this ever get through its MOT?'

'I don't think it has one. You sleep. I need you rested for Morrow. I'm not going to let you sleep much there.' His hand drifted to her thigh again, making every nerve ending hum for action. Lying back made it ten times more acute as the hand slid up the curve of her body to squeeze her shoulder.

Jo was certain she wouldn't sleep while she felt that horny. When she closed her eyes, she went straight out, as if she'd been anaesthetized.