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Goodbye, Jimmy Choo

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Published by Orion

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Chapter 2

Izzie could hear Sue Templeton's loud, unrelenting voice long before the door opened. Her big face fell when she saw who it was. 'Oh it's you,' she brayed. 'We were beginning to wonder if you were coming. Oh, is that the cake? Abigail will be thrilled.'

Of course it's the bloody cake, you dopey tart, thought Izzie, but smiled artlessly and mouthed invented excuses for her lateness. Sue shepherded her through the oppressively narrow hall.

'Bring it through,' she ordered. 'Fortunately we haven't started eating yet.'

'Oh, you shouldn't have waited for me. Sorry, I should have called to say I'd be late but . . .'

'We weren't waiting for *you*,' Sue retorted, then thinking perhaps it was a bit too rude to speak that way even to Izzie, corrected herself, twinkling revoltingly. 'I mean we're waiting for our guest of honour – Mrs Huntingford House!'

'Mrs who? I don't think I've met her. What an unusual name!'

'No, Isabel,' Sue explained as if to a tiresome child. 'She's the new woman who's moved into Huntingford House. Come up from London, husband did something seriously important

in the City, setting up a business locally now – to do with computers I think,' she honked. 'Isn't it always?'

Rolling her eyes to indicate that the details of the business were not the important part – only the size of the bank balance – Sue flapped her hands irritably at the hesitant Izzie and ushered her through. 'Her little boy is at Eagles with ours, and I thought she'd like to get to know us all better. So important to make sure you have plenty of friends when you move to a new place!'

Laudable sentiments, but Izzie suppressed a cynical smile. Sue's hospitality had never been extended quite so freely to her. Izzie could tell by the sense of anticipation in the overheated kitchen that Mrs Huntingford House had been identified as something of a social catch. This should be funny!

As they entered the room, Izzie could hear stifled laughter then a hurried, 'Ssshhhh!' She felt herself tense up even further. There were three women already seated at the table: Linda Meades and Clare Lorrimer were so inseparable that she always thought of them as one, a bit like Ant 'n' Dec or Rosencrantz 'n' Guildenstern. Meades 'n' Lorrimer kind of blurred into a sea of silky camel knits, silky camel hair and too-orange fake tan – all in a flawless eggshell finish. Even the lipgloss was co-ordinated.

Shoe-horned in close to the wall opposite was Fiona Price. Looking frumpy and uncomfortable – her one concession to femininity a pair of gold earrings shaped like stirrups – perspiration beaded her bleached moustache in the airless kitchen, and her arms were clamped across her boobs. Fiona reminded Izzie of an overstuffed armchair, but any idea of cosiness was deceptive. Affectionately known in Izzie's house as 'Frau Schadenfreude', her speciality was spreading the word. She was more effective than Reuters, and like CNN, seemed to function 24/7. What bothered Izzie the most, though, was the obvious delight she took in other people's misfortune. When a friend's

husband had been banned for drink-driving, Fiona had virtually pinned Izzie to the wall outside Boots to impart the sordid details.

True to form, the women all pretended to have forgotten her name, greeting her with vague but perfunctory smiles, so she had to go through the indignity of introducing herself again. From then on, they ignored her, talking instead about the sweeping changes 'Mrs HH' had made to the house since she'd arrived. Each had some juicy tit-bit of information to impart, gleaned from the carpenter, the postman, the man at the deli in Ringford, the florist and more, testifying to the lavish lifestyle and effortless chic of their still-absent guest.

Stuck for something to say, Izzie eventually piped up. 'There was a woman in a car just in front of me when I parked. Perhaps that's her and she's forgotten the house number.' Sue went to peer through the lavishly swagged curtains on the front window. 'Yes that is her! I'll go and get her. Isabel, do put that cake down and could you pour a glass of wine . . . ?'

But a ring at the doorbell cut off Sue's string of commands in mid-stream. She fussed with her hair, pulled lint off the inevitable knitwear and, bracing herself, went to answer the door, her accent poshed up still further as she greeted her guest in rapturous tones. From her vantage point by the kitchen window, Izzie watched bemused as the others preened themselves for the arrival of this new marvel.

The woman who walked through the door, the very one she had seen in the BMW, was clearly a cut above her welcoming committee. Yes indeedy – a different breed altogether. Very urban chic but kind of effortless. This woman was a class act, and it wasn't just the hair; everything about her screamed entitlement, languor, money – such an irresistible blend. Izzie blinked rapidly as she strove to itemise her gorgeously understated ensemble. Her accessories were perfect, from Gucci shades pushed up on her head, to the soft glint of Patek

Philippe on her wrist, right down to powder-blue suede driving shoes revealing a hint of slender tanned feet, the beautiful baby on hip and exquisite little girl in tow. Even the slightly petulant expression and hint of a frown line between the carefully shaped brows fitted perfectly.

Izzie prided herself on being able to scent good breeding at a hundred yards – it was a gift that had come in handy through the years – and this was an absolutely prime example. The arrival's bust was slightly larger than hers and she looked a few years younger, but apart from that they were about the same size. Izzie wondered fleetingly whether she could get friendly enough with this vision to find out which charity shop she honoured with her cast-offs.

'Oh sorry, this is Isabel Stock. Isabel, Madeleine Hoare. She's made this lovely cake for Abigail's party this afternoon. Isn't it gorgeous? Every little girl's dream. A perfect fairy princess. And another little Barbie to add to the collection!'

Izzie winced as the newcomer's incredulous glance swept over the pink monstrosity. She had to say something, to dissociate herself both from the ghastly conceit of Barbie in a Victoria sponge and icing crinoline and from the other women there, before she was dismissed along with them. Over here! she felt like shouting. I'm not like them. Honest! I used to live in London too. I'm interesting really.

The Madeleine woman paused, tilted her head and arched an eyebrow, scrutinising the icing.

'Christ! It looks like a stag party for toddlers. Are those jelly tots or silicone implants?'

Izzie was startled, not sure how to react and then from somewhere dug up a witticism. 'Just the job for Abigail's Party,' she mused. Madeleine stifled a laugh and at that moment there seemed to be a connection – almost imperceptible, but it was there. She shot her a quick glance then looked more closely at the cake.