West End Girls

Jenny Colgan

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Extract

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Chapter One

Lizzie squinted at the old LED alarm clock she'd had since she was at school. 03:39. She had to get up in three and a half hours, which was a slightly comforting thought in itself – that was *ages* away, so that wasn't why she'd woken with a start.

There was a stumbling noise. Lizzie's heart stopped. Someone was in the room. Someone was definitely there. It was a burglar. A murdering, raping burglar. There were loads of them round here, everyone knew it. God, if only she kept a gun under her bed. She had never seen, touched or learned how to work a real gun, and disagreed with them in principle, but . . . she wanted a gun, goddamn it!

'Oh, *tittin'* hell,' came a familiar voice.

Penny. Lizzie's longing for a gun lasted for a couple of seconds longer than it ought to have done.

In drunkenness, Lizzie noticed, and at 3.39 in the morning, Penny's Essex accent rang out even stronger than usual.

'What the *effin' eff* was that?'

Lizzie sat upright and turned on the bedside light, from which Penny recoiled, hissing crossly.

'*That* is my shoe,' said Lizzie, trying not to shout and so wake their mother down the hall, although the walls were so thin she could hear her snoring from here.

'What's it doing in my bloody room?' Penny squinted. 'And what are you doing in my bloody bed?'

For a second, Lizzie double-checked just in case it *was* Penny's room. 'This is my room, you idiot.'

Penny looked dumbfounded. 'I know my own bloody room.'

'You'd think.'

Penny looked around her. 'Oh. Bugger it.'

Lizzie sat up. 'It doesn't matter,' she said. 'I'm awake now.'

This room had belonged to both of them when they'd had to share and their mother had had Sarcastic Alex, the lodger. When he'd moved out Penny had taken the smaller room, claiming it didn't matter, she'd be moving out practically any day to get married and live in London and only occasionally come to visit them in a really big car. Well, that was six years ago now, and it was the last unselfish act on her part Lizzie could remember.

'How was it?' said Lizzie, passing Penny her water glass. She could feel the waistband of her pyjamas dig in as she did so. Oh, God. She wasn't going up another size, she absolutely wasn't, 16 was bad enough, 18, no way.

'What time is it?' said Penny, ignoring her question.

'It's an inbetween-y kind of time: between a good night out and a really, really bad one. So?'

Penny took a long gulp of water, then shrugged. 'Hmm.'

'Terrible?'

'Hmm.'

'Did he lavish you with compliments and jewels?'

'Hmm,' said Penny, squinting at the water glass. 'You know, I'm beginning to wonder if this lavishing-with-jewels-type really exists.'

'My God,' said Lizzie. 'You can't stop searching now. That'd be like a nun renouncing Jesus on her deathbed.'

'Shut up,' said Penny.

There was a break in the snoring from down the hall.

'You shut up,' said Lizzie. 'And go to bed.'

Penny sighed theatrically. 'We *did* go to Gordon Ramsay's restaurant. He wasn't there though.'

'That's good. That's very good. I'm very pleased for you. I thought restaurants shut at twelve, but we'll just draw a veil over that.'

'And he spent the entire time complaining about the cost of his divorce. And the chateaubriand, as it happens.'

'I don't know what that is,' said Lizzie.

'Never mind, darling,' said Penny patronisingly.

Don't think about the gun, thought Lizzie. 'What is it then?'

Penny sniffed.

'So? What have you been doing? Taking cocktails at the Ritz? Dancing under umbrellas in the rain? Ice skating in Central Park?'

'Night bus.'

Lizzie winced in sympathy. 'Who'd you get?'

'One bung-eye, three general lunatics and one wanker.'

'Only one wanker on a night bus? That sounds amazing. There's usually hordes of them putting traffic cones on their heads.'

'No, just one literal wanker. One man having a wank. There were thirty-five with traffic cones on their heads.'

Lizzie tutted.

'And I had to change at Seven Sisters.'

'Seven Sisters is far too *dangerous* for girls! What kind of man is he?'

'*Not* one who sends a nice girl home in a cab.'

'What about a slightly sluttish girl?'

'Shut up.'

'Get out of my bedroom then.'

Penny heaved a big sigh. 'Oh, it's *so* boring.'

'Going to the Ritz for cocktails and out to fancy dinner. Well, it does sound boring. Mum and I watched *Property Ladder* and ate potato waffles.'

'I had to hear about his terrible divorce and how that witch kept the house and how he's terrified of gold-diggers getting hold of what's left of his money and did I mind getting my half of the bill.'

Lizzie flinched. This was not something, she knew from previous vicarious evenings, that could be tolerated. Although Penny's minimum-wage waitress job was supposedly supplemented by tips, in reality her attitude, and the fact that a lot of men tried to ask her out, failed and got aggressive, made the tip-giving side of things fairly erratic.

'Oh, my God! What did you do?'

Penny glanced in the mirror above the cheap dresser crammed in the corner of the tiny room. Despite the hour, Lizzie noticed, she still looked wonderful – her make-up had dribbled down under her eyes, but she looked sexy and a bit dangerous, not like Lizzie would: fat and a bit dirty.

'Legged it out the bathroom window.'

'You *didn't*.'

'No, of course I didn't, you idiot.' She paused. 'I told him I'd forgotten my purse.'

'That's all right then.'

'I'd have legged it out the bathroom window *next* though.'

Penny rubbed her pretty face blearily. 'Anyway it went a bit downhill after that.'

Lizzie tried to smile sympathetically – she was going to have to listen anyway – but this wasn't exactly the first time she'd been woken up in the early hours. Penny was a cad-magnet, but, as she pointed out (none too kindly), she was the only one with a hope in hell of getting them out of this shithole.

'Go to bed,' said Lizzie.

'I mean, I didn't know the bloody brandy was a hundred quid a glass, did I?'

'No,' said Lizzie calmly.

'I'm not the one saying, "Hey, how's about a brandy?" whilst eyeing up my fishnets.' She glanced down. There was a huge ladder up the left leg. 'Shit. Shit, shit, shit.'

'Say it's punk.'

'"How's about a brandy? Chilled? You know, my ex-wife was really chilly in bed. Makes a man feel, you know . . . so lonely."'

'Lonely and poor.'

'Poor my arse,' said Penny dramatically. 'My three ninety-nine ripped tights cause me a lot more pain than spending bloody six hundred pounds on bloody brandy does him.'

'*Six hundred pounds*,' said Lizzie. How on earth could people do something like that? Lizzie lived as she ate: hand to mouth.

'Should have read the menu, the dick, instead of yelping "Two glasses of your finest brandy" over and over again. No wonder the waiter was smiling.'

'Did he tip?'

'Did he fuck. They were still screaming at each other when I ran out of the door.'

'Finish the water,' said Lizzie. It might not get Penny to work on time, but it might get her to work.

Penny took a long slug. 'Ah,' she said. 'Like finest brandy on my lips.'

'You're a bad, bad girl,' said Lizzie. 'Go to bed or I'm telling Mum.'

Six hundred pounds kept running through Lizzie's head the next morning as she made her way to the bus stop. Six hundred pounds. That was unbelievable. Who could, did, spend money like that? Even by accident. Penny was still in bed; she didn't start her job, as Brandford's most glamorous and also grumpiest waitress, until later.

Non-identical twins can have a head start on the knowledge, usually learned by children through a procession of tedious and time-consuming upsets, that life isn't always fair.

'Twins? *Really?*'

That was one of Lizzie's earliest memories; people disbelieving their mother as to their provenance. Along with, 'Look at the size of you!' and, Lizzie's personal favourite, 'So, is Lizzie *terribly* clever, then?'

Being dressed alike only made matters worse, so they both started having tantrums about it from as early an age as possible. After all, it wasn't Lizzie's fault that she stayed short and plump while Penny shot up. It might have been her fault that whilst Penny made sure her dolls were immaculately dressed for their tea party, Lizzie scoffed all the scones. And whilst Penny smiled politely and learned to simper at adults from an early age, in case they had a spare pound coin in their pockets, Lizzie preferred to stay in the background before anyone had the chance to say, 'Good eater, are we?'

'They're so different, aren't they?' their mother's friends

would say, smiling meanly in a very unconvincing fashion.

'Out! Out! Out!' Lizzie would say to herself quietly in the kitchen. 'Goodbye visitors, time to go!' And once they'd gone, her mum would come in and give her a special hug and a biscuit, just for her plain little daughter.

And here the twins still were, twenty-seven years old and in the same tiny council house in Parkend Close, Brandford. Lizzie sometimes felt as if there should be a bus to take them off to real life, but if there ever was she knew she'd miss it, staying indoors and reading *TV Quick*.

Maybe the bus *had* come, she thought occasionally, as she spent yet another Friday night sharing a big box of Celebrations with her work friend Grainne and her mother in front of *Easties*, whilst Penny was off, weighed down by lipgloss, in borderline dangerous nightclubs, chatting up prosperous idiots who left their expensive shirts untucked and reeked of Hugo Boss. Maybe their dad had caught it instead.

Penny woke at eleven, screwed up her eyes and groaned. OK. Another day, another minimum wage. That stupid bloody man from last night. She thought for a second and realised she could only just remember his name, and that it would probably be gone in a couple of days. Excellent.

She blinked in the cheap bathroom mirror. The whole place needed grouting, it was incredibly dingy. But their mother worked far too hard, Lizzie inexplicably was refusing to do it by herself, and Penny had paid a lot of money for these nails so she couldn't be expected to under the circumstances. They seemed to have reached something of an impasse.

She threw on her Tesco ultra-skinny jeans and diamanté top, and got to work on her make-up. OK, she was only going

to work, but you didn't know who you were going to meet on the way, and by the time she'd changed into her uniform she'd look so awful anyway she'd be lucky to get a second glance from anyone half decent.

Penny rarely dwelled on her genetic luck, seeing it mostly as a means to an end, and preferring instead to wonder if she should get her boobs done and whether it really was worth applying for one of those loans she saw on television. So far, Lizzie's shocked expression had just about held her off, but if she had bigger knockers she'd definitely pull a better class of bloke, and would be able to pay it back anyway. But even in her work uniform she stood out. Pale hair – when she didn't go overboard with the highlighter, which she usually did – glowed over a small, heart-shaped face with a high forehead and full lips. Her eyes were long, like a cat's, which she made even longer with liberal amounts of eyeliner in daily changing shades, and she had the figure that only comes to someone who had spent too much time watching what really went on at a deep-fat fryer.

Lizzie accused her occasionally of anorexia, but it was pretty much sour grapes. Penny knew she had to be thin – preferably with big knockers – and didn't think about food terribly often, unlike Lizzie, who turned to the biscuit barrel in times of joy, sadness, stress, tiredness, boredom and random television.

Penny hated Brandford. She hated its estates, its graffiti. The underpass, the horrid cheap corner shops with plastic mop buckets, and cheap sweets being guzzled by fat grubby babies. She hated the stoved-in cars, the fact that practically her entire class had got pregnant at sixteen. She didn't feel like she was made for this. Was it so wrong to want more? Really? Just a nice car? Clothes that didn't come from a supermarket? So, school hadn't worked out so well. It was a

shit school. There was nothing wrong with liking nice things, was there? Even – Penny bit her lip as she applied the white layer of her mascara – someone to fall in love with one day, though she'd never have admitted that to Lizzie in a million years. Lizzie was such a drip when it came to romance, and everything else. She'd seen *Dirty Dancing* nine million times, snottering into her extra-large popcorn all the while. Penny and her friends had scoffed. Penny's favourite film was *Pretty Woman*, closely followed by *The Thomas Crown Affair*.

Penny took the bus – God, she hated the bus – out to the junction of the motorway where the big shops were, at the entrance to London and the M11. In the vast fields of hypermarkets and massive, elongated versions of ordinary high street shops, there were mega-restaurants, huge places seating hundreds for birthday parties, hen nights, reunions and kiddies' parties. Penny's was called the All-American New York Diner. There was a bucking bronco at the back, where girls would get on and shimmy their bosoms, and men would pretend they were having a laugh whilst taking it all incredibly seriously; the food was entirely brown and came in huge portions, and the cocktails were gigantic and sticky.

Penny hated it, but it had one major advantage: everyone went there eventually. Whether a works' night out, or a divorcing couple meeting for a child handover, all sorts of people ended up prodding uselessly at the Death By Chocolate with triple-brownie fudge ice cream and chocolate sauce supreme. And she could spot them a mile away; they'd look slightly perturbed about walking in, wouldn't know what to do with the sparklers in their drink, ask if she had fizzy water or salad ('There's our bacon-bit surprise, sir,' she would say insouciantly), and she'd check out their shoes, or their watch, then play the comely wench a bit more. There weren't many well-off single men in Brandford – one or two

footballers in nearby Saffron Walden, but the competition for them tended to be intense and exhausting – but serving four hundred covers a night very often yielded results, as well as occasionally spectacular tips, which made Lizzie green, particularly as she had an indoor job, in an office and everything.

'I'm off,' shouted Penny, heading for the door. Her mother was at home again today. She'd been having horrible problems with her varicose veins – standing up doling out big scoops of cabbage, and nowadays chicken twizzlers, to ungrateful schoolchildren for nearly thirty years had pretty much done for her legs. Making it through to Friday tended to be a bit on the tricky side.

'Penny?' shouted her mother as Penny slunk past the sitting-room door. Fat and florid, she lay with her feet higher than her head, and an enormous flask of tea – made by Lizzie – by her side. 'Where were you last night?'

'Why?' said Penny sulkily. For goodness' sake, she was twenty-seven, not fourteen. 'I went to Paris to visit Kylie Minogue.'

'Well, could you let me know when you're going to be so late? I worry about you, you know.'

'Well, you should stop, I pay housekeeping, don't I?'

'Not very bloody much,' said her mother. 'Wouldn't keep a mouse in cheese.'

Penny rolled her eyes. 'I'm running my own life, OK?'

'Just a bit of consideration, darling. That's all I ask for.'

Penny heaved a sigh. She and her mother had been having this argument for ten years. 'What are you watching?'

'The 1979 RSC *Macbeth*,' said her mum. 'Ian McKellen and Judi Dench. One of the best ever.'

'Right. God, that crap is so boring. Do you want me to bring you back some salad?'

Her mother's face brightened. 'Oh, go on then, sweet-

heart. And what about some potato wedges? And some of the fried chicken?'

'Mum! It's horrible! I've told you where it's from! It's not even all real chicken! And the doctor told you to lose weight.'

'I know,' said her mother, looking slightly ashamed. 'But it tastes so good.'

Penny tutted, and left the house.

Lizzie marched into work in an even worse mood than usual for a wet Thursday morning.

Stamp importing wasn't quite what she'd had in mind when, after a school career of almost total mediocrity spent entirely in the shadow of her misbehaving sibling, she'd landed a proper office job in Brandford – and she hadn't planned to be there for ten years either, but it was undemanding as jobs go – processing stamp orders from overseas. She'd made a friend, Grainne, who controlled reception and the import desk.

Grainne's hobbies were cats and crisps. It was an undemanding friendship. But it was nice, for once, not to be the shy one, especially when she'd been the one with a boyfriend for a change too. Felix had been tall and slim and handsome, and Lizzie couldn't believe her luck when she pulled him at an awful party Penny had dragged her to one night. It had taken her six months to realise he was actually as dumb as a stone box full of rocks. Lizzie had thought he was just amenable. His constant mumbled 'Whatever you like' to films, TV and sex had eventually grown tiring, even for Lizzie, for whom the novelty of a real live boyfriend was something that took a while to wear off. And she missed having something to talk to Grainne about; now they were back to pussies and Pringles.

*

‘Nice evening?’ said Grainne as she walked in.

‘Uh, yeah.’

‘Why haven’t you washed your hair? Were you out with a new man?’ Grainne lived in fear of Lizzie getting a boyfriend and leaving her.

Lizzie slung her bag in the corner of her desk. It had taken her ages to get back to sleep again when Penny had bowled off to bed, and she felt fuzzy and out of focus.

‘No,’ said Lizzie. ‘How’s your cat? Bought her any new outfits?’

‘Miss Friss is fine, thanks,’ said Grainne. ‘And she likes getting herself dressed up, don’t you, sweetie?’ She was addressing this to one of the photos.

‘Are you sure it isn’t a bit cruel to put animals in hats?’

‘Oh, I think they’re adorable,’ said Grainne. ‘And Miss Friss loves her little bonnet. She told me.’

The reception phone rang.

‘That’s her now,’ said Lizzie. ‘All the mice are laughing at her and she wants to know what to do.’ On seeing Grainne’s face she immediately regretted it.

‘Actually, it’s Mr Boakle,’ said Grainne. ‘He wants to see you.’

Lizzie flinched. Why was the boss asking to see her? She had a horror of getting into trouble; she’d spent so much time trailing after Penny into the headteacher’s office. ‘You’ve got to look after your sister.’ She could hear her mother’s voice again. ‘We’re all she’s got.’

Lizzie sidled into the back office, which was dark, chilly and piled up with files of colourful stamp samples from around the world.

Mr Boakle looked at her. ‘Ah. Yes. Ah, Lizzie, isn’t it?’

Given that she’d worked there for ten years, maybe it would have been nice if he occasionally remembered her

name. No matter. She blushed anyway. Lizzie hated her tendency to blush, especially at times like this when really someone else should be embarrassed, surely.

'Take a seat. You may have noticed that it's been pretty quiet around here recently.'

'Uh.' Actually, it always seemed quiet, but now she thought about it, yes, for the past few months Grainne really had been spending a lot of time knitting Miss Friss a Santa Claws outfit.

'People just aren't using too many stamps any more,' said Mr Boakle sadly. 'So they don't collect them, see. There's some new invention – can't quite figure it out myself – called EU mail.'

'EU mail?'

'Yes, you know. Something to do with joining the Common Market, probably.'

'You mean email,' Lizzie ventured. 'The thing that's been around for years.'

'Something like that. Anyway, whatever the bloody thing is called, it's cutting down on people writing letters something terrible. Sounds like a dreadful thing.'

'How it works is, you type in a letter then you send it for free and the other person receives it instantaneously. For free,' said Lizzie.

Mr Boakle paused. '*Really?* That sounds fantastic.'

'It is,' said Lizzie.

'Hmm,' said Mr Boakle. 'Hmm. That's not good at all. Do you get many letters?'

'Do council tax summonses count?'

'Those damned franking machines,' said Mr Boakle, his face going red. 'Worst invention ever.'

'Until email,' said Lizzie meekly.

'Well. Anyway, that doesn't matter because frankly the

world of post has gone to hell in a hand basket and as a result I've got to lose a member of staff.'

Lizzie suddenly had a horrible vision of herself in a dinner ladies' uniform and closed her eyes tightly to get rid of it. She couldn't lose this job. Please no.

'Oh, please,' she said. She'd always thought being quiet and dependable, they wouldn't mind her staying there . . . but now. What would she do? Well, she hadn't thought that far ahead. But she couldn't do what Penny did, shouting at drunks and hollering across hen parties asking who'd ordered the double portion of ribs. But without any qualifications . . .

'Elizabeth,' said Mr Boakle. Briefly, Lizzie felt like she was in *The Apprentice* and wondered if he was going to point a big finger at her like Alan Sugar did, and growl, 'You're FIRED!' like a big grizzly bear, but he didn't.

'I'm going to have to let you go. I'm really, really sorry.'

'But . . . but . . . '

'You're young,' said Mr Boakle. 'There's a big wide world out there. You should go and see some of it.'

'And how would I pay for that?' said Lizzie, feeling a huge lump in her throat.

Back in Brandford, their mother groaned a little and lifted up her legs again. They really were killing her. Oh well. She thought about her girls. She worried about them so much, she really did. Penny was out and about all over the place, never stopping, never eating a proper meal, and she didn't even want to think about the kind of people she was hanging out with. Penny reminded her so much of Stephen it wasn't funny. She was her father's daughter all right.

And Lizzie was quite the opposite, seemed entirely happy to spend the evening with her old mum, eating choccy and

catching up on the soaps. That didn't seem right either. She'd wanted so much . . . well, wanting didn't help anything, did it? It felt like such a long time ago, before she'd had them, when she'd met Stephen and everything had felt exciting and full of promise, and she'd been a young girl about town. He'd been so handsome and different to the boys she'd known at school. She'd grown up in Brandford, and headed to London as soon as she could, finding a job in Chelsea Girl, sharing a tiny, freezing flat in Bermondsey with four other girls. She'd loved it. They'd all shared clothes and spent all their money going up to town and having a laugh. She'd even had dreams of taking up acting. Best time of her life.

And Stephen. He'd swept her off her feet without a second thought. And she'd fallen for it too, completely. Upmarket boy like him, bit of Essex trash like her. Why had she thought it could work? But she'd thought it would be fine, that love would pull them through.

She remembered, after five whirlwind months, the mixture of terror and excitement she'd felt on finding herself in the pudding club. Her mother would have a fit. But he'd do the right thing – Stephen Willis was a proper, well-brought-up boy, not like the drunken wife beaters from round her area. She hadn't known it was bab*ies* then, not till the doctor said he thought he heard two heartbeats.

In a pub in Chelsea, on a really lovely sunny autumn day, round the corner from his mum's cluttered flat, he'd had a port and lemon (she was paying), and she'd had a Bacardi and lime (they weren't so hot on not drinking during pregnancy in those days), and she'd broken the news. He'd just stared into his glass.

'Darling,' he'd said. 'You daft cow. You stupid cow. That's no good, is it?'

And his handsome face – Penny looked just like him – had twisted up into a mean look, and his eyes had turned cold on her, just like that.

She'd managed, of course. Well, she'd had to. Oh, the neighbours had been awful; that Eilish Berry, thinking she was better than them, taking herself off to London, and back less than a year later with a bun in the oven. Two buns, actually. Her mother had been furious to begin with, and softened, inevitably, when the babies came. They'd got their own council house and they'd all been there ever since, even though the estate just got worse and worse. She'd liked working at the school when the girls were little, she could walk there with them and home again at night and be off at holiday times. Until they got to about ten, of course, when Penny disowned her completely through embarrassment, which she didn't seem to have shaken off now, seventeen years later. Eilish sighed.

She hadn't seen Stephen much after that; he'd practically disappeared off the radar altogether. His mother, though, had tried – sent her some money and some ludicrously impractical knitted outfits, itchy and full of buttons. She'd taken the girls over there a few times when they were small, but Stephen's mother's place was a terrible mess, a huge old apartment in Chelsea which she'd filled with junk since his father had died. Mrs Willis was a bit like one of these shut-ins, with piles of newspapers all over the place. It wasn't hygienic, and it took four hours to get there and back and the girls screamed so hard that, after a while, they just stopped and got on with their own lives. She'd watched the girls. It wasn't as if having no dad was particularly unusual in their part of the world. He'd visited for a while, every now and again, turning up with toys. Whenever he left, Lizzie would

sit by the doorway for the next two days in case he came back. Penny would bite everyone in their nursery. She didn't think they'd remember; they were three when he stopped.

Then they'd seemed all right, until they'd hit their teens. Lizzie had gained puppy fat she couldn't grow out of. She never mentioned it, just gradually became more and more introverted till now, in her twenties, she barely went out at all. There'd been hardly any boyfriends – that last chap was a plank of wood – but she seemed happy to sit at home and watch life pass her by.

Penny on the other hand turned wild. She couldn't get out the house fast enough, up to all sorts of trouble. She'd done her best, thought Eilish. She'd tried to get Lizzie to be more sociable, whilst at the same time keep Penny in check. Forcing them together only made Lizzie more painfully shy and Penny more outrageous than ever, but she was glad they were still together.

'Look out for Penny,' she said to Lizzie all the time, till Lizzie worried sick. 'She's not sensible like you. She could do something stupid in a heartbeat.'

And she would have told Penny to look after Lizzie too, if Penny would listen to her, or stop for just a second. But she didn't.

Probably for the best their dad never appeared again. But she still had her lovely girls.

'Oi! You! Wanker!' Penny was shouting at the back of a departing fat man, part of a group of blowhard salesmen who'd come in for lunch to celebrate some bonus, then acted like they were city millionaires, ordering ridiculous cocktails and not drinking them, making her run around, asking if they could order 'off menu', to which Penny had retorted that they'd cook one of their heads if they could fit it in the

deep-fat fryer. They'd guffawed lustily and asked her if this was one of those American theme bars where the women wore bikinis, and she'd said no, it was one of those American theme bars where everyone tipped 20 per cent. Whereupon they'd got up to go, leaving a catastrophe of thrown food, knocked-over glasses and ripped-up paper napkins, and they'd left her . . . a pound.

She held it up in the air.

The fat man turned round. He had grease from his surf and turf platter spattered all down his Crazy Frog tie.

'What?' he said.

She held the pound coin out to him.

'You left this behind.'

His Neanderthal brow furrowed in incomprehension.

'That's for you, darlin',' he said.

'You'd have got more if you'd have given us a quick flash,' said a weaselly-faced man next to him. He looked at his watch. 'There's still time!'

'Why don't you take it,' said Penny, advancing and handing it to the fat man. 'Buy yourself a magnifying glass so you can see your own dick one of these days.'

Eilish was falling asleep. She got so tired these days. The phone rang, starkly, shaking her out of her dream. Her television programme had finished, and some house show was on. Eilish loved house shows. She would pretend she was the one who had to choose between the townhouse, the modern bungalow, the apartment in the stately home. Very rarely were the customers offered two-up two-downs on a council estate.

The phone rang again and, grunting a little as she moved her legs, she leaned over to pick it up, listening in silence, until finally, 'Oh my God,' she said. 'Oh my God.'

*

Lizzie looked at the phone. Mum. How was she going to tell her she'd been let go? Just shucked off, not needed. After all the work . . .

'How's Mr Boakle?' said Grainne.

'Sorry,' said Lizzie, making her mind up. 'I have to take this call.'

She sank to her desk, steeling herself not to cry. But her mother didn't even ask her how she was, just poured it all out in a rush. After asking her to slow down and repeat herself several times, Lizzie just blew her ratty fringe out of her eyes, and pushed back her chair from the desk.

'Oh my God,' she said.

Penny was staring at Ravi, who was staring at the floor.

'You can't talk to customers like that!' Ravi was saying. He was about sixteen years old, and on a management training scheme which somehow made him her boss even though he hadn't started shaving yet. Disciplining people obviously made him unbelievably unhappy.

'OK,' she said. 'I won't do it again. But they were disgusting losers.'

'They were *customers*, Penny,' said Ravi.

'I know, I know,' said Penny. 'Most of our customers are disgusting losers, right, what can you do . . . '

'No,' said Ravi miserably. 'I mean, it says in the handbook . . . '

The handbook was a huge colour-coordinated folder which laid out every single piece of information required to run the All-American New York Diner, including how many umbrellas per pina colada (2), how many napkins per rib rack (7) and how strong a word you could use against a customer before you were in serious trouble (meanie). Penny could get round Ravi, but nobody could get round

the handbook. She sighed. Her phone rang, again.

'Oh, answer it,' said Ravi, trying to put off the inevitable. Why hadn't he gone in for musical theatre like he'd always dreamed of? He could be living in the real New York by now. He stared out of the window, looking at the 1500-space car park and the way the clouds looked like they were touching the top of the grey corrugated-iron Bowl-o-rama.

'Mum?' said Penny. 'What is it?' She listened intently.

And, finally, 'Oh my God!'

She ripped off her employee badge, which said, 'Hi. My name is Penny and I want y'all to have a nice day now, d'you hear?', threw it on the floor and stamped on it.

'Ravi,' she said. 'You are a nice man. And not a very big one. So, it's going to be a bit painful to do what I'm about to suggest next. But I really do insist that you take this' – she lifted up the heavy handbook – 'and turn to the colour-coded section where it explains *exactly* how to get it up your arse.'