

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

The Things We Do for Love

Imogen Parker

Prologue

1992

It had been a horrible year, thought Libby King, a year in which everything she believed in and held dear had been destroyed. In the misty, grey dawn, with the acrid smell of burning still hanging in the air, Libby King picked her way through the piles of wet rubble that had been the Hall. The charred remains of the grand staircase stopped at the first landing, the Tudor-style oak banister now just a blackened stump. The fire had completely destroyed the main body of the hotel, almost like a physical manifestation of the turmoil that had rocked the Palace in recent months.

And it had all happened in the name of love.

Libby blamed the sixties. People had proclaimed that love was the answer to everything. But her generation knew that love was a notoriously unreliable foundation on which to build the future . . .

Chapter One

19 July 1969

Like most new things, the Summer of Love arrived rather late in the small South Coast town of Kingshaven. Nineteen sixty-nine was already a momentous year: Concorde had flown for the first time, men were about to land on the moon, and, almost as mind-blowing, Kingshaven was hosting its first rock festival. The DJs on the radio were calling it England's Woodstock; there was a mass migration of young people to the South Coast. Kingshaven was where it was at.

Iris stared through the windscreen. The seafront with its pier and clocktower looked exactly as it always had: the beach littered with striped windbreaks; a Punch and Judy show; families splashing in the surf and random shouts of children on the air – but, as Winston's VW van ground its

way up the steep High Street towards the site of the Festival, passing straggles of young people with long hair and hippy clothes, Iris became increasingly aware of the thump of bass and the screech of an overstretched sound system. She glanced along the bench seat, wondering how Winston managed to get away with it.

Winston's adoptive father, Sir John Allsop, who owned the fields where the Festival was taking place, had a record of flouting tradition. He had taken in Winston, an abandoned mixed-race baby, who was generally assumed to be the product of a local girl's liaison with one of the black American GIs stationed in Kingshaven during the war. He had also given refuge to a Middle European Jewish professor and his daughter, Claudia. Recently, more scandalously, Sir John had allowed Claudia's lover, Michael Quinn, to live in sin with his mistress and their illegitimate twins at his mansion, known locally as the Castle. But for the residents of Kingshaven, allowing Winston to hold a rock festival in the grounds, bringing hordes of unwashed 'foreigners' to the town, must surely be the final straw.

Iris and Winston had been friends since her first year at grammar school in nearby Lowhampton when she was the only person prepared to sit next to him on the school bus. When Winston had gone off to Oxford University, Iris had penned him weekly angst-ridden screeds detailing the breakdown of her parents' marriage, her father's elopement, and her miserable life in Kingshaven. They'd fallen out of touch when Iris had run away from home, only bumping into each other the previous year in London, on an anti-war march. Now, Winston was letting her doss in the Victorian house he had bought in the run-down area of Clapham until she got her life back together. She was one of the few people who knew how much work had gone into setting up the Festival, and about the only young person in the country who didn't want to go to it, having vowed never to return to Kingshaven when she ran away, five years before, on the back of a Mod's Lambretta. But that morning the phone had rung as Iris was about to leave for work. One minute later and Winston would have been unable to contact her.

At first, she'd assumed he was calling to give her an update.

'You've gotta come down,' said Winston.

The mere thought of the town she'd grown up in seemed to strip away the years, turning Iris back into a bolshy teenager.

'If it were anywhere else—' she began.

'Not for the bloody Festival,' Winston interrupted. 'It's Claudia.'

'Claudia?'

The mention of her father's girlfriend made Iris feel even more brittle.

'Iris, she's very ill . . .'

Iris stared at the diamonds of colour on the floorboards created by the sun streaming through the stained glass in the front door of Winston's house.

'Iris?' Her silence had made him wonder whether she was still listening.

'Yes?'

'Iris, I think she's going to die.' Now Winston was whispering, as if frightened that someone might hear him at his end of the phone.

'Going to die?' Iris repeated, unable to comprehend what he was saying. She knew Claudia had recently had an operation, but she was little more than thirty. Far too young to die.

'The twins are only two years old . . .'

 Winston's normally smooth voice was choked, staccato.

It sounded almost as if he was crying. Iris couldn't imagine Winston crying.

'I'm on my way,' she'd told him.

The VW van bumped up the long avenue of beech trees and braked outside the front of the Castle, throwing up a spray of gravel. Iris got out, stretched and looked up at the decaying grandeur of the frontage. From an upstairs window, her father stared down at her as if she were an apparition, and then the front door burst open and two tiny children came running out.

The little boy was beautiful and buoyant, with dark curly hair and huge brown eyes, the little girl more wary. She had creamy unfreckled skin but her long red ringlets were exactly as Iris's had been when she was a little girl.

'My name Bruno, mean brown in Italian,' the boy announced. 'Fee Metta mean little flame.'

'My name's Iris,' Iris told him, adding, since he looked as if he expected a reason, 'I don't know why, really.'

She followed them into the house. Out of the glare of sunshine it was unnaturally chilly inside, but the children seemed unaware of the oppressive atmosphere of foreboding. With touching trust, they each slipped a hand into hers as they climbed the great curving marble staircase.

'Mummy,' announced the little boy, as he led the way down a dark corridor to the bedroom. 'This I Wish. She don't know why really.'

The room was furnished with ornate black furniture with gold inlay. The walls were covered in dark wallpaper painted with Chinese scenes. On the bed lay a very pale, thin young woman whose beaming smile made Iris understand instantly how her father could have fallen so irrevocably in love.

Although Claudia was frail and unable to move, there was an enchanting energy around her that seemed to radiate life in this strange mausoleum.

When Claudia asked Michael to take the children away so that she and Iris could get to know each other, Iris observed how tightly she clasped Bruno, even though it was clearly excruciatingly painful to do so, and how she demanded a kiss from Fiammetta, the little girl's sombre face lighting up as her mother told her that it was the best kiss in the world. Claudia waved them all the way to the door, only letting go of her smile when the children's voices were safely distant down the passage.

'Could you try to love my children?' she asked Iris abruptly, as if she knew there wasn't enough time for the niceties of polite conversation.

'I already love them.' Iris surprised herself with her instant response.

On the train journey down, she had thought that because she wasn't involved, she might be useful if everyone else went to pieces. But the moment she'd set eyes on the children, joyfully innocent of what was about to happen, and her father, pole-axed by fear, Iris realized that she was involved after all.

'I don't want them always to be surrounded by gloomy old men,' Claudia declared, so categorically that Iris blurted with nervous laughter. 'I want them to have an intelligent woman who cares about them . . . just sometimes . . . ?'

'I'm not sure I'd be any use,' Iris stammered, at once flattered and frightened by the responsibility.

Claudia was struggling to sit up, to plead her case, her beautiful face now a terrible contortion of eagerness and desperation.

'I'll try,' Iris tried to reassure her. 'I promise I'll try,' she said, backing towards the door, calling for her father.

In the small hours of the following morning, Winston, Michael and Iris sat staring at the television screen. Iris wondered if either of the men was finding it difficult to believe, as she was, that the scenes they were witnessing were really taking place on the moon and not in some television studio. The set looked almost amateur, a plain black backdrop, a sandy floor, a stiff, squat doll in a spacesuit climbing down from a rickety stick-and-squeezybottle spaceship.

'That's one small step for man; one giant leap for mankind,' crackled the voice of Neil Armstrong.

Michael Quinn jumped suddenly to his feet as if he'd just woken up.

'I must get back to Claudia,' he said.

The whole house seemed to shake as he ran up the stairs, then there was a moment of stillness. Iris held her breath, trying to separate the quiet dread in the house from the excited squawking on the television.

'I'm going outside,' she said to Winston.

He nodded, his eyes still glued to the screen.

The balmy summer air had cooled, and Iris shivered. The moon was still high, still pearly white, much nobler than the images of dusty rubble beaming back to Earth. Iris couldn't get her head around it. Could there really be men up there where mankind had only ever gazed and wondered?

A waft of lavender blew over from the walled garden, settling her fidgety thoughts for a moment, then suddenly the chill, silent air was rent by a terrible primal howl more profound than anything else in the universe.

Iris ran inside, taking the stairs two by two, racing down the corridor to Claudia's room, then stopping outside, the sound of her panting breath drowned out by her father's stricken cries.

She hovered for ages, wondering whether to leave him, or go in. Eventually, she put her head around the door and saw him kneeling beside the bed, gasping and snorting back tears and mucus, asking Claudia's shockingly lifeless body, 'What am I going to do?'