Lovereading.co.uk

# Happy Birthday

Christina Jones

Published by Piatkus Books

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

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

# *Chapter One*

Outside Hazy Hassocks' drowsy midsummer church, Mrs Finstock, the vicar's wife, was energetically executing a solo version of 'YMCA' to a small but seemingly appreciative audience.

Resplendent in a lilac tulle two-piece, she leaped up and down in the middle of the road, her arms waving wildly, her generous bosoms dancing beneath the glimmering fabric. Her lilac hat, a mass of feathers from some exotic and possibly protected bird, danced too, albeit to a slightly different beat.

'Is Mrs Finstock *dancing*? In the *street*? In *this* heat?' Phoebe Bowler, the perfect size ten, ash-blonde-bobbed, designer-frocked bride-to-be, sitting beside her father in the back of the rose-scented white limousine, giggled delightedly. She leaned forwards and stared at the spectacle through the blur of her veil. 'Yes – she is! Oh, bless her. She's always so funny, isn't she?'

'Funny wouldn't be my word for it,' Bob Bowler muttered, looking rather anxiously from his daughter to the now star-jumping Mrs Finstock. 'I'm far too nervous to find anything amusing – especially the vicar's wife having one of her turns.'

'Vicar's wife is she? Blimey . . .' the limo's chauffeur joined in as he slowed down and, despite the efficacy of the car's expensive air-con, took the opportunity to mop the sweat from his forehead. 'Looks to me like she's found the communion wine and had a hefty swig or three. Ah – she seems to have stopped prancing – yep, she's waving at us now. Hope she don't want us to join in. Too darn hot for any of that old nonsense. Maybe she just wants to tell us something. Shall I stop, duck?'

Phoebe smiled happily. 'May as well, seeing as we're outside the church and it's nearly midday, the wedding's at noon and I'm half of the main attraction.'

As the limousine purred to an opulent halt, the vicar's wife stopped dancing up and down and bustled busily towards the driver's window. Her face glistened under its generous coating of Crème Puff. There were little beads of moisture in the bristles above her upper lip.

'Thank goodness I caught your attention.'

Difficult not to, Phoebe thought, beaming the prenuptial smile that had been impossible to suppress since she'd woken in her parents' semi that morning. 'Actually, we thought you were dancing.'

'What? No, no . . .' The vicar's wife squinted into the depths of the flower-and-ribbon-bedecked car. 'Oh, Phoebe, dear, don't you look lovely. Now, I don't want to worry you – but we've got a bit of a delay. We're not quite ready for you.' She pulled a face at the driver. 'Would you mind awfully driving round the block again?'

'Fine by me,' the driver said with a nod. 'Allus happens at every wedding. Five minutes or so OK?'

'Lovely.' Mrs Finstock bared her teeth in an agitated smile. 'Five minutes should be perfect.'

'What sort of delay?' Phoebe's prenuptial beam slipped slightly. 'Not something wrong with our planning, surely? I've timed the whole day to perfection. It's taken me months

to get this show on the road. Oh, I know – don't tell me – Clemmie hasn't arrived yet. She's so useless about time. I knew I should have forced to her to be at our house with the rest of the bridesmaids instead of coming straight from Winterbrook. Trust Clemmie! I'll have to have serious words with her later.'

The vicar's wife nodded vigorously. 'That's the ticket. Good girl. Nothing to worry about. Now, off you pop.'

The driver replaced his cap, wiped his face and the limo moved slowly away.

Phoebe got a quick glimpse of her nearest and dearest in their wedding finery, a sea of rainbow colours, outside the church, sheltering from the searing midday sun in the mellowed portals before the car rounded the bend into the High Street.

As she'd suspected, there was no sign of Clemmie in the throng.

'I'll drive back out towards Bagley, shall I?' the driver asked over his shoulder. 'No point getting caught up in the Saturday shopping traffic in Hassocks, is there? Who's this Clemmie, then?'

'My chief bridesmaid.' Phoebe settled back into her seat. 'Or matron-of-honour I suppose I should say seeing as she's already beaten me to the altar. Lifelong best friend. Scientifically brilliant and amazingly clever, but a complete pill-brain when it comes to common sense or being organised. She'll owe me big time for this.'

'Ah, but you go easy on her, duck. Everyone'll expect the bride to be late anyway, won't they? Goes with the territory.' The limo driver headed away from Hazy Hassocks' main street and out into the narrow lanes surrounding the large Berkshire market village. 'Five minutes or so won't make any difference, will it?'

With a sigh, Phoebe shook her head. Well, it wouldn't. Not really. But, any delay to her minutely crafted day was

slightly irritating. She was never late for anything. Not ever. Possible disruptions, interruptions and disasters were all carefully factored into each of Phoebe's plans. Trust dizzy, disorganised Clemmie to be the one to mess things up.

That was the trouble with having someone like Clemmie as a best friend. Especially an extremely loved-up, newly married and even more newly pregnant Clemmie.

Secretly, Phoebe was a teensy bit miffed that Clemmie had met, worked with, fallen in love with and whirwindly married the divine Guy Devlin within six months, and was now merely seconds later expecting their first baby, while she and Ben – having been together since school – had taken the more sedate, orderly, well-planned route to everlasting love.

After a fifteen-year relationship, they'd become engaged, planned the dream wedding down to the finest detail, and had decided to start a family in another year or two when they'd left their rented Hazy Hassocks flat and sensibly saved enough to scramble onto the first rung of the mortgage ladder.

Clemmie, with no regard for planning or organisation, had simply characteristically plunged in. It was all rather annoying to someone like Phoebe who rarely even decided on what to wear without consulting her astral charts and considering all the possible options at least three times.

'Nervous?' Bob Bowler broke into her thoughts and squeezed his daughter's hand.

'About Clemmie being late? No, of course not. Well, not really.' Phoebe looked serenely at her father through the ice-white froth of her veil. 'Par for the course with Clemmie. She's probably having morning sickness or something – as long as she manages not to have it on her frock it'll be fine. She'll turn up eventually. Why on earth would I be nervous?'

'Because it's your wedding day and I'm petrified.' Bob

Bowler chuckled rather shakily. 'I've never been father of the bride before.'

'Well, I've never been the bride before either and I'm absolutely calm,' Phoebe smiled at him and reached across the rear seat of the pink-rose-strewn limousine and patted his grey-trousered leg. 'There's nothing to worry about, Dad. Today will run as smoothly as any military campaign. Stick with me, kid, and you'll be OK.'

Bob shook his head, running a sweating finger round the tight collar of his morning suit. 'You're scary, Phoebes. Cool as a cucumber. I thought brides were supposed to be a mass of nerves.'

Phoebe gazed out on the scorching blue-sky June morning as the limo swept through the glossy Berkshire lanes close to her parents' semi in the tiny village of Bagley-cum-Russet and circled once more towards the church in nearby Hazy Hassocks. Even the weather had come up trumps. As she'd known it would.

She smiled blissfully. 'I'm not worried – not even about Clemmie – because everything is going to be perfect. What could possibly go wrong?'

'Don't even expect me to answer that.' Bob moved his top hat from his lap to the acres of silver leather seat beside him. 'I'm not going to tempt fate.'

'Fate,' Phoebe said firmly, 'can't be tempted. Fate is on my side. And I've planned today with minute attention to detail and a time-line never before seen in the history of weddings – not to mention it being astrally charted, of course.'

Bob snorted. 'You and your astrology! Do you really think a deck of tarot cards and some sort of star-sign mumbo-jumbo can forecast –?'

'Absolutely,' Phoebe said happily. 'I used my charts to plan the exact day, time and place for this wedding. All the portents pointed to this day being the perfect one for our marriage. And after all, Ben and I know each other inside

out. You wait and see – he'll be as calm as I am. We're just looking forward to it being the best wedding anyone can ever remember.'

Settling back in the limousine's smoothly purring luxury, Phoebe rearranged her slim-fitting silk frock and checked her mental tick-list. Yes, it was fine. Apart from Clemmie being late, everything was simply perfect. This, her and Ben's wedding day, was truly going to be the happiest day of her life.

Seven and a half minutes later, the limousine pulled up outside the church again. This time there was no sign of the vicar's wife and the guests had all disappeared.

'There,' Phoebe said cheerfully, 'see? No problems. Clemmie's obviously arrived intact and they're all inside waiting. Blimey, I bet Ben's chewing his fingernails, though. I promised him I wouldn't be late.'

The limo driver struggled out and held the door open. A tidal wave of heat swooshed into the car.

'Proper scorcher you've got,' the driver said, as Phoebe, in her slender strapless column of silk, wriggled the pooled hem round her high-heeled white sandals and clutched her small bouquet of pale-pink rosebuds. 'Still, you know what they say, duck? Happy the bride the sun shines on . . . Now – where's the photographer? You'll need some snaps of you and your dad together before you gets going.'

Bob Bowler frowned towards the church as it shimmered beneath the June sun. 'Yes, where is the photographer, Phoebes? I know you've got the camcorder bloke waiting in the porch to film us coming up the path, but I thought –'

Phoebe sighed in exasperation. 'Why can no one be relied on? Yes, the photographer should be here – maybe he was late as well. As long as he arrives for the after-the-event pics I'll be OK. Oh, well, at least we'll have it on film.'

Bob smiled moist-eyed at his slender, blonde daughter in the exquisite ice-white silk dress, short veil and diamante

tiara. 'You look gorgeous, Phoebe, truly. I'm so proud of you. Let me just straighten your veil a bit. Now, you take my arm and we'll be off. Are you feeling OK?'

'Fine, Dad, honest. Not a tummy-dancing butterfly, trembly hand or nerve in sight.'

Phoebe gave a wide beam to the crowd of Hazy Hassocks Saturday shoppers all clustered round the church gates. The Saturday shoppers beamed back. Several clapped.

'Phoebes . . .' Clemmie, tall and beautiful in a filmy dress of dusky pink, her mass of unruly dark-red hair caught up with white rosebuds, suddenly appeared from the porch and hurried down the church path. 'Oh, you look so lovely . . . I'm so sorry . . .'

'It's OK. You're here now. And you look stunning yourself. Have you stopped being sick? Have you got the little flower girls under control? And has Mum stopped sniffling? And has my nan left that awful hat at home and –'

'What? Yes, but, Phoebes –'

'Don't worry, Clem – honestly. I'm used to you being late for everything. I should have factored it in on my list: ten minutes extra in case Clemmie doesn't turn up.'

'It wasn't me . . . isn't me . . . Phoebe, listen –'

'Oh, Clem, stop fretting about it. I'm cool – now let's get on with this.'

Clemmie gave Bob Bowler a beseeching look, then held out her hand. 'Phoebes, come over here . . . please . . . There's something I've got to tell you.'

'Not now!' Phoebe laughed. 'Whatever it is can wait until after the wedding.'

'No it can't.' Clemmie swallowed. 'Phoebes, sweetheart . . . Oh, Lordy, there's no easy way to say this. There's not going to be a wedding. Ben isn't here. He isn't going to be here. He's called it off . . .'

# Chapter Two

A month later, Phoebe slid the key into the lock of the two-storey Edwardian red-brick terraced house and felt sick. Despite the midday heat and wearing the minimum of underwear beneath her brief pink Cut'n'Curl tunic, she was bone-cold and her hands were shaking. It was the first time she'd been back to her Hazy Hassocks flat since the-wedding-that-never-was.

There had been many, many days in the past awful month that she was sure she'd never do this: would never be able to return to the flat again. How could she walk into the home she and Ben had created and see all the things she'd left so happily the evening before the wedding just sitting there as if suspended in time? How could she walk into the flat knowing Ben wouldn't be there? Knowing that he wouldn't ever be coming home again?

The sun scorched down, as it had all this glorious summer, but everything in Winchester Road looked bleak, grey and dead. Phoebe took a deep breath, praying that the neighbours weren't peering at her with prying inquisitive eyes from behind their prim nets. It was almost like being bereaved, she thought: people knew and stared and sympathised silently, but really didn't know what to say.

What could they say? Ben had left her in the most humiliatingly public way possible and everyone knew that she'd been jilted. And they all speculated on why.

As she had. Over and over again.

Taking another gulp of hot air, Phoebe tried again to turn the key, averting her eyes from the 'Bowler and Phipps' bell-push beneath the one for the upstairs flat, which simply said 'Lancaster'.

It would be separate 'Bowler and Phipps' for ever now, she thought miserably. Of course, she'd planned to conjoin the names on the marriage certificate. Phoebe Bowler Phipps, she'd said, had a really nice ring to it. Ben hadn't agreed. He simply couldn't see why she wanted to amalgamate her maiden name with his surname. Even when she'd said gently and almost jokingly that much as she'd always wanted to be his wife, she'd always thought Phoebe Phipps sounded like a cartoon character, Ben had failed to as much as smile.

Phoebe sighed.

Maybe that's why he . . . Why he . . . Well, why he did what he did. Because although she'd wanted to be married to Ben for as long as she could remember, she didn't want to be alliterative Phoebe Phipps. Maybe she shouldn't have told him. Maybe she'd really hurt his feelings. Maybe it was all her fault after all.

She fumbled with the key again.

Could she really do this? On her own? Should she have accepted her parents' offer to come with her – just for this first visit? No, she had to start standing on her own feet, because . . . Well, because there wasn't an alternative, was there? Her mum and dad would have made it worse, wouldn't they? They'd have been kind, as they had been since the wedding day when she'd returned home and cried herself to sleep every night in her childhood bedroom, and their kindness would make her cry. And, Phoebe had decided, she'd cried

enough to last her a lifetime and would never, ever cry – in public at least – again.

Or even worse, they might have launched into yet another vitriolic attack on the hapless Ben and his cold-feet jitters at best, or his cold-hearted abandoning at worst.

No, on balance, Phoebe knew, this visit to the flat was something she had to do alone. And if she managed it today, then after this first time it wouldn't be so bad – she'd just collect her bits and pieces in as many visits as it took, and go back to her parents' home in Bagley, and then she'd contact the letting agents and tell them she was moving out of Winchester Road. For good.

The key turned and she pushed the door open.

A pile of post was heaped against her flat door. Stepping over it – it probably hid more than one wedding congrats card – Phoebe walked into the carefully updated neutral minimalist living room, her pink Cut'n'Curl clogs slip-slapping rhythmically on the wooden floor.

How quiet it was in the flat. How pale. How sterile. As if all the life had been sucked out. It looked, she thought bleakly, like a neglected showroom. Not like a home at all. There was no hint of warmth, of laughter, of living, of loving.

Of Ben there was no trace at all. Her CDs, books and magazines were still there. But someone – Ben? – had been in since the-wedding-that-never-was and removed every last one of his personal items. The flat even smelled empty. A month ago it had wafted with scented candles and Ben's aftershave and her own perfume and herbs and spices from the experimental cooking sessions they'd shared. Now it had a neglected, bland smell of nothingness.

It was as if the life she'd shared with Ben – and Ben himself – had never existed.

Feeling suddenly dizzy and engulfed by loneliness, Phoebe sank down onto the white sofa. A shaft of sunlight sneaked

through the cream and white embossed linen curtains and formed a glinting golden puddle on the floor. Phoebe swallowed the lump in her throat. This wasn't her home any more – how could it be? When she'd left it, she'd been laughing and giggling and Ben, accompanied by Alan, his best man, had kissed her goodbye.

For ever.

Phoebe sniffed back a threatening tear and hauled herself to her feet. No time for wallowing in self-pity – there were things to be done, tasks to be tackled, stuff to be sorted. The flat was stifling, airless, so she opened the French doors on to the garden. The only sound was the Kennet, a snaking river tributary, rippling unseen behind the high walls, making its way towards the Thames at Winterbrook.

She and Ben had worked hard on the garden, too. They'd built a little courtyard for sitting in with a glass of wine on balmy summer nights, with lush foliage and jasmine, honeysuckle and orange blossom tumbling from the high-brick walls, making a secret, sensuous oasis. A lovers' arbour.

Oh, God . . .

Phoebe turned away from the garden, determined not to cry.

Today, she'd returned to work as senior stylist at Pauline's Cut'n'Curl in Hazy Hassocks High Street after the three weeks leave she'd booked for the Caribbean cruise honeymoon – which she'd spent holed up in her old bedroom in Bagley-cum-Russet – followed by an extra unpaid week because she knew she wasn't quite ready for the ill-concealed interrogation from her regular blue-rinse-and-bubble-perm clients.

Today, she was using her lunch hour to start packing her possessions and close the door on the flat. Today she was going to try to pull her life back together.

So far the life-pulling had been a dismal failure, Phoebe thought sadly, as she listlessly tugged a holdall from the hall

cupboard and pulled her coats and jackets from their pegs. Pauline and the girls at the salon had been lovely this morning, of course, and kept up a stream of bright chatter, shielding her from the more nosy clients by getting her to count conditioner bottles in the stockroom. But Pauline and the girls could do nothing to shield her from the frankly curious eyes and whispers. Pauline and the girls could do nothing to shield her from her own mortification.

The whispers she'd get used to, she knew that. The humiliation might just take a little longer.

Unzipping the holdall, Phoebe then slowly consulted the 'Things to Collect' list in her pink spiral-bound notebook. Even devastating heartbreak and her life falling apart hadn't managed to totally destroy her obsession with organisation. She'd listed the rooms in the flat: five; sub-divided the contents of each that a) belonged to her, b) belonged to Ben, c) were jointly owned; and sub-sectioned each of a) and c) into things she would remove on this first visit.

Pressing her jackets into a neat pile at the bottom of the holdall, Phoebe lugged the bag into the living room and made a start on the books and music.

She'd just finished pushing the CDs into every available corner, ticking them off her list, trying not to remember the myriad 'our tunes' included on them, knowing she'd never listen to them again and pretty sure they'd all end up in Hedley and Biff Pippin's animal charity shop, when her phone rang.

Fishing it out of the pocket of her short pink Cut'n'Curl overall, she frowned then smiled. Clemmie. Probably wanting to know how the first morning back at work had gone. She'd have to sound cheerful otherwise Clemmie would be hot-footing it from Winterbrook to lend a shoulder to cry on. Again.

'Hi,' Phoebe said breezily. 'How are you? Still being sick? Poor thing . . . Still, it can't last for the whole nine months,

can it? What? Work? Oh, well, you know . . . it went OK. Pauline and the girls were lovely of course, but . . . What, now? No, I'm in the flat . . . Yes, well, it had to be done some time. I'm alone. No, no, really, Clem, even if you are in Hassocks, I'm much better doing it on my own. It's really kind of you but I need to do this my way. What – tonight? Who with? Oh, right. Yes, lovely . . . Thanks. Where? OK? See you later. Bye.'

Pushing her mobile back into her pocket, Phoebe sighed. Clemmie was the best friend anyone could wish for. And a girlie night out in anonymous Winterbrook – their nearest largish town – as Clem had suggested, would be nice, but it was so hard being the only single one – especially when she and Ben had been together for ever.

Phoebe swallowed. She wasn't going to think about Ben. Not now. Not ever again.

Just as she was pondering over whether she was brave enough to walk into the bedroom – which she seriously doubted – and shove a few more clothes into the holdall before returning to work, the doorbell rang.

'I really hope it's not Clemmie,' Phoebe muttered to herself, heading for the door. 'I've just got to get used to doing everything alone . . .'

It wasn't Clemmie.

Slo Motion, one elderly third of Hazy Hassocks' only funeral directors who lived with his cousins, Constance and Perpetua, and rather sadly ran their business a few houses away in Winchester Road, stood on the doorstep.

'I saw you arrive earlier.' Slo, dressed in a heavy black serge suit despite the searing heat and with cigarette burns on his waistcoat, grinned gummily at her. 'Thought I'd come and say welcome home. Be neighbourly, like. Here . . .'

Phoebe peered dubiously at the lidded dish in his hands. 'Oh. . . er, thank you. Um, oh, that isn't an *urn* is it?'

'Nah, course not. It's a casserole. Weather's a bit hot for a

casserole I know, duck, but it's what our Perpetua allus makes for the bereaved on our first visit. Seems to cheer 'em up. It's what them telly chefs would call rustic – got lumps in it – oh, and don't let on to our Constance that you've 'ad it. She's as tight as a duck's whatsit over freebies. I've defrosted it for you.'

'Thank you.' Phoebe smiled bravely. 'It's very kind of you. And a casserole will be lovely – but it still looks like it's in an urn. For ashes . . .'

'Ah, well, yes it *is* an urn if you wants to split hairs, but it's a fresh one, duck. Untouched by human remains. Therefore it's just a container really, isn't it? We uses them for all sorts. The gels swear by 'em for storing leftovers and what have you. Here – you take it – there's no need to let us have it back. It'll come in handy later for flowers or face cream or talc or summat.'

'Thank you.' Phoebe took the casserole-urn, holding it at arm's length. 'I'll, um, enjoy it. Er, are the gels, um, Constance and Perpetua not with you?'

'Nah,' Slo wheezed happily. 'They've gorn up the Twilights to measure up a customer.'

'Right.' Phoebe pulled a face. The thought of the two female Motions sorting out yet another funeral at Twilights – Hazy Hassocks' warden-assisted rest home for the elderly – was probably best not dwelt on. Not in her current state of heightened emotion. But at least the sad departure of a Twilighter to their eternal rest meant Constance and Perpetua weren't here to offer their own heavy-handed brand of sympathy. Every cloud and all that. 'And it's lovely to see you, but actually, I'm just going back to work. I was only collecting a few of my things.'

'Why? You're not leaving, duck? Oh, that's a bloomin' shame. Me and the gels loved having you here. A bit of young blood in the street livened us old uns up no end. I was right sorry about . . . well, about what happened.' Slo

shuffled his feet. 'Can't imagine what that Ben was thinking of. Buggering off and leaving a lovely young girl like you – and you allus seemed so happy together.'

'Mmm.' Phoebe knew she had to change the subject. It was always worse when someone was kind. 'Well, that's all behind us now – and yes, I'm moving out. I'm going back to my parents in Bagley and –'

'Damn shame!' Slo looked indignant. 'You'd made a lovely little home here. Seems all wrong that you've got to leave it. Still, I suppose it'll be too dear with you on your own. Mind, you've got two bedrooms – you could allus take in a lodger, couldn't you? To help with the rent?'

Phoebe sighed. 'Well, yes, I suppose I could if I was staying, but I can't live here any more.'

'Because of the memories? Ah, they can be right killers – that's speaking professionally, of course.' Slo fidgeted in the pocket of his waistcoat and brought out a battered packet of Marlboro. 'All right with you if I sparks up, duck? Don't tell the gels, though. They thinks I packed up on New Year's Eve. Again.'

'Puff away. Your secret's safe with me,' Phoebe said faintly as Slo gurgled and wheezed and shuddered pleasurably with a spasm of chesty coughing. 'And thanks again for popping round.'

'You think over what I said.' Slo inhaled deeply. 'You don't have to run away. This is your home, duck, and you've got every right to stay here. Sometimes –' He broke off to cough cheerfully. 'Sometimes we finds – professionally speaking again – that the one what's left behind can rebuild a nice little life for themselves among the memories once the first pain has gorn. It helps 'em. Not that your Ben has died, duck, more's the pity I says, but you knows what I mean.'

Phoebe nodded. Lots of her friends – and even her parents – had said much the same thing about moving out. But staying in Winchester Road was simply impossible. Even if

she could afford to pay the rent single-handedly, every inch of the flat reminded her of Ben and their life – not just the future they'd planned, but their shared history too. And how, Phoebe thought despairingly, could she ever, ever sleep in *that* bed again?

Slo sucked shakily on his cigarette, the ash tumbling down his waistcoat. 'I'll let you get on now, duck – I can see you're busy – but you think on what I've said. And if you do decide to leave, then don't go without saying goodbye.'

'No, I won't. And thank you again for this.' Phoebe glanced down anxiously at the ebony urn which was, she now noticed, steaming slightly. 'I'm sure it'll be delicious.'

As soon as the door was closed and Slo had disappeared back along Winchester Road, Phoebe tipped the casserole into the sink. She felt a bit guilty, watching as it glugged glutinously and hovered in unrecognisable clumps round the plug hole. It smelled of very old mushrooms and moth balls. No doubt the Motions had made it with the very best of intentions – still, they'd never know she hadn't eaten it, would they?

Running the tap over the residue and using a fork to force the more recalcitrant lumps out of sight, she then quickly rinsed the urn, wrapped it in a shroud of kitchen roll and, still holding it at arm's length, disposed of it in the dustbin outside the back door.

The deed done, Phoebe glanced at her watch. Nearly two o'clock. Oh, Lord – thanks to Slo she was going to be late back to work and she hadn't even started on sorting out her clothes. Ah, well. At least it would mean not having to go into the bedroom – yet . . .

'Who's that down there? What are you – *Phoebe*? Phoebe!' A voice screeched delightedly from somewhere above her. 'Cool! I thought you were the Bath Road yobbos doing a bit of breaking and entering! I'm up here!'

Squinting upwards, against the sun spiralling in the deep

blue sky, Phoebe groaned inwardly at the sight of Mindy – her upstairs neighbour – leaning precariously over her greenery-fronded balcony.

'Oh, er, hi, Mindy. Yes, it's me – not burglars. Er, I can't stop, I'm late for work and –'

'Nooo!' Mindy – all stylishly layered short black hair, expensively tanned face and heavily mascared eyes – screeched. 'You can't go. Not yet. I've been dying to see you. I want to know what's happening. I want all the gory details. Stay there, sweetie. I'm coming down.'

Phoebe shook her head as Mindy, wearing a skimpy white bikini top and even skimpier white shorts, clattered down the cast-iron fire escape which led to the garden. Mindy – long-haul cabin crew out of Heathrow – was probably the last person she needed to share her innermost angst with right now. Mindy – impossibly slender, stunningly glamorous and wildly indiscreet – was definitely not going to be sympathetic about the jilting.

'If I'd known you were here I'd have brought a bottle of wine.' Mindy immediately folded herself elegantly onto one of Phoebe's wrought-iron chairs and crossed her long, long legs and flipped her designer sunglasses over her eyes. 'Phew – it's sooo hot! Sweetheart, why haven't you got your lounger out? You're very pale – you should be catching some rays.'

'I'm going back to work,' Phoebe said again. 'I'm already late.'

Mindy waved a slim hand. 'Phone in sick. Take the afternoon off. We've got sooo much to talk about. So – go on – what happened? I couldn't believe it when I got back from the Far East trip and everyone told me Ben hadn't turned up. Oh, sweetheart, you must have felt such a prat!'

Phoebe swallowed. Typical Mindy – ultra-sensitive. 'Honestly, I don't want to talk about it.'

'Talking's good.' Mindy lifted the large sunglasses and

batted her eyelashes at Phoebe. 'Cathartic. That's why everyone should have counselling after traumas. Did you? Have counselling?'

'No.'

'Well, you should. Must. Otherwise you'll turn all embittered. Hate men for ever.'

'Yes, very probably. Look, Mindy, I really don't have time to chat. Maybe later – next time I come round . . .'

'What do you mean? You mean you're not living here? Why on earth not, sweetie?'

Phoebe sighed. 'All sorts of reasons. And as I'm leaving here as soon as possible, unless you're grounded for a while we probably won't see much of each other and –'

'Leaving? The flat? Moving out completely?' Mindy lowered the sunglasses again and frowned at Phoebe. 'Really? Well, there's a coincidence, because I'm moving out too. This weekend in fact. So this old house will be a sad and lonely place. Where are you going?'

'Back to my parents in Bagley-cum-Russet. You?'

'A west London penthouse with a really cute Airbus pilot.'

Phoebe almost smiled. 'No contest there then, but I thought you and, um . . .'

She stopped. What on earth was Mindy's boyfriend called? Was he the Lancaster on the flat's name plate, or was that Mindy? No, Phoebe frowned, Mindy's surname was Martin, wasn't it? She'd noticed it when she'd sorted letters from their communal post in the hall. So he was Somebody Lancaster, wasn't he? In his absence, Mindy had always referred to him as Lover Boy with a sort of erotic purr, but somehow Phoebe felt she couldn't call him that, could she?

Phoebe had only ever glimpsed him either going upstairs, or coming down, or jumping in or out of his car, and had a vague image of a tall, dark, shadowy, uniformed figure who'd waved and called hi, but she'd never met him. He'd been absent more than he'd been at home most of the time

she and Ben had lived in Winchester Road, and Phoebe had guessed his cabin crew job also took him all over the world.

Then, on the odd occasions when he and Mindy had been home at the same time, she and Ben had listened with guilty enjoyment to regular rip-snorting rows, slamming doors and stomping feet reverberating from the upstairs flat. Rows and separations, Phoebe realised now, that she'd thought smugly would never happen to her and Ben in their rock solid relationship. How blindly self-righteous she'd been . . .

'Rocky?' Mindy supplied helpfully. 'The divine Rocky Lancaster? Drop dead gorgeous Rocky Lancaster?'

Rocky – that was it. Phoebe nodded. She remembered thinking it was an odd name and probably the poor bloke's parents had been Sly Stallone fans or something. But – Rocky Lancaster . . . Surely she'd heard that name somewhere else? In connection with something else entirely? Not recently, but . . .

Mindy frowned. 'Drop dead is what I wish he'd do – anytime soon for preference. The bastard. Everyone thought he was wonderful but – oh, sweetie, if only you knew the truth. Of course, you must have heard about him. I was so ashamed. Ah well, like you and Ben, that's all history now. I do have some pride and a massive sense of self-preservation – and there was no way I was going to stay here with him after what he did. I mean, would you, if your boyfriend –?'

Phoebe's mobile rang. She glanced at the warbling phone. 'Sorry, Mindy, it's work, I'll have to answer it. Pauline? Sorry I'm late. Oh, yes I'm fine, really. I got a bit side-tracked. Yes, I'm just on my way back now. What? Two perms? Yes, I'm sure I can – right – I'll be with you in five minutes.'

Damn, she thought, snapping the phone shut. Just when Mindy was getting down to the juicy details. Now she'd probably never know what foul misdemeanour Rocky had

committed, would she? And she could really, really do with wallowing in someone else's misery at the moment. Bugger.

'You've clearly got to dash.' Mindy uncurled herself and hugged Phoebe. 'Duty obviously calls. Well, you take care of yourself, sweetheart, and if we don't see one another again, have a happy life.'

'You too.' Phoebe extricated herself from Mindy's Chanel-perfumed embrace.

'Oh, I will.' Mindy stretched with a sleepy, lascivious smile. 'And if you should be unfortunate enough to run into Rocky while you're clearing the rest of your stuff out, tell him I hope he rots in hell.'