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Dearest Rivals

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Extract

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Summer

Chapter 1

A wash of rain flowed down the outside of the kitchen window. It was a Gloucestershire monsoon. Peering out into the waterlogged garden, where she was barely able to make out the colours of the staked sweet peas planted against the far brick wall, Nina postponed a decision on tonight's barbecue. Nothing this weekend was going according to plan.

It felt to Nina as though her house guests had been here for ever. Already she had cooked one elaborate dinner for six – which had been stretched into eight at the last minute – and one full-scale cooked breakfast plus two loaves of banana bread for tea. It had been her husband Alex's idea to hold a weekend house party, to invite two people they barely knew – three if you counted her sister's boyfriend, Gerry – and to suggest everyone came down on Friday night.

'Why not Saturday morning?'

'Because that way they'll be more relaxed.'

'It would be much easier to have them arrive on—'

He had cut her off. 'It's business,' he said conclusively. He meant business with Howard, a new and rich holiday acquaintance.

The clouds overhead were so black that at three o'clock on a July afternoon it was necessary to have all the kitchen lights blazing. They were recessed halogens, the kitchen a recent extension to the original house, parts of which dated back to the seventeenth century. Alex had surprised her by throwing himself into the design of the kitchen: a royal blue Aga,

an oversized butler's sink, pale blue hand-painted cupboard doors, the worktops a combination of marble and oak, and the floor reclaimed terracotta. Around her, the house was still. Muffin lay under the kitchen table. Alex was in his office. Jemma and Howard were presumably now asleep, having gone back to bed after a very late breakfast.

'It's the country air. Leave the washing-up, Nina. We'll help out later, won't we, Howie?'

'Mmm. Lovely bit of bacon. Shall I leave my plate in the sink?'

And her sister, Susan, was out with her party on an impromptu trip to the Cotswold Wildlife Park.

Nina put the kettle on the Aga and rinsed out the cafetiere to make a fresh pot. While she waited for the kettle to boil she lit a Marlboro Light. Now would be the time to take her coffee, a book and sit in the drawing room accompanied by Muffin, her aged brown and white shih tzu. But instead there was the dishwasher to be reloaded, the frying pans to be washed up, salads to be prepared, cream to be whipped and a pile of children's clothes to be washed.

The children's clothes belonged to Harry and Samantha, aged two and five respectively, the offspring of Gerry the boyfriend. Harry and Samantha had not been invited. In fact, they had been specifically excluded.

'No kids,' Alex had said.

'Could you let Gerry know it's just adults?' she had repeated to Susan a week earlier.

But they had come anyway, arriving two hours late in Gerry's Peugeot estate, Alex making no effort to conceal his dismay as they pulled up next to Howard's Lexus and piled out of the car onto the gravelled driveway. Samantha clung to Gerry while Harry clutched a scrap of tartan fabric later identified as The Blanket. Only Muffin, circling frantically, had seemed pleased to see them.

Susan looked thunderous. Striding away from the car she had abandoned Gerry with the luggage, grabbed Nina by the

hand and led them purposefully upstairs where she erupted in the seclusion of Nina's bedroom.

'That fucking bitch!'

Nina presumed Susan meant Gerry's ex-wife. Susan had mentioned her before. 'Linda?'

'Lisa. It's her weekend; it's marked on the schedule in black and white. And then she calls Gerry yesterday afternoon and says he has to have the kids because she's got to work.'

'The whole weekend?' Nina asked, more in faint hope than expectation.

Susan ignored the question. 'She knew. She fucking knew because Samantha blurted it out, I expect. And she can't bear the fact that Gerry's found someone else so she has to ruin everything for him.'

Susan threw herself onto the bed. She was wearing an elegant sleeveless red linen shift dress that Nina had bought her from LK Bennett for her birthday last year, teamed inelegantly with Birkenstocks.

Nina wondered why Gerry had agreed to this. Or why it had not been possible to call and forewarn them. But with Susan one had to tread carefully, framing all observations as neutrally as possible. 'It wasn't possible to make alternative arrangements?'

Susan counted off the points on her fingers. 'He feels he has to because she manipulated him into feeling guilty. He feels he has to because she makes him feel that whatever he does it's not good enough. He is at the mercy of her narcissistic personality.'

Nina needed to get back to Jemma and Howie, who had been abandoned in the drawing room, though contentedly enough with a bottle of champagne and a tray of crudités.

'The thing is …'

'It's a classic dynamic. Their marriage fell into a textbook pattern.' Susan looked at her as if she should anticipate what she was going to say next.

'Textbook?'

'Critical parent and obedient child,' Susan said as if it was self-evident. 'And now that he's broken free she can't bear to let go of her control over him.'

The thought came to Nina that Gerry, a lanky and rather unkempt man with a wild shock of ginger hair, walking into the house clutching two children and a booster seat, had not looked like a man who had reclaimed his power. And wasn't it his wife who had been the one to leave – for another man? She had not met Gerry before, but she had heard thrilling reports from Susan. It was usually like that in the beginning. Gerry was a newly divorced chartered surveyor with a passion for writing science fiction.

But this left the question of what they were going to do with the children that evening. 'The thing is, Alex wanted to have a quiet dinner. We quite understand about the children …' This was not exactly true. 'But can you make sure they're …' She struggled for a tactful word. Out of the way? Silent? 'Settled.' She looked at her watch. 'We ought to make up a bed for them. I'm afraid they'll have to share the fold-up.'

Susan appeared not to have heard her. 'I want to help Gerry,' she said earnestly. 'I want him to become the man that he is inside, the man who has been suppressed and ridiculed and marginalised by her. I want him to live his potential. He is such a creative person. He writes film scripts, you know.'

'You've mentioned that before.'

'And he's turning around the Chiltern Writers' Group. He's got them a regular room at High Wycombe Library.'

Nina moved towards the door. 'The children will have to sleep in your room.'

This remark brought Susan back to the present. 'Haven't you got a room they can go in?'

'No.'

'Oh.' For a moment Susan seemed nonplussed. But this condition rarely lasted. Her expression brightened. 'There's Alex's office. That would be much better! And if it's a fold-up bed we can carry it down there.'

Nina hesitated, mentally anticipating Alex's reaction.

Susan pressed on. 'It'll be perfect. It's just for the night-time. We can fold up the bed during the day. Alex won't even know they've been in there.'

Nina couldn't imagine that Alex would be blind to the presence of two small children asleep next to his desk.

'And if we're in the attic room,' Susan continued, 'there isn't going to be enough space anyway, is there? Unless you've given it to that couple.'

Now Nina felt on the back foot. 'No. Jemma and Howard are in the guest room. They arrived first,' she added by way of explanation. This wasn't exactly true, either. They had arrived first but Alex had already allocated them the larger first-floor bedroom with the view of the garden.

'Well, then,' Susan said, getting up. 'That's settled then.'

And it was. Susan had as always secured the last word, the final decision, her own way. Nina had, as ever, let her – overwhelmed by a mix of emotions that she was never quite able to identify but which included long-standing guilt, a measure of embarrassment at the difference in their respective financial positions and a desire to put right all that was wrong in her sister's life.

Overlaying all of the discomfiture on this occasion was the fact that Susan and Gerry had been far down the list of couples considered for the weekend. Alex's first choice – his solicitor, Simon, and his wife, Carole – had cancelled two weeks ago. 'The au pair's mother's died. She's got to go back to Krakow.' Then, *sotto voce*, Carole added, 'It's bloody inconvenient, actually. We'll have to do Carcassonne without her.'

Nina's second- and third-choice couples had been rejected by Alex as too snobbish and too dull respectively. Howard was, in Alex's words, a bit of a rough diamond. It was important that Howard felt comfortable, which meant no public-school or Oxbridge conversation and definitely no opera talk. Their fourth couple, their American neighbours in London, were going to be away on holiday.

At this rate her brother would be joining the list. So Susan and Gerry had been their fifth choice.

With barely a week to go to the house party, Alex had reluctantly agreed. 'Just don't let your sister in the bloody kitchen!'

'Alex, that's not fair.'

'Christ, two customers ended up in hospital!'

'Salmonella isn't that unusual.'

'The woman literally can't boil an egg.'

Now, as the kettle whistled, Nina put out her cigarette, poured boiling water into the cafetiere and waited a minute to plunge it. She looked out on to the garden and saw that the rain was still pouring determinedly. The garden was much the same as when they had bought it: a good-sized lawn bordered with mixed beds and to the side what was optimistically referred to in the agent's particulars as a summerhouse, really a shed-like structure of peeling timbers with a small porch at the front and windows on either side of the door.

She poured out two mugs and took them along to Alex's study, trailed by Muffin. The door was closed. Grasping the two mugs in one hand, she turned the brass doorknob.

Alex looked up as if startled, then raised a tired smile. This year there had been so many late nights and long weekends of working.

'Coffee?'

'Thanks.' He pushed back his office chair and straightened the papers.

She leaned against the desk. 'You should take a break.'

'Yep.' He didn't sound as if he meant it. 'Howard up yet?'

'No.'

'I'm going to take him down the pub.'

'Without Gerry, I presume.'

Alex raised an eyebrow. 'Yes.'

At least he had calmed down since last night when they went to bed. Alex had been fuming: 'That fucking loser! Who in God's name talks about *Star Trek* over dinner?' He

mimicked Gerry. 'Episode forty-two, set in the intergalactic boredom zone, is the only one where Spock is seen to blow his nose.'

She had laughed. 'Jemma and Howard didn't mind.'

But Alex continued to sound riled. 'Christ. It was supposed to be relaxed and sophisticated. We couldn't even see each other.'

It had been necessary to blow out the candles after Harry had made repeated lunges for the silver candelabra. The children had finally fallen asleep at ten, after countless trips downstairs and exits by Gerry from the table for glasses of water and adjustments to the night light. Gerry struck Nina as a kind man, struggling to come to terms with what had clearly been a traumatic divorce. Over dinner he had seemed embarrassed at the interruptions from his children. 'Sorry. It's been a tough time for them.' He looked down at his plate. 'None of us saw it coming.'

Susan had chipped in: 'I think it's criminal. Gerry's ex-wife ran off with another man,' she proclaimed, seemingly oblivious to Gerry's discomfiture, 'and she still got the house and all the money.' She took a drink of wine. 'She got all the rights with none of the responsibilities.'

Privately, Nina could not see that Susan was the woman to help Gerry shoulder his parental duties. After her sister had moved back to Marlow, the dearth of single men in the town had been Susan's foremost topic of conversation. 'Everyone's married.' She had met Gerry at a Monday-night pub quiz, telephoning Nina the next day to tell her triumphantly, 'He's got a really good job and he's divorced, but his wife has the kids most of the time.' Susan's enthusiasms had a habit of fading quickly. Nina could not help but notice that over dinner Susan had ignored Gerry in favour of Howard, asking him a stream of fascinated questions about his business. She could only hope that Jemma hadn't noticed.

Now, Alex picked up his mug of coffee from his desk. He looked washed out despite his naturally tanned skin, the legacy

of his Italian mother, who had named him Alessandro. The purchase of the Gloucestershire house was supposed to have provided a respite from the punishing work week. But the reality was that they had hardly been down this year and their plans to spend most of August there had been abandoned when Alex looked at his schedule of business meetings.

He had always worked hard. And she had too: painting and cleaning alongside him in the early days. There were staff to do that now and office staff – two, including his PA, Sasha. Sasha headed up the office, kept Alex's diary and featured in every late-night row between them.

In the old days it had been fun. But Alex had changed in his mid-thirties. He, and in consequence the business, had grown more serious. He had expanded the business dramatically, negotiating a new deal hard on the heels of the last, each with larger buildings and bigger loans.

And now there was Howard to consider, whom Alex had been courting for the last three months since they had hit it off on holiday in Las Vegas. On their return to the UK, Alex had taken him to dinner at his club, gambling at a London casino and in between trailed up to Howard's office in Radlett for a couple of pub lunches.

'It just makes so much more sense to involve private investors at this growth stage of the business,' Alex had explained to her. 'I'm outgrowing bank finance. The bank takes too long to make decisions. By the time I've got an answer on a loan, the building's been sold to someone else.'

Now she moved over to stand closer to Alex. Gently she said, 'Would it really be so terrible if he didn't want to invest? I mean, it's not as if you need the money.'

'No, of course not,' Alex said quickly.

'There are always alternatives. I know it takes longer, but you could just ask the bank.'

Alex's gaze had fallen out of the window onto the back garden lawn. 'Yes,' he said distractedly. 'I could always ask the bank.'

*

Susan reached for her glass of champagne and inhaled on a Marlboro Light before replacing both and tipping a further hefty dose of amber and lavender oil into the bath. There was a shower on her attic floor but, as she had pointed out to Nina, a bath would be so much nicer.

Nina had rolled her eyes. 'Just don't use all the hot water.'

'Definitely not. You'll never know I've been in there! Any chance of a ciggie?'

It was like staying in a luxury hotel. Alex had planned the master bathroom extension over the kitchen, incorporating the modern conveniences of marble tiling, a double vanity unit and under-floor heating. Two huge plush white towels were draped over the ceiling-height chrome towel rail and to the end of the claw-footed bath an assortment of Jo Malone bath products and candles were clustered on a small mahogany chest.

One had to concede that Alex, for all his faults, knew about property.

Beneath her she could hear the sounds of dinner preparations. Corks popping, Howard and Alex laughing and the aroma of sirloin, which Nina, abandoning the barbecue plans on account of the intermittent drizzle, had decided to casserole in a red-wine sauce for an informal kitchen supper.

Now Susan stilled herself to pick up the low hum of Howard's voice. Howard – tanned with the physique of a boxer, his hair cropped in a crew cut – had a lot to recommend him: two car dealerships, a yacht and a fat wife whom, after more than twenty years, he was surely ready to trade in? Furthermore Howard's two children were at university. And he drove a Lexus.

Howard wouldn't have got lost on the way to the Cotswold Wildlife Park or missed the exit on the way home or made them share two sandwiches in the café because it was 'a week to pay day and things are a little tight fiscally'. Howard wouldn't ask her for petrol money. Howard would have

screwed her last night instead of letting a five-year-old climb into bed between them.

It would be perfect to have a joint right now, but she couldn't risk Alex detecting it. Maybe later in the garden. Sometimes Alex could be slightly scary which was why, for example with the children's sleeping arrangements, it was safer to work on Nina. Instead, Susan allowed the champagne to anaesthetise the afternoon's trip: the whining for juice, the endless trips to the lavatory, the melting ice-creams, Samantha's blister, Harry dropping The Blanket in the rain-sodden car park.

She could not quell her rapidly growing disillusion with Gerry, a man whose passive temperament she now realised she had misjudged as untapped creative genius. Why did this keep happening to her? Why did men represent themselves as one thing – in Gerry's case a man who was at least solvent – and then reveal themselves to be totally broke? Why did wonderful jobs turn into legal minefields? Why, in fact, did every man, flat, job, car and further education course start out so well only to end up in sour disappointment?

She took another gulp of champagne to head off the simultaneous depression and resentment that struck more and more frequently these days, coinciding with her move back home to her mother after the Swansea tea-room debacle. Once the environmental health officer had mentioned prosecution it had seemed prudent to move on without leaving a forwarding address.

It wasn't fair. It wasn't fair that someone should keep trying so hard and get knocked back at every turn. It wasn't deserved that at thirty-four she had nothing to her name but a bicycle, two duffel bags of clothes and the contents of her childhood bedroom. It wasn't right that she had been deprived of the basics of thirty-something life, particularly when someone like Nina – who was only two years older and who couldn't in all honesty be described as pretty or talented – had so much.

Susan now wanted with fervour all that she had spent her

twenties despising: a home, a car and a credit card. In short, she wanted a husband.

She reached forward and turned on the tap to let more near-scorching water run in. There was no point in rushing. If she got up Gerry would only want her to help put the children to bed. No. She would relax for a little longer, take her time putting up her hair and applying Nina's make-up, select something silky and clinging from Nina's wardrobe and descend the stairs just before eight. All that would be required would be to help Nina move the serving dishes onto the kitchen table, allowing her to deftly ease herself into position for dinner – next to Howard.

'Why don't you let me have him, sweetie? Then you can eat your dinner.'

Gerry cast Jemma a grateful glance. 'If you're sure.'

'Come on, Harry. Come and sit on Auntie Jemma's lap.'

Harry looked uncertain. 'Bring your blanket,' Jemma said encouragingly. 'That's right.' In response Harry, clad in Superman pyjamas, took a firm hold of it and scuttled round to her, silently lifting up his arms to be hoisted onto her lap.

'There. Isn't that nice?'

Harry was tired. He had spent the last half-hour clinging to his father and grizzling. Samantha meanwhile had circled the table in her nightdress, alternately lugging Muffin around and pulling at her father's arm. Gerry needed to get the kids into a routine. Maybe she would say something to him tomorrow. Years of childminding had taught Jemma a thing or two. But for now, the poor man needed to have a square meal and a nice glass of wine and relax a bit.

There was no childminding now. Those had been the days when Howard was just starting out. Howard had begun by repossessing cars. She would get up in the morning, pull back the curtains on the Dagenham flat and see if there was a car on the trailer. If there was, the bills would get paid that week. But Howard was good and there was usually a car. He was

tough and wily and patient. After a few years the business had expanded into debt collection. Or debt management solutions as Howard called it now. Same thing – taking things off people who didn't want to give them to you. And then the first dealership, flogging second-hand cars from a dusty lot in a side road in Chingford. And then the new cars and the proper showroom on the High Street and in time the yacht chartering in Marbella and the half-share in Italian restaurants.

And all the while the other business that didn't have a name or an SA number or a UK bank account.

She pulled Harry to her and listened to the conversation around her. Alex was talking to Howard.

'People have been forecasting the collapse of the UK property market for years. But they overlook the importance that fixed interest rates play in stabilising downturns.'

'But there are some danger signs—' Howard said evenly, his eyes fixed on his plate.

Alex, who had barely touched his food, interrupted Howard. 'Yes. But any problems will be localised. That's why location is so important. London property is fail-safe.'

Jemma had noticed that Alex only really came alive when he was talking about work. He had been like that in Las Vegas, lying on the sun-lounger by the side of the pool at the Four Seasons Hotel talking on his mobile. He didn't even take Nina shopping! She wouldn't have let Howard get away with that.

Besides, as she and Howard had always known, you had to enjoy the ride while it lasted.

Opposite her, Nina was talking to Gerry. 'Are you taking the children away this summer?'

Gerry pulled a face. 'Things are a little tight … fiscally.'

'You're very welcome to come here. Next weekend we've got Alex's office staff coming down for their summer party. But after that we won't be down for weeks. Alex has meetings in London.'

Nina was all right. On holiday, after Alex had first struck up a conversation with Howard by the towel stand, the two women had fallen into a routine of having lunch by the pool while the men went off for an afternoon poker game. There, under the palm trees, waited on by tanned young men in khaki shorts and sparkling white polo shirts, they worked their way through the pool menu and too many Long Island ice teas. Nina, like Jemma, had thought it hilarious that every hour one such young man would come round with a white duster and offer to clean their sunglasses. Nina was down to earth. Not like Alex. Nina had told her about her work as a caterer, her new venture as a food writer and her plans for the garden in Gloucestershire. But she never talked about Alex's business.

It was Howard who told Jemma about that.

'He's a property developer. He wants investors for a block he's refurbishing on the edge of Putney.'

'Has he asked you for money?'

'No. But he will.'

Alex hadn't directly asked so far. But Howard, who had let Alex make all the running, had predicted he would this weekend.

She gave Harry a piece of bread roll. He stuffed it into his mouth, then brought his hand to rest on her breast. She was wearing a low-cut black crêpe dress from the Marina Rinaldi collection at Harrods. She might be heavy but she still had good boobs.

She pulled Harry close. Jemma had resigned herself to waiting for grandchildren. Jason and Elliott both wanted degrees and then MBAs. Howard had made it clear that they would have to make their own way in the world. Not that that stopped her slipping them a generous wad of cash every time they came home.

Nina was trying again with Gerry. 'And Susan tells me that you're planning a writers' workshop.'

Gerry sighed. 'It's not definite. Library health and safety regulations limit numbers and catering arrangements.'

Bloody hell! If Howard had worried about regulations they'd still be in the Dagenham flat.

She reached forward for her glass of wine, letting her eye fall on Susan. She was pretty enough if you liked her sort. Arty-looking, with her dark frizzy hair piled up in some sort of knobbly wooden clip that looked like it came from Oxfam. She had the type of skin that tanned easily, the same as Nina's, and the same dark brown eyes and good cheekbones. But whereas Jemma suspected that Susan was older than she appeared, Nina was the opposite. It had been a surprise on holiday when Nina had mentioned that she was thirty-six. Jemma had assumed she was closer to forty. Later Jemma realised that this was not because of her features or complexion but the way she dressed: longish shorts with crisp polo shirts or round-necked white T-shirts, her swimsuit a conservative black one-piece. Nina had come to say goodbye on the morning of their departure: she had flown back in sensible jeans and Tods loafers and a short-sleeved white seersucker shirt.

Susan, in contrast, dressed like a teenager going through a hippie phase: today she had skipped about in three-quarter-length olive-green linen trousers, a low-cut purple vest and leather flip flops. Tonight she had made a lot more effort. In fact she was overdressed and showing a lot of flesh in a thin-strapped pink number. Sitting next to Howard, she was hanging on his every word. When the men broke into laughter she joined in a fraction of a second late, touching Howard's arm and leaving her hand there too long.

No matter. Howard hadn't gone anywhere so far and he certainly wasn't going anywhere now. Like all couples they had had their ups and downs. And a nasty moment all those years ago with the receptionist at the Chingford showroom. Jemma had had to put her foot down over her. Howard had fallen into line, sacked her and nothing more had been said.

They had a history and it wasn't all picture-perfect. But when they got into bed at night – when Howard told her what was on his mind, when he spilt the beans and got down

to the details – each knew that they could trust the other. Whatever the secrets and tales Howard spun the world, she was confident that there was nothing she didn't know about the business. Last night, as they lay in bed, he had told her all about Alex.

'He wants half a mill for Putney.'

'What?'

'He hasn't talked figures. But that's what he's going to ask for …' Howard paused. 'Because that's what he needs. He's six months behind with the payments to Allied Bank on his central London properties. The business is sinking. He made some bad investments and the interest rate is killing him. And he spends too much. He's holding off the bank but any day now they're going to call in the loans.'

She hadn't asked him how he knew. Howard had a contact, a financial private investigator with great connections and no respect for the law, who for an envelope of cash would tell you all you needed to know about your business associate's bank accounts, credit cards and mortgage.

'So what are you going to do?'

Howard put his arms round her. 'I'm going to make him an offer. His entire business.' He began kissing the back of her neck. 'For a knock-down price.'

Susan sat on the kitchen step and watched the first rays of the dawn rise. She leaned back against the door, closed lest any smoke linger in the kitchen, and inhaled on the joint. She felt at a perfect pitch of physical and emotional wellbeing, a state all the sweeter for having been so long coming. After so long struggling and getting nowhere she reflected with elation that she could still pull it off.

Her success she put down to her ability to change plans according to circumstances, to pull triumph out of the most unpromising scenario. After dinner her plans for engaging Howard had been derailed when he had been dragged into the garden by Alex for cigars. Gerry, complaining of 'a long

day', had gone to bed. She had been marooned in the living room with fat Jemma and boring Nina reminiscing about their luxury holiday in Las Vegas.

'Howard liked that Cirque du Soleil. But I made sure we got to see Céline.'

Listening to them had made her sick, the casual way they talked about spending money she could only dream of. Jemma, it was clear, liked to shop.

'You have to be careful, mind. I like to go for the classics. You can't go wrong with Louis Vuitton.'

There was more talk of the hot stone massage at the Four Seasons Spa and the merits of the different luxury malls.

'We used to go to Vegas every year. But now that Howie's got the yachts in Marbella it's more difficult to get away.'

Poor Jemma. It must be so fucking hard when you can't holiday in the USA on account of all the money you're making in Spain.

Susan had looked discontentedly around the room. Since she had last come Alex had bought a Victorian watercolour, which now hung next to the door. Over dinner he had explained that he got it from Christie's in South Kensington – which had got Howard talking about buying classic cars at auction. It had also emerged that Howard and Jemma lived in Radlett in a house with an indoor pool, a home cinema and a gym.

Nina and Alex were always buying things. The room was furnished with good antiques and big sofas. The doorway was made of old Cotswold stone and because it was from the seventeenth century you had to bend slightly to go through. The house had other old things like that: there was a wig-hole next to the huge fireplace and the flagstones were worn from hundreds of years of people treading on them.

Nina had tried to involve her in the conversation.

'Susan's spending the summer in Marlow with our family,' she explained to Jemma. 'She's got a stand at the farmers' market.'

'I'm selling soy soap and candles,' Susan explained brightly. But she didn't want to talk about living with her mother or her dead-end job or her God-awful brother. Nor did she want to be reminded that tomorrow she would have to leave this nice house, squash into the car with Gerry and go back to it all. She felt a surge of resentment. She was too old to be living in other people's houses, obeying other people's rules, eating what they allowed her to eat.

Before Wales she had been reduced to taking a nannying job, something she had sworn she would never go back to. The Phillipses lived in a five-storey house in Argyll Road off Kensington High Street. They had two children – Clemmie, who went to Norland Place and did as she was told, and Hamish, who was two and whined a lot and reminded Susan of her brother. Caro Phillips's husband was something in the City: she didn't even work. Instead Caro Phillips spent her time going to the gym, having coffee with her friends and making lists. 'We're going to be in Palm Springs for a week – it's the firm's fifty-year anniversary conference and I can't miss it. We'll be staying at the Ritz-Carlton. You'll be in sole charge while we're away. So you need to be up to speed before we go.'

The lists were mostly don'ts: don't answer the door without checking the entryphone; don't give Hamish any sugar; don't allow Clemmie more than one hour of television after homework; don't tumble-dry Clemmie's Kent & Carey silk-trim smock dress.

Susan had broken all the rules. What did Caro Phillips expect when she even told Susan what not to eat – 'Susan, that carrot cake was supposed to be kept for Sunday!'

Was it any wonder that these people couldn't keep nannies when they treated them so abysmally?

Susan half-listened to the conversation, which had moved on to London restaurants. Jemma was talking. 'I don't think you can beat Harvey Nic's Fifth Floor for lunch …'

Susan looked from Nina to Jemma. Like Caro Phillips,

they didn't possess any special qualities that she didn't have: they weren't pretty or clever or talented. No, they had just got lucky and hooked up with the right man.

After a little while she made her excuses and retreated upstairs, only to be greeted by Gerry's open-mouthed snoring and the kids spread out across the bed. Perched on the edge, intermittently kicked by Harry, eventually she drifted off to sleep only to be woken up by the sounds of loud goodnights and the clatter of footsteps on the wooden staircase. At three o'clock she gave up trying to get back to sleep and decided to go downstairs for a joint. It was as she was coming down the stairs that she had first caught the whiff of cigar smoke from the drawing room and the sound of a glass being replaced on the table.

Howard? Or Alex? In a split second she realised that it didn't really matter.

So she had paused, retreated silently upstairs, splashed her face with water and swapped her faded nightdress for the pink silk dress discarded on the floor. But she had left off her bra and knickers.

Alex was in the drawing room. He looked up as she came in. Immediately she noticed that he looked downcast in a way that he never had before.

'Hey,' she said softly. 'Greetings, fellow insomniac!'

He lifted a hand as if in reply. She picked up Nina's Marlboro Lights from the table. 'Light?'

He leaned forward and lit her cigarette. She caught the scent of his aftershave and the aroma of cigars. She loved those mingled smells. Alex sat with a cigar and a near-empty crystal brandy glass. She picked up the bottle and refilled his glass.

And then threw him the line, 'What's happened?'

He shook his head. 'Sometimes the best laid plans go awry.'

She waited for him to say more. Sure enough after thirty seconds or so he spoke. 'Tonight I made Howard an offer.' He

grimaced. 'And he made me an unexpected counter-offer.'

She had no idea what he was talking about. But that didn't matter. It was a question of validating people's feelings – she recalled that from Counselling Basics – in other words telling people what they wanted to hear.

'Alex. You are a business genius!'

He gave a hollow laugh. But she was right. Hell, Alex could pay all her bills out of petty cash.

Undaunted by Alex's grim expression as he stared into his glass, she pressed on. 'It's obvious how talented you are. Look at all you've accomplished.'

'All that I'm about to—' He stopped short. 'Sometimes holding it together can be tough.'

'Well, yes,' she said simply. 'Whoever told you it would be easy? Of course there are going to be tough times when you set out to do something exceptional. But what separates someone like you from the crowd – what makes you one in a million – is that you can pull it off.' She searched in her mind for the right metaphor. 'Any idiot can fly a plane on autopilot. What takes real skill and guts is to pull it out of a tailspin.'

She could see from the flicker in his eyes that she had caught his attention now. She took the opportunity to move over to the sofa where he was sitting. 'You just have to keep your nerve.'

She moved her hand against his shoulders. 'You're very tense.'

'I have a constant fucking headache.'

That remark was a very good sign. She could never remember Alex admitting any vulnerability before. She took the initiative, tucking her legs underneath her so that she was kneeling next to him on the sofa. She began massaging his shoulders. She could remember what to do from the Introduction to Massage Therapy course.

'It's your trapezius muscles,' she said confidently.

He didn't put up any resistance. Instead, as she worked in

silence, she felt him weaken with every minute that passed until she felt safe enough to gently unbutton his shirt and slip it from his back. They must have sat there for close to twenty minutes, in silence, Susan moving so that the inside of her thigh was pressed up close to his leg.

Softly she asked, 'Does Nina know how you feel?'

He shook his head. 'I don't want to worry her.'

She murmured in agreement. 'I think it's very noble of you to protect her. But you need someone to talk to – a sounding board. Someone to support you.'

He gave a humourless laugh. 'Are you saying I need to see a shrink?'

'No, of course not. You're not that weak type of person. You're a winner. But I think you need a friend. Someone who is on your side.'

He said nothing. She pushed her fingers up into his hair and he arched his head back with pleasure. 'Alex, you need an ally. A confidante.'

A mistress.

She took his continued silence as a sign of assent. 'And you need some pleasure in your life,' she concluded.

It was time to test him. She moved closer so that her breast was pressed against his bare back with just the thin silk of Nina's dress separating them. When he didn't resist she knew that it was time to strike.

It was ironic. The lowest three months of her life, the job she still pretended to herself she had not taken, the men who had only wanted to escort her to one place for one purpose, had taught her all she needed to know – it pays to be direct. She pulled down the straps of the dress, pressing her naked flesh to his, and eased her hand onto Alex's crotch. He was already hard. She felt the thrill of victory close at hand. Deftly she undid his belt.

'We can't,' he protested. He placed a hand on hers as if to stop her.

She ignored him. 'Alex, you need this. Let me give this to

you.' His hand relaxed but stayed in place. It was a dangerous moment. It was time to call his bluff.

So she pulled up the straps of the dress and stood up. He could not hide the dash of disappointment that crossed his face. She let him feel it. And then, standing in front of him, she slowly pulled off her dress so that she was naked. She saw his eyes fall on her full breasts, her flat stomach and then down. She saw his hunger, let him look but stood so that his hand was just out of reach. And then she dropped to her knees in front of him.

'Alex, you deserve this.'

He was lost to her now. She took his hard cock in her mouth and began teasing him, taking him to the brink but never far enough, until she could sense that he was growing angry with thwarted desire. She brought him the closest yet, almost to the point of climax and pulled away. Then, before he had a moment to think, let alone consider the consequences, she pushed him back and sat astride him. She fucked him hard and quickly, left no chance that he might have time to move or think or resist.

He came and she didn't. Afterwards, as she eased herself off him, she could see that he didn't know what to say or how to react. She did.

She handed him his shirt. 'You need to get to bed.'

He looked struck with doubt and fear.

'Shh,' she said soothingly. 'Go to bed. Go on.'

He hesitated, picked up his shirt off the floor, then placing a kiss lightly on her forehead, he departed. She stayed on the sofa, her legs up on the armrest, too intoxicated to sleep. She waited half an hour then went to roll a joint on the kitchen table.

And so it was that she was sitting on the kitchen step as dawn rose, in position overlooking the driveway, to hear the sound of tyres on the gravel and to watch as two police cars and a large black Vauxhall saloon pulled up outside the house.