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Hens Reunited

Lucy Diamond

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Extract

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Katie's Hen Night

February 1994

'Cheers to the hens!'

Katie Taylor picked up her champagne flute and thrust it into the air. Seven flushed faces beamed back at her along the length of the restaurant table. Her best friends, Alice and Georgia; her younger sisters, Charlotte and Laura; two friends from work, and, down at the far end of the table, her future sister-in-law, Nicki.

'Cheers!' the chorus came back as they all lifted their glasses and clinked them against each other. 'Yay!' added Alice, her apple cheeks shining in the candlelight. 'Cheers to the blushing bride, too!'

Katie adjusted the plastic silvery tiara on her head – it had slipped over one ear again – and slugged back a large mouthful of bubbly. 'Well, I don't know about *blushing*,' she said, cocking an eyebrow saucily, and everyone laughed. 'Seriously, though,' she said, suddenly feeling a lump in her

throat, 'it's so great that you're all here for my hen night.' Tears pricked her eyes as she gazed at them, friends and family out together in the new T.G.I. Friday's off the ring road. She thought for a moment she was going to start blubbing all over her chicken-in-a-basket, and dabbed at her eyes with the paper serviette. 'Thanks, Alice and Georgia, for organizing everything,' she went on, her voice wobbling slightly as she raised her glass to each of them in turn. 'You're the best hens and bridesmaids a girl could ask for.'

'You haven't seen the strippergram yet,' Georgia teased, tossing her dark hair over one shoulder so that it fell down her back in a sleek, shining mass. She arched a perfectly plucked eyebrow. 'You might not be saying that later . . .'

Alice grinned. 'She's only winding you up,' she told Katie, dipping one of her fries in ketchup and swallowing it whole.

'Yeah, I'm only joking,' Georgia said, and winked. 'It's a gorillagram really. Big, butch and hairy, just the way you like them, Katie.'

Everyone giggled. '*Really*, Georgia?' asked Charlotte, Katie's youngest sister, who was only fifteen and thought Georgia the most glamorous creature ever to be seen in Wiltshire. 'Is there *really* going to be a gorillagram?' She stared around eagerly, eyes wide, hoping for a glimpse of some male dangly bits to brag about to her friends at

school. What with the alcopop she'd tried for the first time in her life AND the electric-blue mascara that Laura had let her borrow, this was turning out to be the most exciting night she'd ever had.

Georgia pursed her blood-red lips. 'You never know,' she said, tapping her nose confidingly.

'Big butch hairy men aside,' Alice said, raising her glass in Katie's direction, 'here's to you, Mrs Watkinson.'

'Oi, not yet,' Katie retorted, laughing. 'I've got one week left of being Katie Taylor before I'm a Mrs anything.' She allowed herself a secret shiver of excitement at the thought of the wedding next Saturday. Mrs Watkinson. Mrs Neil Watkinson! It sounded so married. So grown up! She glanced down at her engagement ring, the gold glinting under the bright restaurant spotlights, and felt goosebumps breaking out along her arms. 'I mean it, though. I'm having a fab night tonight. And I just know the wedding is going to be the best one ever!'

Two hours later, Katie was feeling decidedly ratted as she swung around the dance floor to Chaka Demus and Pliers. Georgia was shaking it up nearby with a bloke wearing stupid rapper trousers, and Alice was making Charlotte drink pints of water at the side, after some Pernod-and-black-related vomiting incident in the loos. Oh, it was so brilliant having Alice and Georgia here, Katie was really

chuffed they'd come all the way from London for tonight. She'd missed them, more than she'd expected to. It had all been a whirlwind, meeting Neil, leaving London, making plans for the wedding and a whole new future . . .

The song changed and suddenly Georgia was at her side. 'You're Lulu, I'm Robbie,' she said, spinning around on the spot. 'Alice! Over here! You're Gary Barlow!'

Alice left her Charlotte-tending duties at once and ran onto the dance floor. 'I'm Mark Owen,' she bellowed over the pounding music, wiggling her hips. She wasn't really a confident dancer, Alice, always too self-conscious about how her body looked (unlike Georgia, who was going for it big-style with her routine, punching the air and singing into a pretend microphone), but the first time the three of them had ever been out together to the Friday club night at the student union, they'd all had such a laugh dancing to 'Could It Be Magic' that, since then, hitting the dance floor for Take That had become something of a ritual.

'Cos I neeeeeeeed your love!' Georgia screamed, grabbing Katie's hand and spinning her round.

Katie laughed uncontrollably as she saw the looks her workmates, Beth and Andrea, were giving her. They both knew Katie as the rather quiet, sensible new girl in the office, helping with the accounts, mucking in with the tea- and coffee-making. They probably hadn't realized they worked with a disco diva who had such mad Robbie

Williams-impersonating friends. Oh, who cared what they thought anyway? It was only a stop-gap job until she sorted out another college course. And she hadn't had a proper dance for ages – too long.

She made a hand into a pretend microphone of her own and went for it.

By two o'clock the next morning when the music stopped and the club lights suddenly went horribly bright, Charlotte was asleep on a velour banquette with Laura trying to shake her awake, Beth and Andrea had long gone, and Nicki had been picked up by her fella for a lift home. 'See you at the wedding,' she'd said, kissing Katie goodbye.

'That was an ace hen night,' Alice said, as the cab dropped them back at Katie's mum's house. Her fair hair was plastered to her head and someone had spilled a pint of lager down her side, but her eyes were sparkly with happiness.

'I loved it,' Georgia agreed, linking an arm through Katie's as they walked up the front path. 'What a laugh – my face aches from smiling all night. It's not been the same without you, Kate, our Friday nights. Are you sure you can't persuade Neil to move to London?'

Katie wrinkled her nose. 'I doubt it,' she said, unlocking the front door. 'And now that I've got this job in his dad's firm, I—'

Everyone jumped as a large figure loomed in the doorway. Alice gave a scream before clapping a hand to her mouth and giggling nervously. 'Back so soon?' slurred Mrs Taylor, leaning against the door jamb. Her skin was mottled and puffy, her eyes glazed. She was slaughtered, as usual. 'Thought you might have pulled and gone off to some bloke's house.'

'We're not all like you,' Katie said tartly, elbowing her aside. 'Come on in. Laura, are you all right with Charlotte?' She could feel her skin prickling. Mum had to spoil everything. 'Go up to my room,' she hissed to Alice and Georgia. 'I'll be there in two minutes.'

'I've told her, she's making a mistake,' Mrs Taylor said, her eyes small and mean. 'But does she listen to her old mum? No. She'll learn. She'll soon—'

'Oh, shut up, Mum,' Laura snapped. 'Or I'll get Charlotte to puke on you.'

Mercifully – and surprisingly – Mrs Taylor sloped off to bed herself without another word.

Alice and Georgia were squeezing into Katie's old bedroom for the night, and when they'd all whispered and giggled their way through make-up removal and teeth brushing, the three of them lay in their sleeping bags in the darkness.

'Sorry about my mum,' Katie said, still mortified at what had happened. 'She's such a nightmare.'

Alice reached out and held her hand. 'Don't let it spoil tonight,' she said.

'Yeah, come on, Mrs Watkinson, think of happier things,' Georgia put in.

'Oi, don't start all that Mrs Watkinson stuff again!' Katie scolded, but Alice had already launched into song.

'And here's to you, Mrs Watkinson . . .' she warbled.

'Georgia-'n'-Alice love you more than you could know,' Georgia joined in, giggling. 'Whoa, whoa, whoa . . .'

Katie smiled in the darkness at her friends' tuneless singing. They were right – she wouldn't let her mum wreck her hen night. She was nearly Mrs Watkinson after all – and better times were just around the corner . . .

Chapter One

How Deep Is Your Love?

Friday, 13 June 2008

'So don't forget, this needs to be handed in to me on Monday, first thing, all right? Anyone giving in late coursework will—'

BRRRRRRINNNNNGGGGG!

The school bell interrupted Katie's words. Half the class had had an eye on the clock for the last ten minutes, of course – who didn't want to get away at breakneck speed on Friday afternoon? – and were up from their seats, bags packed and through the door before the bell had finished pealing without so much as a 'Bye, miss'.

'Coursework on Monday morning!' Katie bellowed after their departing backs. They were not supposed to leave the classroom until she'd given them permission to go – headmaster's rules – but it was the end of the week, and

she decided she'd disregard it this once. Some battles just weren't worth fighting.

She turned back to face the remnants of the class who were busily stuffing their algebra textbooks into their bags. She could see it in their eyes, their hungry expressions, that they too were desperate to escape the classroom, but they at least were still obedient enough to wait for the official release. 'Okay, off you go, then,' she said. 'See you next week. Have a good weekend.'

Back scraped all the chairs from their desks as they got to their feet. A swell of chatter rose; you could feel the atmosphere change from that of endured confinement to sweet liberation. And off they went, iPods in, mobiles checked for new text messages (another blind eye turned – they were meant to wait until they were off school premises for that), talk of parties and shopping and sleepovers . . .

Their high, excited voices echoed for a while as they went down the corridors, then all was silent. Friday afternoon. Your weekend starts here.

She sat down at her desk, relishing the peace and quiet. It always seemed particularly dense, that silence, after thirty noisy teenagers had so recently vacated the space. She pulled over a pile of Year 8 homework books. Right, then. Now for an hour's marking before she went to the supermarket; the traditional start to the weekend. Not for her, talk of sleepovers and parties and shopping. Katie

Taylor liked a good solid structure at the centre of her life. It felt safe that way. There was no room for any silly fanciful notions when you had a watertight routine in place.

She pulled over the first book. Ella Townsend. With 'I ♥ Zack!!!!' in big letters on the front cover. Katie couldn't help but notice that 'I ♥ Danny!!!!' and 'I ♥ Miles!!!!' had been crossed out elsewhere on the cover. If Ella Townsend could just pay as much attention to her maths homework as she did to her love life, she'd be top of the class. As it was, with Zack Richards to moon over and write love notes to, her homework had taken a swerve for the worse this year. What was it with teenagers and their hopeless crushes?

Katie wrinkled her nose as she red-penned her way through Ella's equations. Cross, cross, cross, cross, tick, cross. Ella wasn't daft, either. Only a year ago, she'd been one of the most diligent students in the class. Now hormones had kicked in and schoolwork had gone out the window. The sad thing was, she didn't even seem to care.

Concentrate, Ella!, Katie wrote in red pen at the bottom of the page, having totted up the girl's score as four out of twenty. *I know you can do better than this!*

Still, they all had them, didn't they? Their silly romantic lapses of reason. Katie, too, had been like that, back when she was a teenager. But of course, she'd been even worse

than Ella. She'd actually given up her degree to go and get married. To Neil Watkinson, of all people! So she was a fine one to talk.

Katie realized she was gazing out of the classroom window, almost as if she were expecting her ex-husband to gallop across the playground on a white charger or something. She stifled a giggle. Fat chance. Neil Watkinson probably drove a people-carrier these days, with a collection of kiddie seats in the back and his second wife in the passenger seat. Or third wife, even, knowing what he was like.

Neil bloody Watkinson, eh. It seemed almost unbelievable to her now, that she and Neil Watkinson had once spent all that money on the hired suit and dress, flowers, photos and a finger buffet, had pored over invitation lists, seating plans and honeymoon travel brochures. For what? A year of having to pick his dirty pants up off the floor every day, that's what. Cooking all those bloody Findus crispy pancakes, his favourite food. Ironing umpteen work shirts of his – how had that happened? How had they morphed into those husband/wife stereotypes so scarily quickly, when she was just as useless with an iron as him?

All that she had now to show she'd ever been married were a few faded photos, that nasty gold Ratners ring stashed in the depths of her knicker drawer and the cheeseboard her Aunty Wendy had bought them, gathering

dust in the kitchen. She didn't even particularly like cheese; she was a Cheddar kind of girl, fine in a sandwich with a bit of tomato, but that was about it.

It seemed even more surreal to Katie that she'd ever taken her clothes off and lain there on the marital bed, letting Neil Watkinson clamber onto her and pump away, wearing his Bristol bloody Rovers top half the time (sartorial standards fell alarmingly, post-wedding). He was desperate for her to get pregnant as quick as possible. Not because he particularly liked children – he called the neighbours' kids all the names under the sun if they woke him up on a Sunday morning – but because he thought it would prove he was a Real Man. And that was really where their marriage started to go wrong, of course . . .

Katie shuddered at the fleeting flashback. She and Neil had got together during the long vacation after her first year of university. All her friends were heading off on adventures: Georgia had wangled herself an internship at the *Daily Mirror* as part of her journalism course. Alice was InterRailing with a few other mates. Katie had no such exciting plans – in fact, she was working as a barmaid in the White Horse, trying to pay off her debts. But then in walked Neil Watkinson and bought her a drink . . . and suddenly life seemed to pick up.

She was smitten with him, instantly. His low voice, his crooked smile, the way his eyes sought out hers and

lingered over her body. She'd never had a proper boyfriend before then, had never known what it felt like to be in love, but within minutes she felt as if she were drowning in the stuff. Two weeks later, she'd lost her virginity to him in one of the meadows by the towpath. And two months after that, he'd proposed.

Everyone had voiced their doubts when she said she was leaving uni to marry Neil. 'You must be barking,' Georgia had said with typical bluntness. 'Tie yourself down to one bloke? You're not even twenty yet – you've got years of shagging around ahead of you!'

'What about your degree?' Alice had added. 'You can't just drop out because you've fallen in love. Can't you wait a few years?'

But no. She didn't want to wait. She didn't want to 'shag around', as Georgia had so charmingly put it. Her mind was made up. Even her mum couldn't sway her. 'You're making a terrible mistake,' she'd said, shaking her head. 'Don't trust him. Lesson number one – men are all bastards.'

But that was like a red rag to a bull, of course. Katie was not going to take love-life advice from her mum of all people. She'd listened to her heart instead, she'd sorted out the white dress and tiara, and sent out the invitations. She'd been Mrs Neil Watkinson for a whole twelve months until the tension had begun to crackle between them, when she

hadn't given him a baby, and he wouldn't give her any freedom, and … well, you had to have your bottom line, didn't you? And stumbling upon your husband rogering Linda O'Connor from next door in the spare room was definitely what Katie called a bottom line.

What a relief it had been, walking out on him! She could see herself now, head high as she strode down that narrow front path, not looking back at the little two-up two-down terraced house, all her stuff wedged into sports bags (including the cheeseboard – God knows why she'd packed that, as a weapon perhaps, in case he tried to stop her going).

Neil, this isn't working any more, she'd written. *I've gone back to London. Sorry.*

It had been cowardly, sure, sneaking out of the relationship when he'd been at work, especially as he'd grovelled and begged over the shagging-Linda-O'Connor incident until he was blue in the face. He thought he was forgiven, but she'd just been biding her time, steeling herself until she had the guts to walk away. And the lightness that had filled her, the joy of liberation, she was almost giddy with it as she clicked the front gate behind her and left their home for good.

End of the marriage. Start of her new life. Easy as that. And no, she'd never truly trusted another man since.

She turned back to her desk and picked up the next

exercise book. Megan White. Who *also* loved Zack, by the looks of things.

Ten minutes later, Katie was interrupted by Miss Dickens, the school secretary, popping her head round the classroom door.

'Sorry to bother you, Katie dear, but there's a . . .' She looked flummoxed for a second, her nose twitching like a rabbit's. 'Well, there's a car waiting for you outside. A taxi.'

Katie frowned. 'A taxi? For me? But I haven't ordered—'

'Yes, for you, dear.' That faint look of consternation on her face as if she suspected a prank in the offing. Miss Dickens was very wary of pranks. 'Most insistent, the driver was. Said there'd been a change of plan and you needed to leave work now.'

'Change of plan?' Katie echoed. 'Leave now?'

Miss Dickens nodded and the silvery curls on top of her head bobbed back and forth. 'That's what he said. I hope nobody's mucking you about, what with it being Friday the thirteenth and all that, but . . . well, if you wouldn't mind sorting him out, dear, only I'm right in the middle of the Year 10 class schedules for September and . . .'

'Yes, of course,' Katie said, cutting in. Given half a chance, Miss Dickens would be there until Sunday evening, sounding off about her class schedules. How irritating to

be interrupted like this, though. Obviously, there was some misunderstanding, all this talk of a change of plan, and having to leave work. Friday the thirteenth indeed – Katie had no truck with fanciful superstitions. The driver was clearly confusing her with another person who didn't have twenty-five more homework books to mark and a Tesco trip to fit in by six o'clock, but all the same . . .

She grabbed her handbag and followed Miss Dickens down the corridor. It was still so warm – this June was turning out to be a scorcher – and she made a mental note to put some Pimm's in the trolley when she finally got to the supermarket. Pimm's, mint, lemonade, cucumber, maybe some strawberries. If a thing was worth doing, it was worth doing properly, Katie always thought.

She'd reached the front doors of the school that opened out onto the staff car park and drive. And there, engine purring, sat a large black cab, the sort you usually only saw in London. It looked swanky and decidedly out of place, waiting outside scruffy St Joseph's Comprehensive School in this particular Bristol suburb, which usually only saw Mondeos and Astras shambling around.

Definitely a case of mistaken identity. Oh well. At least this would only take two minutes to sort out.

She strode over to the car, an apologetic look on her face. 'I think you've got the wrong—'

'Katie Taylor?'

'Yes, that's me, but—'

'Birthday tenth March, lives on Warburton Road?'

She stared at the driver, momentarily taken aback. Had she met him before? She racked her brain but had no memory of his dark hair, thick eyebrows and greasy-looking skin. 'How did you know that?'

He consulted a piece of paper he had on a clipboard. 'Born in the General Hospital to Margery and Ian Taylor, two sisters?'

Katie could feel her cheeks flushing with heat. What was this? Some massive wind-up? 'Look, I don't know who sent you—' she began, trying to wrest back some control.

'Favourite colour blue, favourite smell lavender?' the driver went on, glancing up at her from his paper. He raised his eyebrows. 'Very nice,' he said to himself.

'Well yes, but—' She glanced around, wondering if some annoying teenage boys would be having a good laugh about this nearby. How did he know all this stuff? Had someone swiped a personal file from the office? It was probably Miss Dickens, befuddled by her class schedule, who'd given out a load of information about—

'Right, well, that must be you, then,' the driver said. 'He said I'd have to prove it before you'd believe me. Hop in, my lovely, and we'll get going.'

She put her hands on her hips. 'Go where? Who said that, anyway? Look, I really think this is a mistake. My

own car is . . .' She waved her hand at where her red Clio usually sat in the car park, waiting faithfully for her all day until it was time to go home. She prided herself on always parking it exactly between the white lines. You could have taken a ruler and measured each side, and it would be bang slap in the middle. Katie liked precision. But her eyebrows shot up now as she realized there was nothing in her parking space but shimmering heat. 'It's gone! My car's gone!'

The driver looked as if he was getting fed up. He turned the engine off and leaned against the wheel. 'Yeah, I know it's gone. Steve took it. That's why I'm here.'

'Steve?' Katie echoed, feeling more baffled by the second. What was Steve doing with her car?

'Yep, he picked up your car to be serviced. So I'm here to give you a lift. All right? Any more questions?'

Katie blinked. She felt as if someone had snatched her up from her ordinary everyday life where her car was precision parked and her day ran like well-oiled clockwork, and dumped her into a parallel universe where the mechanism of her routine had rusted over, and nothing made sense. So Steve had taken her car to the garage? But what was with the cloak-and-dagger Q-and-A session? Why all that favourite-colour stuff?

The driver was still staring at her, waiting for an answer.

One of his pink sausagey fingers scratched the salt-and-pepper stubble on his chin.

'Um … no,' she said faintly in the end. 'No more questions.'

'Right. In you get then. Might even miss the rush hour if we go now.'

Katie thought briefly of the pile of homework books she'd left unfinished on her desk, then banished the image from her mind. She'd have to come in early on Monday and do them then. How incredibly annoying! She hated having work hanging over her for the whole weekend; she preferred to clear the decks first. Work first, fun later. She'd always been like that, even as a schoolgirl. *Conscientious,* her teachers had written in her school reports.

Still. She didn't want to start quibbling with this driver, not now he'd started the car again and was revving the engine so impatiently. Not now she'd discovered he was her only means of transport home. Bloody hell!

She pulled open the back door and sat down on the bouncy vinyl seat. She felt odd, disorientated, as if it wasn't really her, sitting there being driven along. She had work to do, and the supermarket shopping to get through! How was she supposed to do that without her own wheels?

Honestly! Steve didn't think things through sometimes. It was all very kind of him taking her car off like that, but

he might have told her. Might have given her a bit of notice, rather than sending a cab round like this. But then, that was Steve for you. Him and his impetuousness . . .

She leaned back against the seat as the car rumbled through the estate. She and Steve had been together for just over two years and he was the first person she'd let herself get properly attached to since her disastrous marriage break-up all those years ago. She'd been so disillusioned after Neil that she'd sworn off men for a long time, only allowing herself brief flings and dalliances to keep from total Old Maid Meltdown. But no one had ever got close. She was just starting to think that her mum had actually been right all along about men, when she met Steve.

Steve was different. He made her laugh. He made her happy. And ooh, she really really fancied him, like she hadn't fancied anyone for years. He had sandy hair and brown eyes, a nice bum, and a wicked sense of humour. She'd kept him at arm's length for a long time, not quite able to let go and trust him. But he'd been persistent. Steady. He kept his promises just as consistently as he kept her warm in bed. And she hadn't intended to let him move in so quickly but . . . it had just happened. It seemed easier that way. And it was surprisingly nice to live with a man again, curling up on the sofa together in front of *The Apprentice* and what-have-you, even if Steve did spend the

whole programme doing his terrible Alan Sugar impressions. Throwing dinner parties together, and watching Steve across the candlelight as he made everyone laugh with his stories about work. Lying in bed on Sunday mornings, hearing his heart beat as she rested her head on his bare chest . . . yes, they were all good things. Very good.

Even *Georgia* approved. 'Well, he's a step up from Neil, I'll give him that,' she'd said when they'd met at a mutual friend's party. She'd exhaled a long plume of cigarette smoke as she and Katie watched Steve chat to everyone on his way to the bar. 'He's got social skills at least.'

'George! And the rest!' Katie had scolded. 'Come on, you can be a bit more generous than that.'

'All right, social skills and a sexy arse,' Georgia had conceded. 'And best of all, he's not Neil. Look, I'm complimenting the guy, all right?'

Katie jerked out of her thoughts now as she realized the driver was taking her the wrong way. She sighed crossly. For heaven's sake! What was he *doing*? She leaned forward. 'Excuse me – I live on *Warburton* Road,' she reminded him. 'You've gone past the turn-off, you know.'

The driver didn't seem to have heard. He was whistling along with Beyoncé on the radio and slapping the steering wheel to the beat.

Katie felt her hackles rising with annoyance. It was Friday, she was tired, she didn't like being messed around,

she didn't like her plans being changed by *anyone*, and now she was going to spend half her precious evening being driven around Bristol by some moron cabbie … 'I *said*, you've missed the turn-off!' she told him in her most teachery voice. 'You're going the wrong way!'

The driver still didn't answer. Katie was starting to feel disconcerted. What was going on here? Why wasn't the driver taking her home? Was this all part of Steve's plan, or was something more sinister going on? *It IS Friday the thirteenth, after all,* wittered Miss Dickens in her head.

Enough game-playing. She got her mobile phone out of her bag and brandished it so that he could see it in his rear-view mirror. 'If you don't pull over and let me get out *right now*, I'm calling the police,' she told him, her voice shaking.

To her consternation, he merely laughed. 'He said you might get cross with me,' the driver replied. 'He told me, just ignore her if she starts getting shirty. Sorry, sweetheart. But he's paying the bill, see, so …'

Katie's mouth dropped open in outrage. *Just ignore her if she starts getting shirty*? Had Steve actually said that about her? She glared as she imagined the words coming out of his mouth. She'd give him shirty! What *was* this wild goose chase he was sending her on, anyway?

'*I'll* pay the bill,' Katie said, fuming, as they turned into

a leafy Georgian square. 'Just stop the car and I'll pay. I've had enough of this game now. I just want to—'

'No need for that, my darlin',' the driver said, indicating and pulling over. 'Because we're here. Allow me.'

He nipped out and held the back door open for her. She stared suspiciously at him, and then up at the hotel she was standing in front of. Berkeley Square Hotel? Why had he brought her here? 'And . . . dare I ask what happens now?' she said icily. 'All part of the joke, eh?'

His hands were up in a *Whoa!* gesture, and he was laughing. 'Calm down. He said to go and check in. You have a good weekend now.' And with that, he was back in the driver's seat, giving her a cheery wave and pulling off.

Katie watched him go, feeling bewildered. 'He said to go and check in?' she repeated to herself. 'What, in *there*?'

She eyed the hotel. She knew for sure that this was a wind-up now. Any second, Steve would pop out, laughing his head off, then take her to their favourite pub in town. *So where* are *you, then, Steve?*, she thought, looking around. *Very funny*, she'd say when she spotted him. *You had me going for a minute, then. I thought I was getting kidnapped!*

Steve didn't appear. She looked at the hotel again. It occupied several townhouses in the quiet Georgian square, and had a pleasingly symmetrical frontage, with its large sash windows and the olive trees in pots either side of the

main door. It was meant to have an amazing restaurant, with luxurious double rooms. The sort of place she'd never go, unless someone was having a really special birthday do there. She'd read about it in the *Evening Post* when it had been revamped six months or so ago, had said, 'Ooh! That looks a bit flash for Brizzle', and then forgotten about it.

So deep down, she knew it was all a tease about her checking in there. It had to be, didn't it? Steve was probably taking a picture of her right now on his mobile phone from where he was hiding. He'd take the mickey out of her about it later. 'Did you really believe that cabbie?' he'd laugh. 'You dozy mare. What are you like?'

She was standing there like a lemon, not able to think straight. She might as well go inside the place, now that she was here, she supposed. She could always pretend she was checking out the facilities or something. And then, once she'd done that, she'd get the bus back home. Oh, and she'd send *Steve* out on the supermarket run. It was the least he could do after all this.

She stepped inside the hotel lobby. It felt cool and light, and practically smelled of money. Classical music was playing, and there was a small ornate fountain in the waiting area, water tumbling over slick white cobbles, which immediately made Katie need the loo. She felt sweaty and grubby in her Friday work clothes – whatever had possessed her to put on this skanky old vest top today,

anyway? – and tried to smooth her hair behind her ears as she went up to reception.

The woman behind the desk smiled at her, foundation dewy on her skin, clothes immaculate, a subtle hint of sweet perfume lingering around her. *Maria Porter, Reception Manager,* it said on her name tag. 'Can I help you?' she asked in a pleasant voice.

Katie felt instantly ridiculous. What was she doing here? Why had she even come in? 'I . . .' she began uncertainly, her face flooding with colour.

Maria Porter sat there, looking composed as she waited for Katie to form a coherent sentence.

'I don't suppose . . .' Katie swallowed, '. . . you've got a reservation for Katie Taylor, have you?' Her heart thumped uncomfortably. 'Or Steven Patrick?' Her fingers squeezed together. She felt so embarrassed! Any second now, Maria Porter, Reception Manager was going to send her packing and she'd be back out through those fancy doors, with her tail between her legs.

'Let's see,' said the receptionist, turning to her computer monitor and pressing a couple of buttons with her highly polished fingernails. Click, click. 'Ahh yes, here we are,' she said after a moment. 'Mr Patrick is waiting for you upstairs. Your suite is on the top floor, the last door on your right as you come out of the lift. Enjoy your stay!'

This was a dream. This wasn't actually real. Things like

this didn't happen to her. Katie stared at Maria Porter for a full ten seconds, jaw hanging open so that all her fillings were on display, before remembering her manners. 'Thank you,' she managed to say, and she walked in a daze towards the lift. Her head was spinning. She had been so convinced that this was a wind-up, had been certain it was some elaborate trick. Apparently not.

Oh my God. This was so exciting. The sort of thing you saw in a film, and thought, Yeah *right*. Like any bloke in real life would ever do *that*!

But it seemed that Steve had. What was he up to? Had he been promoted, maybe, and was splashing the cash? He'd mentioned some big conference he was hoping to be asked along to, but there'd been no indication of a pay rise in the offing.

Up she went in the mirrored lift, horrified to see how pink her cheeks were and how scruffy her hair was. And was that really a splodge of yogurt on her top? She was half surprised she hadn't been frogmarched out of the building by now for being such a pleb.

The door slid open again at the top floor, and she stepped out onto carpet so thick and soft, her feet didn't make a sound as she walked along the corridor.

She knocked at the door at the end and turned the handle, her heart thumping as she went in.

There inside the room, sitting on an enormous double

bed, looking pleased with himself and nervous all at the same time, was Steve. Katie stared at him, taking in several things at once.

There was a bouquet of red roses on one of the bedside tables.

There was a bottle of Moët on ice on the other.

There was a neatly packed bag of Katie's clothes and make-up on a chair, with her best black dress already on a hanger.

Wow. Even better than a film. This was amazing! So romantic! So . . .

Her blood ran cold suddenly as she noticed that Steve had his hand outstretched. And there, on his upturned palm, was a turquoise satin jewellery box. He opened it up and she saw a silver ring inside.

Her eyes sought out his face, shocked. He was smiling. 'Katie,' he said, dropping to his knees and proffering the box. 'Will you marry me?'