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Silk

Rupert James

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Extract

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Chapter 1

Rain rattled against the windows, mixed with grit and dry leaves swept up from the dirty London streets. It hadn't rained for weeks, but all the same it was a terrible end to a disappointing summer, the clouds marching relentlessly across the sky day after day, cold, barely a glimpse of sunshine. And now, finally, just in time for the August bank holiday, it had made up its mind to rain. The smell of wet earth wafted up from the filthy pavements, where weeks' worth of London grime was being washed away in sour, oily rivulets. The smell reached all the way to the top of the house, where Victoria stood, clutching her dressing gown around her, nursing a hangover and facing a brand new day at noon. Far below, working people hurried along with umbrellas, buffeted by the wind. The plane trees in the garden square rocked and swayed, their dark, exhausted leaves suddenly shiny with rain. It was the sort of day when she felt like going straight back to bed again. Had done so, in fact, many times.

There was nothing in particular for which to get up. Adele had suggested lunch – but Adele had been as drunk as she was last night, and was even less likely to be in shape by lunchtime. There was a Pilates class at two, and another at five, but that would mean having a bath and choosing an outfit and getting the car out and driving all the way to Chelsea . . . And in this weather, the traffic would be awful . . . She could do some work – there was the new *Vogue* to be digested, trends noted and analysed, research to be done, calls to be made. But without a deadline – Victoria never had deadlines – it was hard to get started.

Perhaps she would just open a bottle of wine, run a bath, soak for a while, shave her legs and go back to bed. After all, Massimo wasn't expected until tomorrow, at the very earliest. Plenty of time to make herself presentable, to put on the face that the world saw. But for now . . . She took one last glance out of the window, and drew the curtains. They smelt of cigarettes from too many late-night parties,

too many days spent listlessly smoking on the sofa. She really should take them to the cleaners, or buy new. She was sick of green velvet, of the funereal tone it gave to the room. She wanted something light, bright, inspiring. The whole room needed freshening up. Her hands strayed over *Elle Decoration*, then drifted away again, exhausted, the magazine unopened. It would wait. She'd rather keep the money. No point in lavishing all that care and attention on a flat that wasn't really hers.

She tasted something bitter in her mouth – the taste she always got when she thought about her precarious position, her vulnerability. Nothing was in her name. She'd asked Massimo a hundred times if he would sign over the deeds of the flat to her, or at least put some serious money into a savings account, something for a rainy day – because, come what may, as the mistress of a wealthy Catholic businessman, she was going to be rained on, heavily and at length, sooner or later. And when that wealthy Catholic businessman was married to an equally Catholic wife, the mother of a disabled son who, even in his twenties, needed full-time home care, the rain would be that little bit harder. Every time Victoria raised the subject of divorce or marriage, of settlements and outright gifts, Massimo ducked and dived with his usual charm, showered her with affection and presents, stayed for a few days, making love more energetically than usual, then disappeared again, the questions unanswered, unaddressed. Occasionally, when pressed, he'd say things like 'It's all yours, baby . . . It's all for you . . .', which made Victoria hope that maybe, after all, he'd made arrangements. But at other times – on rainy days like today, for instance – she was sure that he had not. If it came to a choice, the wife would always win. Mistresses, even as loyal and beautiful as Victoria, were dispensible. A wife was for life.

If only she could do what Adele had done . . . But Adele, as she never tired of reminding Victoria, was the smart one. She'd arrived in London in the seventies, with nothing but a secretarial qualification from a college in Geneva, and supported herself with a string of temporary day jobs while concentrating on her real career in the evenings. This involved dressing up in smart clothes, sitting in expensive bars in Mayfair, trying to appear available without looking like an out-and-out prostitute, until some tired businessman offered to buy her a drink.

After several abortive affairs, Adele landed the big catch – the unmarried son of a banking family, who whisked her off to Capri and Cannes, showed her the high life and brought her back to London with a bump – in her tummy. Nine months later, she produced a son and heir to the family fortunes, and made it perfectly clear that her little bundle of joy would be willing to waive his rights as the legitimate inheritor if recompensed with a substantial trust fund which she, his poor wronged mother, would manage. The relevant pieces of paper were signed, and today Adele and her son Hugo, now a strapping twentysomething, lived in the lap of luxury, in a mortgage-free house in Notting Hill that was worth well over ten times what had been paid for it. Her name was on the deeds, her income was protected, and her wise investments (managed by one of her many subsequent lovers) guaranteed for mother and son a comfortable old age.

Adele was tied to no one, dependent on no one. She took lovers as and when she felt like it, usually managing to convert them into friends rather than dumping them outright, and assembled around herself a salon of wealthy, powerful and influential men who gathered at her regular Tuesday-night *soirées*, there to discuss business, do discreet deals, and meet Adele's ever-revolving circle of attractive female friends. It was chez Adele that Victoria had met Massimo Rivelli, and it was on Adele's advice that she had snared him. But she had broken Adele's First Law – she'd fallen in love with Massimo, and made herself vulnerable. Now, said Adele, she would never get the house, the allowance, the security that she craved. She had shown weakness in herself, and pity for her lover. She had shown her hand, and she could never win.

Adele advised a clean break while Victoria was still young enough to find a new lover, one who would treat her better, and more honestly, than Massimo. But, try as she might, Victoria couldn't do it. More than once she'd prepared herself to drop the bombshell, to deliver the ultimatum – but Massimo had a way of wrongfooting her, and before she knew it she was more hopelessly in love than ever. She took her revenge with petty infidelities, knowing full well that such things never touched him. Massimo had his wife, of course – and Victoria was too much a woman of the world not to guess that he had other girlfriends stashed away. She was pretty certain that she was Mistress Number One, but she was surely not alone.

She went to the bathroom, turned on the hot tap and emptied half a bottle of moisturising bubbles under the flowing water. If she soaked for a while, and had something to eat, she might feel up to the five o'clock class – at least it would get her out of the house. While it was running, she fixed coffee and a chicken sandwich and checked her emails. There was one from Massimo, confirming dates of their next holiday – to Sardinia this time, closer than ever to Italy (at least they spoke the same language) – to stay at the house of a friend, with a view to selling Le Mûrier – the south of France was 'too popular', he said – and buying property on the island, perhaps near Porto Cervo, the new home for the truly wealthy. Well, she would miss Provence, the vulgarity of Saint-Tropez, the peace of Le Mûrier, the shops and bars and restaurants that she had come to love – but, if it brought her nearer to the epicentre of Massimo's life, so much the better. She Googled a few images of the marina at Porto Cervo, imagined herself in one of those white houses on the hillside, looking down into the sapphire waters, sipping wine and making love through long, hot, lemon-scented afternoons. Did lemons grow on Sardinia? If not, what did? Olives? Grapes? Oranges? In any case, it looked beautiful. The perfect backdrop against which Massimo would kiss her on the back of the neck – his favourite place, after the more obvious ones – and whisper in her ear 'Darling . . . I've got something to ask you . . . Will you be my . . .'

She came to with a jolt, the sound of dripping, slopping water dashing her sundrenched dreams.

'Shit! The bath!'

It was too late. The water had overflowed the tub, and was spreading with horrible speed across the marble floor. She made a grab towards the plug, slipped and nearly brained herself on the taps, caught herself on the shower rail, which she half wrenched out of the wall, and managed to plunge her hand into the water.

The ice cold water.

She pulled the plug, watched the water drain away, then grabbed clean towels from the bathroom cupboard to mop up the spillage. Oh God, there would be complaints again, if the water had leaked to the floor below.

Cold.

Why was the water cold? Not just tepid, like a hot tap left running too long, but freezing cold.

She phoned down to the concierge. They'd have someone up within the hour, they assured her.

Victoria splashed cold water on her face and neck, made a coffee, lit a cigarette and returned to her dreams of Porto Cervo.

The door buzzer woke her; she'd dropped off, a half-smoked cigarette burnt out in the ashtray, a cup of cold coffee congealing beside it. She was in a bad mood now, her headache even worse.

'About bloody time,' she muttered as she opened the door, preparing to take her bad mood out on whatever fat bald idiot they'd sent up this time.

Then she abruptly changed her mind.

Six feet of dark blue overall stood before her. Large, spade-like hands held a toolbox and a piece of pink paper scribbled with job details. Scanning up, Victoria took in a lean, triangular torso, broad shoulders, a thick neck and – oh, my God, the cheekbones! The cropped blond hair! Was she still dreaming?

'Mrs Crabtree?' The voice was heavily accented, eastern European, obviously – well, he was a plumber – but she couldn't quite put her finger on it. Yet.

'Yes, I'm . . .' She couldn't be bothered to correct the form of address. 'Come on in. Please excuse the dressing gown. I was about to have a bath.'

He grinned, followed her to the bathroom – was that his pale blue eyes she could feel burning on her backside? – and put his toolbox down on the wet floor. Victoria's eyes darted down the front of his shirt. His chest was hairy, a few plumes coming over the neckline. That five o'clock Pilates class now seemed a rather distant prospect.

'The water is freezing cold,' she said, perching on the edge of the sink and pulling her robe around her. 'Is there a problem with the boiler?'

'I look.' Ah, a man of few words. 'Where is?'

'I'm afraid I don't really have a clue . . . Somewhere in there, I think.' She gestured vaguely towards the cupboard where she kept towels. He opened it, crouched down, stretched up, displaying his long legs, round

arse and massive back to excellent advantage. Victoria feasted her eyes. It had been too long since she had seen Massimo. How long? Two weeks? More like three. And in all that time, no fun for Victoria. No fun at all.

'Is through here.' He jerked a thumb towards the hall. His hands were golden brown, the nails standing out in the palest pink. Victoria heard rummaging from the hallway, a door opening, things being moved around – the hoover, the ironing board, all the stuff she never touched but left to the cleaner – and, finally, the sound of low laughter.

'What is it?' She stood in the bathroom doorway, and saw his bum sticking out of the cupboard.

'Pilot light.' There were three loud clicks, and he emerged, red in the face, one thick vein standing out on his forehead. 'Pilot light gone out. Is light now.'

'Oh dear, was that all? I suppose I should know how to do that myself. How embarrassing.'

'Is easy. I show you?'

'Well, I don't know. Isn't it terribly complicated?'

'Come. Here. Look.'

She ducked into the cupboard, and he joined her. It was a cosy fit, particularly with his great broad shoulders. He smelt rather agreeably of soap and sweat.

'Look. See little light?' His thick fingers pointed to a porthole, where a tiny blue flicker of flame was burning.

'Oh yes . . .'

'If he is not there, you go one, two, three, boomph.' He pressed a button. 'Now you do.'

'One . . . Oh, it's stiff!'

'Harder.'

'Two . . . I can't seem to . . .'

His hand covered hers. 'Here. Like this.' He pumped her fingers down, the button engaged, the spark flew.

'Oh! How lovely!' They watched the flame burn for a moment together, as if it was the most rivetting thing in the world. 'Now may I have my hand back, please?'

'Yes. Sorry.'

They emerged, backwards and rather inelegantly, from the cupboard.

Victoria's dressing gown had worked itself open, and in rearranging it she gave him a flash. Accidentally? Of course.

He bounded ahead of her into the bathroom, turned on taps. 'Now! Hot water!'

'Thank you so much. I would never have been able to do that on my own. It's okay, leave it running.'

He was squatting down again, packing up his toolbox, filling out his form. His thighs bulged, threatening to rip the blue cotton of his overalls. He smiled up at her. God, he was handsome.

'Perhaps you would like to . . . help me test it.'

Doubt crossed his face. Perhaps his English wasn't good enough to catch her meaning – not that it was particularly ambiguous. Victoria didn't want to scare him off, but she was going to have to drop any attempt at subtlety.

She opened her dressing gown.

He understood that.

Within seconds, his hands – those huge, brown hands with golden hairs on the wrist – were all over her, on her waist, her back, her shoulders, her buttocks. He smiled, a pink flush on his cheeks, and then buried his face between her breasts, kissing and licking, sucking on each nipple, not too hard, not too gently. He knew what he was doing. He came up for air, but only long enough to kiss his way up her neck and find her mouth.

Victoria's fingers fumbled for the fastener at the top of his overalls, and then unzipped him all the way down to his crotch. The heat beat off him like a radiator. He was wearing a thin, worn t-shirt underneath, and then . . . Her hands explored. Boxer shorts. No trousers. And there was something big in there. But first . . .

She broke the kiss. 'Strip,' she said. He looked puzzled. 'Go on. I want to see you. Take your clothes off.'

Would he go all macho on her? She'd never had a Polish lover before – if he was Polish – and for all she knew they could be one of the more prudish nations. After all, they were Catholics – and even Massimo, despite all her training, was far from comfortable with being regarded as a sex object.

Plumber Boy seemed to have no such qualms. He wriggled out of the top of his overalls, revealing massive arms, dusted with golden hair.

There were damp patches in his armpits, around his chest. The overalls peeled off him, like skin from a moulting snake, hanging from his hips. He grabbed the bottom of his t-shirt and lifted it over his head. Muscled rippled under the hair on his stomach, on his chest. He pulled his head free from the t-shirt, his hair standing up, his arms hanging by his side.

Youth certainly did have its advantages. In his fifties, Massimo was a real man's man, the epitome of masculinity, strong, solid, a fabulous lover – but there was something about young skin, young muscle, the freshness, the smoothness . . . Victoria ran a hand down his chest, down his stomach. He wanted to grab her again, but she pushed him lightly away.

'Now the rest. Boots first.'

She watched him crouching, fiddling with his laces, which, naturally, knotted. He was like a schoolboy, too eager to get out of his uniform at the end of the day, in a hurry to play football, fumbling, awkward. She liked it. Finally the boots were off, and he stepped out of the overalls completely. All that was left now were his white sports socks and a very worn pair of cotton boxers, which were strained to bursting point by a very large and eager cock within.

Victoria was tempted to drop to her knees and finish the job herself, but the subject was taking orders rather nicely, and so she finished his training. She clicked her fingers. He got the message. Freed from the elastic waistband, his cock slapped up against his belly, cushioned by a light fuzz of blond hair.

'Hmmmm. Not bad.' She gestured a little circle in the air. 'Turn round.' The rear view was just as good as the front. 'Very nice. Now.' She clicked again, pointed to the floor. 'On your knees.'

He did as he was bidden – no macho hangups here, she was glad to see – and looked up at her with those ice blue eyes, his cock pointing the same way, his arse resting on the heels of his white socks.

She placed a foot on either side of his thighs.

'Now then,' she said, 'let's see if you can get this old boiler going as well.' It was lost on him, of course – but, to be honest, that was the last thing on Victoria's mind as the plumber buried his stubbly face between her legs.

* * *

'Ta-dah!'

Will threw open the doors – big double fire doors, with push bars, held shut with a chain and padlock that he'd just unlocked – and propelled Isabelle into the studio. It was a large, empty oblong. High ceilings, brick walls painted white, peeling, sooty. High windows, the sort that you open with a rope and pulley, reminiscent of schoolrooms. Some skanky industrial carpet on the floor, possibly once navy blue, now an indefinable grey. A metal kitchen sink was fitted to one wall, the pipes underneath exposed. It smelt stuffy, old, uninhabited. But it was big – twice as big as Isabelle was expecting – and bright, and to cap it all it was located slap bang in the middle of Hoxton, the epicentre of the London fashion world.

'But we can never afford it,' said Isabelle, hardly daring to step in and own the space. 'I mean . . . My God.' She looked up, spun around, feeling the size and the light. 'It's wonderful.'

'Do you like it?'

'Of course I like it. I love it. But come on. We'd blow everything on the first month's rent.'

'I thought the cutting table could go here.' Will gestured towards the left-hand wall.

'Yes, the light's good . . . but how could we . . .'

'And if we put some screens up at this end, we can have a couple of mattresses, you know, if we need to crash.'

'Is there a loo?'

'Outside, where we came in. It was a furniture factory. This was the main workshop. The offices were upstairs.'

'But it's huge . . .'

'Well it would need to be, wouldn't it?'

'Oh but Will . . .'

'What's wrong?'

'The money, of course.'

'Leave that to me.'

'We could never afford it.'

'We can.'

'How?'

'I've done a deal. Called in a favour. You know, friends in the right places.'

'You've shagged someone.'

'I may have done, at some stage of the negotiations, yes, and obviously I made a very good impression, because, my dear, we have got this place for virtually nothing for a year.'

'How? I can't believe it. It's too good to be true.'

'Because because because. Dreary business about leases and contracts and so on.'

'Is it legit?'

'Of course it's legit. What do you think I'm getting us into?'

'You tell me.' But it was already too late – Isabelle could see herself working in the space, modelling the fabrics on the dummies, installing a rack against the longest wall, hanging up her swatches, throwing parties, sleeping, eating and working in this one empty box which was already filled with her dreams. She took Will's hands in hers.

'Do you promise . . .'

'Shhh.' He put a finger to her lips. 'Trust me.'

Suddenly she felt euphoria bubbling up inside her. She kissed his hand, then grabbed it and pulled him around the studio, running, laughing, screaming.

'Oh my God! This is it! This is where it's going to happen! You're a genius!'

'No, Princess,' said Will, taking her in a waltz hold, 'you're the genius. I'm just the businessman. Shall we dance?'

Ben was late, and dinner was cold, but that was nothing new; Christine actually expected it these days, and simply cooked things that were equally edible hot or not. He was at home less and less, as if he was fading out of her life, for all that she wanted to relish these final months as mother and son, before he flew the nest for good and became just another adult. Oh well, she thought, his absence will be less painful when it comes. Perhaps this is his way of breaking it to me gently.

Their nights in together had never been frequent – either she was working, or dining, or undertaking some public engagement, or he was DJing at a club, doing band practice or simply 'out with mates' – which, Christine assumed, meant girlfriends, although she never asked and he never told. Could be boyfriends. Could be just friends. After encouraging

her children to be independent and open minded, she could hardly complain now that they were.

It had been a hard day, like every other day – on her feet in the high court, this time acting for a woman in her sixties who had given the last forty years of her life to her husband's farming business, milking at four o'clock in the morning, raising children who now worked on the farm, taking an accountancy course so that she could do the books in her 'spare' time – and was not inclined to accept the £800,000 payout that her cheating bastard of a husband proposed. Christine had a figure much more like £1.5 million in mind, and was confident of getting it. She could hear the rustle of that silk gown getting ever nearer . . .

She put a couple of salmon fillets on a plate, a few new potatoes, a bit of salad, covered up the rest and put it in the fridge. If Ben got back hungry, it was there for him. If not, that was dinner sorted for tomorrow night. At least with one child theoretically living at home, Christine could motivate herself to cook. God knows what she'd do when Ben went to university. Probably exist on microwaved ready meals, like her other single friends – of which there seemed to be far too many these days. Marriages didn't last. Nobody could say divorce was too easy – people like Christine made damn sure of that – but that didn't put people off. She used to quip at dinner parties in the good old days that she was all in favour of the breakdown of marriage, that it had feathered her nest very nicely. Oh, they used to laugh at that one, their friends – knowing, as she now realised they must have done, the vicious irony of which Christine was blithely, smugly unaware. Well, that one certainly turned round and bit her on the arse, like a trusted family pet gone bad.

It was half past eight. Proper dinner time. Christine poured herself a glass of wine – just one, albeit a large one. She didn't want to end up like Linda, her former pupil mistress, still slogging away at the rougher end of the family bar while her *protégée* had long since leapfrogged her. Married and divorced young and childless, never got over it, Linda drank herself into maudlin misery every night, somehow functioning with a hangover – just. The clerks at her chambers didn't trust her with decent work. She fucked up too often, but wouldn't admit it. She said she preferred the rough and tumble of legal aid work, representing those who couldn't speak for themselves, an advocate for battered wives, illegal immigrants, the underprivileged.

She worshipped Polly Toynbee, with whom she claimed some kind of acquaintance ('as Pol said this morning'), and tended rather to sneer at Christine's success. The woman was a desperately lonely alcoholic, and therefore Christine couldn't quite bring herself to screen her calls – however much she wanted to.

She forced herself to eat up like a good girl, although the fish tasted of nothing, the potatoes seemed to be made of plastic and the salad was about as exciting as her love life. At least the salad was undressed – something Christine had not been for a very long time. When had a man last paid her a compliment – let alone asked her out on a date? As for sex – she could barely remember. Or, to be strictly truthful, she didn't care to remember. Sex with one's ex-husband, with whom one has just settled out of court, from whom one is now moving on and glad of it, was not to be advised. It was the sort of irrational behaviour that she looked down on in others – like dogs returning to their own vomit, she used to say of those dumped spouses who dropped their drawers at the merest sniff of interest from former partners. Well, she'd done it herself, what, a year ago? Two years? When Andy had come round to discuss the endless vexed question of Isabelle's finances and future, when they'd opened a bottle of wine and got talking about the old days, and ended up in, or rather on, what had once been the marital bed. And God, it had been so good. They fitted together so well. She knew every contour of that fine, black body, every sensitive part, every trick to bring him pleasure, just as he knew her. It had been quick, and frantic, and afterwards they both felt strange, and he left quickly, remembering a prior engagement . . .

Never again, she'd said then, little knowing that it meant never again with anyone.

Well, men were a distraction. She had other things to focus on now – like that application to become a Queen's Counsel. After this case, God and the Judge willing, she would be ready – and they would have to find some damn good reasons to turn her down. Her hands were clean, her record impeccable, there was no scandal or 'history' attached to her – and she intended to keep it that way. Work would fill the unforgiving hours at home, alone. With just herself to take care of, there would be more time to prepare her briefs, research case law, find that telling precedent that could be pulled out of the hat at the critical moment . . .

And was that it? Nights at home, swotting over papers as she had done when she was qualifying? The adrenalin rush of picking up a brief on a Monday night, with only twelve hours before your court appearance in some far-flung regional dump, no prospect of sleep, seat-of-the-pants stuff, thinking on your feet . . . And she'd still managed to fit in friends and parties and the first ecstatic months of her relationship with Andy, turning up at court still drunk, still high on sex, it must have been written all over her face, she must have smelt of him . . .

There was no point in dwelling on the past, although every avenue of thought seemed to lead there. She was forty-seven, single, starting again, the mother of two children of whom she was very proud, and very fond, although she wondered how much the feeling was reciprocated. Ben was a sweetheart, of course, big on the cuddles, always telling her (particularly since the divorce) that she was his best friend and the World's Number One Mum – but he could not have been less interested in her career if he tried. It was, for him, just a fact of life, the thing that put bread on the table. Mummy goes to work in a funny black dress and a white hat, he'd said when he was five, and never got much further than that.

As for Isabelle, her firstborn, her beautiful daughter, whom she loved and worried about far too much for both of them – Isabelle had always been a daddy's girl. Fair enough – she resembled Andy far more than she did Christine, from her skin tone onwards. Sometimes even Christine found it hard to believe that her beautiful brown baby was really her own – although she could never forget the agony of childbirth. It was always to Andy that Isabelle went first when she was in trouble (often) or short of money (always). She loved Christine with the kind of fierce, competitive love that often exists between mothers and daughters. Christine had tried, throughout Isabelle's teens, to play it cool, to ease off with the discipline, to be a friend rather than a mother – and had ended up being neither. Now, quite clearly, Isabelle saw her only as a source of finance. That she blamed her mother for driving her father away was written all over her face – that gorgeous, symmetrical, doll-like face that fell so easily into a sulk or a pout, making the smiles, when they came, even more dazzling by contrast.

She washed up, put on some music – she always worked better with

some dramatic aural background, in this case Mahler's Second – and hauled her papers out of her case. Yes, the case of Farmer Giles v the Farmer's Wife was in the bag. The *coup de grâce* was prepared, the weapons primed, Mrs Giles ready to blurt out a few embarrassing facts in the witness box. Tomorrow, maybe the next day, surely by the weekend, Farmer Giles would lose the farm.

The phone rang. Assuming it was Ben with an ETA, she muted Mahler and snatched it up.

'Hello darling.' The voice was slurred, female.

'Oh! Linda.' It was only quarter past nine; she was pissed already.

'Lindy's lonely.' Christ, thought Christine, here we go again. She'd be in Daly's, or one of the other legal watering holes frequented by people a third of her age, or at home, slumped over the second bottle of wine, wanting company.

'Oh dear,' said Christine brightly. 'And Christine's working.'

'You're always working,' said Linda, running the words together. 'Come on. It's playtime.'

'Not for this little girl.'

'But I want to talk about our holiday.'

Holiday? This was news to Christine. 'What? We're not . . .'

'Yes we are. Lindy's got it all worked out.' When she was drunk, which was most of the time, Linda referred to herself almost entirely in the third person. 'We're going to the Gam – hic! – the Gambia.'

There had recently been yet another documentary about middle-aged British women going on sex holidays to that godforsaken outpost of the Commonwealth. Presumably Linda, too, had seen it, although her reaction was obviously not one of disgusted contempt.

'I am not going to Gambia.'

'But darling, the weather is so lovely, and the men, oh the men are so nice . . . And now that we're both single ladies . . .'

'It's a police state.'

'. . . and the resorts look lovely, very good security too, you wouldn't have to see anything you didn't want to see.'

'Linda, I am not, repeat not, going to Gambia with you.'

'Well where then?'

'Look, can this wait for another time?' *When you're sober*, she nearly added, but thought better of it. Linda was a pest, but for all that she

was a friend, and most definitely in need. 'I have got rather a lot of work to do, and . . .'

'How's that gorgeous husband of yours?' When all else failed, Linda knew she could get response by sticking the knife in. She had been so impressed when Christine married a black man. Now she could not forgive her for letting him go.

'My ex-husband is perfectly well, as far as I know.'

'Cut the crap, Chris, you miss him like hell.'

'Sorry, Linda. Ben's home. Must run. Let's talk soon, it would be lovely to catch up. Bye!'

She put the phone down. Silence descended. Ben, of course, was nowhere to be seen.

Christine cleared her throat, took three deep breaths, picked up her sharp silver propelling pencil and set to work.