Connections

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Extract

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Room 105 (Jennifer)

We nearly missed the flight. Our connection from Dublin had been delayed (I'd warned Harry that could happen, but of course he immediately told me I was being paranoid); then, because we had to check in again at Gatwick, and because there'd been some kind of problem with the computer system, we found ourselves at the back of a barely moving queue which snaked halfway around the airport and out of sight. I looked at the numbers in front of us, did a quick calculation based on allowing a very slim check-in time of three minutes for everyone ahead, and announced that we'd make it about ten minutes after the flight was due to depart.

'Don't be so silly,' Harry told me, although I could hear a faint flicker of anxiety in his voice. 'There's buckets of time.'

Well, of course there wasn't buckets of time. We shuffled along the queue with me trying desperately not to show my increasing anxiety, while Harry tried, equally desperately, to appear ultra-nonchalant about the minutes that were ticking inexorably by. It wasn't a good start, I thought, as I shot him looks of ill-concealed rage, despite also trying to convince myself that it was hardly his fault. But I wished

he'd done what I wanted and travelled from Dublin to London the night before, when we would have been able to avail ourselves of the late-night check-in facilities and avoid the morning mêlée around us.

I flexed my shoulders as we moved forward again. The weight of the dress which I was carrying over my arm was monumental. It was coming with me as cabin baggage, even though I knew it would take up a vast amount of space. But it was my fairy-tale wedding dress and it had cost almost as much as the trip itself. There was no way I was letting it out of my sight.

Everything would be OK once – if – we got on the plane and were on our way to our perfect wedding location. I couldn't begin to imagine how I'd feel if we missed the flight. I'd been looking forward to this week for the past twelve months.

The brochure had been absolutely compelling – Weddings in Paradise, it had proclaimed, and I was instantly beguiled, even though a lot of people were saying that Caribbean weddings were a bit naff these days and the chic thing to do was to go totally traditional in your local church or get married in the snowy wastes of Siberia for that authentic all-white look.

It might be naff, but it was going to be perfectly naff if you know what I mean! I had visions of me walking barefoot along the white sands in my white dress and looking elegantly shipwrecked and beautiful with my sun-bleached hair falling in very careful disarray around my face. OK, I know that I would actually look my normal mess (also, I'd bought oyster white Prada shoes, so barefoot wasn't actually an option), but it was a nice image all the same.

The original plan had been for just the two of us to go.

After all, as I pointed out to Harry, much of the reason for heading off to the sun instead of staying in Dublin was to avoid the whole frenzy that the wedding would generate at home. He'd done it once before and I'd seen the photographs. It was my nightmare wedding from hell, a vast crowd of friends and family all jostling for position around the church door, leaving the bride looking a little overwhelmed beside Harry's mother, an overtanned woman in an extravagant purple suit and matching purple hat with a peacock feather rising from the back of the crown. As I looked at those photographs I could see why the marriage had gone up in smoke. No bride likes playing second fiddle to her mother-in-law's hat.

Harry's first marriage lasted three years. I was hoping that ours would last for ever. I was sure it would. I loved Harry. He was The One. He was kind and thoughtful and funny and he treated me like a precious jewel. Honestly. Most of the time anyway. All my friends loved Harry too. He was impossible not to love (well, unless you were Karen – wife number one – who'd once left a message on his mobile phone calling him a self-centred, self-obsessed, selfish bollocks. Karen had a good line in invective and, unfortunately, a good line into Harry's monthly salary, because she'd managed to negotiate a great deal for herself on the back of maintenance for their daughter). However, despite the constant demands on his time and wallet from the woman he'd married by mistake, Harry never let it get him down. The thing is, Harry always looks on the bright side. He's the life and soul of any party and has a good word to say about everyone. He likes being surrounded by friends, and despite the fact that his brother and sister don't seem to be around very much, he cares about family too, which is why

he never got riled by Karen's rantings. I knew that Harry was also devoted to his mother (his father died a few years before I came on the scene). I'm making him sound a bit too perfect, maybe, and obviously that was never the case, but he was perfect for me. After all, despite his love of socialising, he understood that I couldn't spend every night out and about – I'm a nurse, and so my shifts mean that I can't always go on the complete lash because obviously I don't want to poison a patient by mistake owing to the fact that I'm still out of it the next day. Unlike my previous boyfriend, Carl, who called me a prissy cow who was a walking party-pooper. I wasn't. I'm not.

I allowed my tiny private wedding to turn into a massive party, didn't I? That's not the actions of a party-pooper. To be honest, I wasn't exactly mad about that particular idea. After all, the reason for going to the Caribbean in the first place had been to indulge in a private romantic idyll; but as Harry talked to everyone he knew about it, it became obvious that he was keen on the idea of having people around for the big day.

'We don't need anyone else,' I told him.

'No, absolutely. But it would be nice, don't you think? After we've done the business and drunk the coconut milk on the beach or whatever, wouldn't it be just fantastic to have our closest friends around to celebrate with?'

He had a point. It did seem a bit of a downer to do the whole wedding thing and then just sit down for a meal on our own. The reality was that it would make it all much more memorable if there were people to share the moment with us. I wasn't sure whether too many people would really be able to make it – travelling to the Caribbean just before Christmas mightn't be their idea of how to spend their time

and money – but in the end I was happy to invite them. I knew that if anyone came along it would be Harry's friends. Mine wouldn't be able to afford it. Harry's mates seemed to be somewhat better-off, although maybe it was because they were all in jobs that paid well whereas my friends had gone into careers that were big on caring and short on cash (not that there's anything wrong with earning money; I wish I had more of it myself!).

We didn't plan on asking family though. Mine is huge and you know how it is, if you leave someone out you've insulted them for life, never mind the fact that they probably wouldn't really want to come anyway, especially when it was such a distance. But the whole question of asking people was a minefield and I just didn't want to go there. I talked it over with Mum and she was perfectly happy with our desert island plan – she's done four weddings already with my sisters and brothers so she was easy-going about missing this one. Besides, I've a younger sister planning to do the big family wedding thing so there's plenty more opportunity for her.

Harry was a little more concerned about his mother because he felt that she'd like to come along. But as I pointed out, it wouldn't be much fun for Gloria being the only parent there among all of our friends. She might feel awkward and uncomfortable (although I wasn't actually so sure of that – like Harry, Gloria is a social animal even though he frets about her being home alone too often). But since this was a second wedding for Harry, I thought she'd understand the lower-key nature of things even though she probably felt slightly miffed out about losing an opportunity to wear a fancy hat again. (She has delusions about herself and her hats. She once won Best Dressed Lady at

the annual horse show – a reasonably prestigious prize in the circles in which she moves, so she considers her taste in fashion to have been proved impeccable. I know I sound bitchy here but, well, the phrase mutton dressed as lamb was kind of written for her, and although it's unfair to judge her solely on her love of glitzy clothes and make-up, I can't help it!)

Much to my surprise, after Harry had spoken to his wide range of close friends, about a dozen people elected to celebrate with us. Then we discovered that our hotel, the beautiful White Sands, offered a special rate on the rooms if we were going to take a minimum number of them, and so, in the end, it worked out that two of my own friends, Sarah and Deirdre, were able to tag along too because spreading the cost between everyone made it more affordable. I was delighted about that because, much as I like Harry's gang, I was beginning to feel outnumbered.

So that was the travelling party, although we weren't all flying together. I knew that some of Harry's mates would be on our flight but it had been amazingly well-booked and the others, as well as Sarah and Deirdre, were coming on a different one with a different airline later in the day.

But Rob, Ken, Dave, Winston, Emily and Brigitte were with us in the never-ending queue.

'Don't worry,' said Emily as she saw me check my watch for the hundredth time. 'They won't go without us.'

They nearly did. But thankfully we weren't the only people caught in the snaking line and a squadron of airline employees began walking up and down, checking where everyone was travelling, and fast-tracking those of us whose flights were due to depart in less than an hour. So suddenly we were bumped up to the front and we were at the check-in

desk and Harry was smiling at me and telling me that he'd told me all along that there was no need to worry.

I like the fact that Harry is an optimistic person whereas I'm always looking for the snags in life. It balances us out. I can't help myself, of course. I want to be as laid-back and cheerful about things as him but it's just not in my nature. I reckoned that this was what drew us together. My half-empty glass and his half-full one. Oh, look, I'm not that bad really. I just feel that life has a habit of hitting you in the face just as you think it's time to peek over the parapet. So I like to be prepared for the worst, even though secretly I do believe and hope that the best will happen.

The worst happened at the boarding gate. The stewardess took one look at my gorgeous dress and told me that it would have to go in the hold. I told her that it would end up there over my dead body. She said it wouldn't fit in the overhead bin. And, she added, even if it did, it'd get crushed by the hand baggage of the other passengers. We looked defiantly at each other for two full minutes before I agreed to allow her to hold on to the dress. This was because she promised to bring it up to the plane when everyone had boarded and ask the steward to find a place for it in the cabin.

And then, after me getting really upset about everything and imagining my beautiful dress being dumped into the hold while we were sitting in row 64, I was totally surprised when the steward came down and told us that there was a space for us in the premium cabin where my dress was waiting for me.

'You see,' said Harry as we sat down in the wider seats with more leg room and took up their offer of free champagne, 'there was no need to worry about anything.'

It was a great flight though I wished we'd been on our own because Rob and Brigitte and the rest of them kept coming up to us and slagging us about our upgrade and our upcoming nuptials and I couldn't help thinking that some of the other people in the premium section were getting a bit fed up about our slightly raucous friends.

'It's just that they're a bit . . . well . . . over the top,' I explained to Harry.

'They're happy. They're fun. They're looking forward to a great week.'

'Me too,' I said, and then I freaked out because I discovered that Emily had somehow managed to spill champagne on to the bottom of my dress which had a seat all to itself. (It was swathed in cellophane and covers but the hem just peeked out.) We were coming in to land when I spotted it and so I didn't really get to see the island as the green speck in the sea that everyone apparently oohed and aahed over because I was having quiet hysterics. But by the time we landed I'd been comforted enough by Harry to feel that maybe things weren't so bad. All the same I clutched the dress to me as he and the others piled into the baggage hall to retrieve our luggage, and I was more than relieved when we were finally alone in our gorgeous room with its huge balcony overlooking the fabulous Caribbean Sea.

'This is the life, eh,' he said as he stretched out on the luxurious bed with its muslin canopy. 'Couldn't you just live here for ever?'

I nodded.

'Though I suppose you'd get fed up with it after a while,' he said.

'Rubbish.' I smiled at him as I lay down on the bed beside him. 'How could anyone get tired of Paradise?'

'Indeed,' he remarked as he slid my T-shirt over my head and found my left boob with his lips. 'Total paradise.'

Paradise was fan-bloody-tastic. Really it was. Blue skies, blue seas and the gorgeous white sands. Even though I felt a bit overwhelmed by being in a gang (I'd only ever gone on holiday in a group of four until now), it was fun. I'd have preferred a bit more time alone with Harry, but, as he said to me as we danced to the calypso band on the second night, we had our whole lives to be alone together. This was celebration time and we should live it up to the max.

It was nice to have Deirdre and Sarah with me when I went to the spa to book some beauty treatments ahead of the big day. A stunning local girl named Marilou was going to do me up. She was absolutely lovely to me and promised to make me her best bride ever. I presumed she said that to all of her brides (and so far there'd been a wedding every bloody day – I hadn't realised quite how many people were actually forsaking trendy Siberia for the sun!), but she beamed so widely at me that I wanted to believe her. As I left the spa I smiled at a tall girl with caramel and honey hair and a flawless complexion who I immediately identified as another bride. We exchanged conspiratorial winks and I left her to Marilou's tender mercies while I went back to the beach to top up my own tan. I was going to be a gorgeous bride (hopefully). This would be the best wedding ever. I was the luckiest girl in the world.

The bombshell dropped the following evening. We were all in the Green Garden restaurant, our tables grouped together

and surrounded by tropical plants. Winston (one of Harry's nicer friends and an up-and-coming barrister) was giving us the inside track on the celebrity trial of the year – a top Irish pop star had been sued by her driving instructor for sexual harassment and had won the case, though apparently the whole truth had most certainly not come out in court. Winston told the story in a very funny way and I couldn't imagine him being ferocious and horrible to his adversaries, although apparently he was. Deirdre was chuckling beside me and Sarah was laughing helplessly when suddenly Harry stood up and cried, 'Mum!' in a voice which carried right across the restaurant.

I didn't, obviously, think he was actually calling his mother, since Gloria was safely tucked up in her gorgeous Glenageary home, but I did wonder what on earth he was going on about. And then I followed his eyes and my jaw dropped. Because there she was, standing at the entrance to the Green Garden, wearing a blue silk dress which clung to her incredibly lissom body. Gloria is sixty-two but she doesn't look a day over twenty-two. Well, obviously that's a complete lie because she does – it's just that (in addition to the hat fetish, and what I neglected to mention earlier) Gloria is a nip-and-tuck aficionado. She's had 'work' done to her eyes and her forehead as well as some freaky collagen injections to her lips. (Not quite trout pout, but gosh, I wouldn't have liked to be Mr O'Hara with those lips coming at me. So maybe just as well he'd popped his clogs.) However, from a distance, she looks relatively young. Up close, of course, her crêpey hands give her away. As do her gleaming teeth, which clearly aren't nature's own.

'What the . . .' I stared as she sashayed her way across the room.

'Oh, Mum!' Harry gave her a bear hug and lifted her off her feet. 'I'm so chuffed to see you.' He turned to me. 'Well, Jen,' he said. 'What d'you think?'

I was still staring. 'What are you doing here?' I asked.

Gloria laughed. It was a silvery laugh, the kind of laugh that you imagine she learned from watching black and white movies. 'How could I stay away?' she trilled. 'I wanted to be here when my baby married the love of his life.'

There was an amused chuckle around the table and she looked archly at everyone. 'I know you all think I'm far too young to be his mother,' she began (and I swear to God there wasn't a drop of irony in her voice), 'but I couldn't stay away.'

I frowned. 'But . . . but . . . you never said anything!' I looked accusingly at Harry. 'You never said anything either.'

'Of course not,' he said. 'Mum wasn't sure she could come. She's been in hospital, you know.'

Well, I did know. Gloria had been in for a chemical peel. Actually, now that I thought about it, her face still looked a bit raw.

'I didn't want to come unless I could do justice to your big day,' she said grandly. 'And now I can.' She plopped into the chair that Harry had dragged from an adjoining empty table. 'Oh my Lord, you guys, I'm so-oo jet-lagged.' She stretched her elegant (I have to admit this) legs out in front of her and allowed her high-heeled shoes to slip from her feet.

Now, the thing is, I love my mother. I really do. But I'd freak out if she arrived into a gang of my friends and tried to be one of us. She's my mother, for God's sake. Not my friend. And it's probably very childish and anal of me to want my mother to be a mother when there's a conspiracy

out there to try and make everyone look the same and act the same no matter what their age, but I can't help that. Anyway, my ma is older than Gloria O'Hara. She always looks OK for her age. But she sure isn't a kind of ancient sex-symbol.

I'm not ageist. When I'm sixty-two I want to look good for my age. I want people to think that I could be anything from thirty-five to fifty-five. Preferably thirty-five, of course. But I certainly don't want to look like a flipping teenage prom queen. In fact, close up, Gloria was just a little bit scary, with her wide-awake eyes and peeled face.

'I didn't realise you were thinking of coming at all,' I said blankly.

'I was at his first wedding,' said Gloria. 'To that silly, silly girl. The least I can do is to support him in the marriage which I hope will be for ever. Which I know will be for ever, dearest Jennifer, because I know you're the exact right girl for him.'

Emily and the other girls cooed. But I knew that Sarah was looking at me with mute enquiry in her eyes.

Harry waved expansively at the wine waiter and asked him to bring us a bottle of champagne. Gloria rested her feet on his lap. And I wondered why it was that he'd obviously invited his mother and never said a word to me.

I didn't get a chance to ask him straight away, and we stayed up late that night. Despite Gloria's jet-lag she managed to quaff a good quantity of champagne, and when the calypso band had finished for the evening Harry played the piano while she sang in the manner of Shirley Bassey without the range. Actually, she wasn't bad. But her rendition of 'Diamonds Are Forever', while grabbing me by the hand and caressing my engagement ring, was totally scary.

It was nearly two in the morning before Harry and I were alone in Room 105 and Gloria was safely locked away in 212. I'd been terrified that her room would be next door but thankfully it was further down the hillside and well out of casual hearing distance. I wanted her out of the way because I was afraid that there'd be a certain amount of shouting in Room 105 that night. And not shouting in the throes of sexual passion.

'What the hell do you mean by asking your mother to come along and not telling me?' I demanded as soon as I'd slammed the door closed behind us.

Harry looked at me in astonishment. 'And what's the matter with you?' he asked. 'Why are you getting your knickers in a twist?'

'Harry!' I cried. 'She's your mum. We decided against asking our families. It was friends only.'

'Crikey, Jen, keep your hair on.' Harry looked at me in surprise. 'It's different for you. You've got both parents, four sisters and two brothers – at least three of whom seem to be at your house at any given time. I've got one brother and one sister but I'm the only one who sees her regularly. I couldn't leave her out.'

'But you didn't tell me!' I wailed. 'I wasn't expecting to see her. It was a surprise.'

'Sure. But a nice surprise.'

I said nothing. Harry and I didn't talk about his mother much. I admired his sense of responsibility towards her. There are loads of blokes who wouldn't bother to call in to see their mum on the way home from work every evening, knowing that she was home alone (even though as I said before, she didn't actually stay in alone. She went to bridge nights and out with 'the girls' and was in the local musical

society, which seemed to be a hotbed of social activity). But I sometimes felt as though Harry bent over backwards to look after her. After all, as I told him once, she was a good-looking woman with a life of her own. She didn't really need him. He'd looked at me darkly and told me that though Gloria was without a doubt an attractive woman for her age, and although she did go out from time to time, she was still on her own. And he was her only family within calling distance. So he'd be there for her whenever she needed. But, he'd added, Gloria never, ever asked him to call to see her. Once we were married and had established a routine of our own, he added, I didn't need to worry about Gloria. Because, he said, he felt that I might be getting a little bit worried over nothing. He was wrong about that. I'd begun to think that maybe it was more than Gloria's hat that had upstaged Karen.

But then Karen wasn't a very nice person. I'd heard her on the phone to Harry a couple of times and she was bitchy and unpleasant. If she'd been bitchy and unpleasant about Gloria I could understand why things had deteriorated between them. It would be different between us. I could get to like Gloria even though she freaked me out most of the time. And I would certainly be understanding about Harry's loyalty to his widowed mother.

So that night I just shrugged and told Harry that I must be feeling a bit jet-laggy myself, or that maybe wedding nerves were getting the better of me. And I said that I was sorry for shouting at him and that I couldn't wait to get married in two days' time and that I was pleased and delighted that Gloria was going to be there.

* * *

'She's a fucking horror.' Deirdre was the one who said it to me the night before the wedding. It was barbecue night at the hotel and we were walking back to the restaurant, plates loaded with chicken wings and burgers. 'You want to keep well away from her.'

'I don't see her that often,' I told Deirdre. 'I know Harry has to, because she's on her own, but she doesn't really impinge on our lives that much,'

'She's a cross between Bet Lynch and a drag queen,' said Deirdre. 'And if you give her a couple of years she'll be a candidate for the awfulplasticsurgery.com site.'

I chuckled.

'No, seriously,' said Deirdre as we sat down at the table. 'Where's she going in that get-up?'

I watched as my future mother-in-law tottered towards the barbecue wearing spiky heels and a leopardskin dress. It was a tasteful leopardskin dress . . . well . . . it wasn't a mini or anything like that. It had a long layered skirt and fairly decent chest cover. Gloria's blonde hair was caught up in a stylish chignon, secured by a brightly coloured clip in the shape of a flamingo which she'd bought in the hotel shop that morning.

'She's not so bad really,' I murmured. 'Over the top, but, hey, she's colourful.'

'That's true,' said Deirdre drily.

Gloria kept us entertained all evening. Her stories, like her singing, weren't at all bad. It was just that it seemed somehow inappropriate to me that she was the star of the show. I told myself not to be mean and bitchy; she was Harry's mother and she was a widow and, hell, maybe if I was her age and looked that good (whether by nature or by design) I'd want to be the star of the show too. I could

see where Harry got his party-loving nature from. Though I was a bit creeped out when the two of them did the tango together. Fortunately Gloria then danced with all of Harry's male friends which gave me the opportunity to grab him in a clinch myself.

'I love you,' I said, as the band's singer segued into a slower number and Harry tightened his grip around me.

'I love you too,' he told me. He was looking over my shoulder as he spoke and he chuckled.

'What?' I asked.

'Mum and Dave are looking very smoochy together.'

'What!' I tried to turn around.

He chuckled again. 'All in fun, sweetie. All in fun.'

I feel bad about saying that I was beginning to hate Gloria. But the woman was a walking menace. On the beach she wore more leopard-print stuff and blinged herself up with gold chains, earrings and rings. She had a toe-ring too, which she'd bought in one of the jewellery stores in town. And that day before our wedding, she made me feel as though she was the young fun-loving person whereas I was a boring middle-aged crone. That was because I refused to go on the Pirate Cruise around the island. I was trying to spend the day quietly, drinking lots of water instead of cocktails so that my skin would be gorgeous and lustrous for the following day.

'Maybe you're right,' she said eventually. 'You probably do need some extra work on your looks.'

OK, that was going too far. I know that my castaway-beauty image would never happen but I'm not that bad. And I wasn't taking being lectured by someone who couldn't even frown properly!

'Oh, sod off, Gloria,' I said narkily. 'Nobody asked you.' And I got up and went back to the room. I poured myself a large glass of water and took it out to the balcony, where I stretched out on my sun-lounger with a copy of *Jennifer Jones and the Jealous Journalist* by my favourite author, Corinne Doherty, which I'd brought with me but which I'd hardly had a chance to read because everything had been so fun-filled and party-ish. I waited for Harry to join me. He'd been there when Gloria had made her jibe and I'd seen him wince.

Half an hour later he still hadn't come. I was beginning to get annoyed. An hour and I was starting to worry. After an hour and a half I stomped back to the beach.

Sarah and Deirdre (neither of whom had been around when the Pirate Cruise was being discussed) as well as Winston were sitting at the water's edge. There was no sign of Harry, Gloria or the others.

'They went on the Pirate Cruise,' Winston said uncomfortably. 'Gloria so wanted to go and Harry gave in.'

I gritted my teeth and avoided the sympathetic glances of both Sarah and Deirdre.

'What time are they due back?' I asked.

'Not till six,' said Winston.

I got up again. 'I'm going to the spa,' I said. 'I need a relaxing treatment.'

Although they were always busy I thought that maybe they might be able to give me a wrap. There'd been one in the brochure, mango and orange blossom or something, which sounded absolutely fantastic. I felt as though I needed something absolutely fantastic to take my mind off the fact

that my fiancé had given in to his mother's demands to go on some ridiculous beer-fest (which for sure was what the Pirate Cruise had to be) on the day before our wedding. I enquired about the wrap at reception but Marilou looked at me regretfully. They were totally booked up on the wrap scene, she told me. But I could have one the day after tomorrow.

'And you should.' A girl wearing a towelling robe looked at me with enthusiasm. 'I wasn't mad keen on the idea but my boyfriend made me do it. And it was absolutely wonderful.' She grinned at Marilou. 'Thanks again. I'll tell Declan that I'm converted.' And she wafted out of the spa in a perfume of fruit essences.

'Samantha could give you a massage in half an hour.' Marilou was consulting her book. 'She only has thirty minutes but that should be enough to relax you.'

'I don't need relaxing,' I snapped and then realised that of course I did.

So I stayed and had the relaxing massage and I did feel a lot better, and then I headed back to the room and sat on the patio lounger, reading my book and drinking bottles of water to help with the lustrous look. By the time I made my way back to the beach, the Pirate Cruise ship was offloading its passengers on to the wooden jetty.

Gloria was wearing a bandanna around her head and a patch over one eye. Maybe she needs it, I thought acidly. Maybe the botox has worn off.

'Hey, there you are!' she cried as she flounced on to the beach. 'You should've come with us. We missed you.'

'I was in the spa,' I told her with dignity. 'I had a treatment booked.'

'I didn't know that,' said Harry as he arrived beside her. 'I thought you'd been plucked and prepped already.'

I made a face at him.

'Anyone for cocktails?' Gloria waved at a passing waitress. 'How about rum punch for everyone?' And before I had time to say that I was sticking to water she'd given the order and a large jug of punch was brought down to the beach.

Everyone was having a good time. Gloria was telling funny pirate stories (and to prove I'm not biased against her I did laugh). Harry watched her proudly.

'You'd never think it, would you?' he murmured to me as she did her Keira Knightley *Pirates of the Caribbean* impression.

'Think what?' I was thinking lots of things about Gloria.

'You know. That she was a mum. That she'd had a hard life. That Dad died and left her on her own.'

I wanted to say that lots of women had hard lives and were left on their own but I didn't. In many ways he was right. Gloria was an amazing woman.

I'd planned to spend a couple of hours with Deirdre and Sarah that evening, but as the sun was sinking in pink-orange flames beneath the horizon, Gloria announced that she'd booked a table for 'the girls' in the Mariner's Reef that evening. The girls were me and her, Emily and Brigitte, Sarah and Deirdre. I was beginning to get seriously pissed off with this woman. She was taking over my whole wedding. But I was afraid to say anything to Harry because he seemed to love the idea of his mum being one of the girls.

We met in the restaurant at eight. The girls (thankfully with the exception of Deirdre and Sarah) seemed to agree with Harry that Gloria was wonderful. They discussed her

nip and tucks (which, let me tell you, is a totally gross conversation to have over dinner) and got the name of her favourite surgeon. There was a big debate over the issues of boob jobs (the one procedure that Gloria hadn't apparently had done yet) and liposuction (which she had).

'Though really what makes the most difference is the cosmetic stuff,' she proclaimed. 'Look, I had my eyelids tattooed. Means I don't have to worry about eyeliner ever again.'

I shuddered.

'So,' I asked eventually, 'looking as great as you do, Gloria, is there any chance that you'll get married yourself one day soon?'

Silence descended on the table. Gloria looked at me, the laughter gone from her eyes. 'I really don't think so,' she said icily. 'My husband and I had a wonderful marriage for over thirty years. I have no need for another man.'

'Use it or lose it,' I told her. (I'd broken with my water-only regime and had knocked back a couple of glasses of champagne that Gloria had ordered.)

'Really, Jennifer.' This time her look was one of disgust. 'I don't think that's the sort of thing we want to hear.'

Wasn't it? I'd have thought she'd be up for a bit of sexual conversation.

'C'mon, Gloria,' I said. 'You get tarted up like a dog's dinner every day. Surely it's not all for your own benefit?'

For once Gloria seemed lost for words. Unfortunately I wasn't.

'I mean,' I continued, 'what's with the leopardskin motif if not to attract them and pounce?'

Beside me Deirdre stifled a snort of laughter. I could see that Emily wanted to giggle too.

'You're great for a woman of your age,' I continued blithely. 'But it must be such an effort every day.'

'I beg your pardon.' I could hear the fury in Gloria's voice. 'I'm lucky to have naturally good bone structure. All my procedures have been minor.'

'Minor liposuction?' I asked in disbelief. 'I thought lipo meant shoving a tube into you and sucking out all the fat. I'd hardly call that minor.'

The girls weren't stifling laughter now. They were looking at both of us in tentative horror.

'I have never been so insulted in all my life,' snapped Gloria. 'After all the trouble I went to tonight . . . I don't know what my Harry sees in you.'

She got up and swept from the room, although the effect was ruined a little when she stumbled at the top of the steps and had to be helped back on to her precarious heels by the waiter.

'Crikey, Jen,' said Sarah. 'I think you've blotted your copybook with the ma-in-law.'

I bit my lip. I hadn't originally set out to insult her, but . . .

'I'll talk to Harry if you like,' offered Brigitte. 'Tell him you had a bit too much to drink.'

'I haven't had too much to drink,' I lied. 'I'll sort this out myself.'

The men were having their own dinner in the Green Garden. I didn't bother interrupting them but headed back to the room, where I stretched out on the big bed and was asleep almost immediately.

It was nearly midnight before I woke again, and that was to the sound of the door opening. I blinked as the light was switched on and sat up in bed.