All Inclusive

By Judy Astley

Published by Transworld publishers

1

Champagne Classic

21 ml brandy
1 sugar cube (white)
Angostura bitters
champagne

'Cyn! Cynthia! Hi! I didn't recognize you with your clothes on!'

Oh Lordy that came out all wrong, Ned realized as the words tumbled out loud and witless. What kind of a conversation-opener was that? People were staring, as well they might, both at him and at the woman on the far side of the Harrods meat counter, weighing up an oven-ready pheasant in each hand. All the same, what he'd said was true enough: here in the bustling Food Hall Cyn was elegantly wrapped up against the February frost in a honey-gold suede coat, shimmery olive velvet scarf and spike-heeled pointy brown boots. Last time he'd seen her, on that hot-sun holiday back in November, she'd been poolside on a lounger in a pink and scarlet bikini with matching sarong and shell-trimmed flip-flops.

'Ned! Good heavens, how are you? What are you doing in here?'

There was the dazzling flash of a fabulous smile that was just as sunburst-radiant even with the tan long faded. She had that high-maintenance high-gloss look, as if she began each day by having her skin gently buffed by handfuls of lightly oiled pearls.

Ned hesitated, stopping short of blurting out that he was in urgent pursuit of meat in case that too could be misinterpreted and result in a hasty summons to Security. He pushed his way through the lunchtime customers towards Cyn and kissed her on each cheek. He caught a hint of vanilla and coconut and was at once transported back to the beach bar on the island of St George,

Copyright © 2004 Judy Astley

lining up the cocktails at sundown. Her choice was always a rum punch, he remembered, its surface thickly flecked with nutmeg and cinnamon. There would be a chunk of coconut on a cocktail stick and she'd dunk it in her drink and bite off little slivers of the flesh.

'I'm after a big slab of Beef Wellington,' he told her. 'Under orders from the domestic front to bring home something Beth can pass off to the new neighbours tonight as home-cooked. She's up to her eyes checking recipes for World Wide Wendy's new book and the last thing she feels like is cooking for us. I was just wondering if the lamb shanks wouldn't be a tastier option when I saw you. Almost didn't recognize you in winter plumage.'

'Hmm . . . so you announced to half the store! That Wendy woman's never off the telly; last week I watched her doing, what was it? Smothered muskrat! Ugh! Poor Beth, fancy having to cook that one!' Cyn wrinkled her nose and giggled, shoving the pheasants back to their place in the display. She tucked her arm through his and led him away from the crush at the counter. 'Are you on a lunch break? Have you got time for a quick drink and a catch-up? So strange seeing you on home ground. It's as if those few Caribbean weeks are real life and this isn't!'

Next thing he knew, Ned was not, as he should have been, on his way back to the office clutching that evening's supper and preparing to sell a Kensington mansion to a balding rock legend. Instead he was perched beside Cynthia on a bar stool at the oyster counter, where they celebrated this coincidental meeting with champagne and a dozen best Whitstables. Followed by another dozen. The beef went completely out of Ned's mind and that evening as he grovelled an apology to a furious Beth, he somehow found himself putting the lapse down to simple forgetfulness, in preference to compounding the offence by admitting to the lavish lunch.

As he rummaged penitently through the freezer in search of enough boeuf bourguignon to feed six, he thought about the day and how Cyn hadn't talked about Bradley and he hadn't talked about Beth. He'd miss Cyn on next November's trip to St George. She'd been, during that same fortnight for the past three years, a lively annual fixture holding court from her lounger beneath the tamarind tree, halfway between the pool and the beachfront jacuzzi. She and Brad had been keen to go for a fourth time, but the dates clashed with a family wedding. A niece of Bradley's was to be married on a tropical beach way out east somewhere: a luxury spa and spiritual retreat where, Cyn had assured him, you got your chakras rebalanced every morning and a rub-down after lunch with smouldering bamboo scented with jojoba. Just about to die for, apparently.

Copyright © 2004 Judy Astley

'Of course, I'll miss the old faces,' Cyn had sighed. 'But who knows? The year after we just might be back.'

Ned winced as Beth hurled the frozen block of fancy stew into the microwave and slammed the door shut. Her dark blonde curls flashed this way and that as she zapped between the sink and the cooker, chucking potato peelings inaccurately at the bin and stirring something that bubbled angrily.

'One bloody thing I asked you to do for me today, just one sodding thing. I've had a completely hellish day over at Wendy's. Why she thinks anyone outside Saskatchewan is really gagging to serve up braised bear steaks I've no idea. She gets madder by the month.'

Wondering if she'd have thawed out by the time the supper had, Ned went to the fridge to see if he could help her mood along by handing her a glass of Chablis. As he poured it he pictured the way his unexpected lunch date had licked an escape of oyster juice from around her lips and he thought, yes, he might just give Cyn a call, as she'd suggested, just to be friendly, to keep in touch. Where was the harm in that?

Copyright © 2004 Judy Astley Published by Transworld