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Players

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Extract

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Chapter One

Hugh Summershill knew better than to try to discern or understand the subtle rivalries that women engage in, but he did know that Julia McIntyre was the type of woman his wife, Tor, sniffed at. She'd think Julia had 'let herself go' (even though she was only a size fourteen – he'd checked in her labels one languorous afternoon, wanting to go back to La Perla and get that lacy all-in-one thing he'd seen in the window). Her hair wasn't poker straight, but bouncy with a soft curl which she just left to dry naturally, and she had milky skin with rosebud-pink nipples that had clearly never seen the sun. She wasn't polished, sophisticated, thin or fashionable. In fact, she wasn't any of the things that Tor prized – she wouldn't even have seen her as a competitor – and he'd often wondered whether, subconsciously, this was why he'd gone with her: a random act of spite to his wife, whose perfectionism was alienating and aloof.

He lay back, enjoying the feeling of her breath on his stomach, the spring breeze whispering over him and making him shiver as they lay naked and entwined on the daybed on her veranda. The background rumble of buses and steady drone of rush hour traffic kept his senses rudely aware that this was Battersea, not Bermuda.

'Hmmm, you like that?' she smiled, blowing air rings on his hips. She shifted position, placing herself between his legs, inching downwards, her hair fanning silkily across him as she traced wide meandering S-shapes over his torso with her breath.

She felt him stir and looked up at him, pulling herself forwards, grazing her curves against him, giving him some of what he wanted, but not enough. Nowhere near enough. He grabbed her, ready again, and she giggled at his lusty appetite. Poor Hugh, he'd clearly been starved for years.

'You know,' she said provocatively as she straddled him, not remotely done with him yet, 'this could be how we spend every afternoon. Can't you just imagine it, darling? You and me and this?'

Her hands fluttered behind her, cupping his balls, and she began grinding with intent.

'What . . . do you . . . mean?' he groaned.

The late afternoon sunlight caught her hair, drenching her in apricot light. He didn't know whether to fuck her or eat her.

'I mean I don't want to share you any more, lover,' she purred, leaning over him and biting his lip. 'Let's make this real, once and for all. I want you to move in.'

At the exact moment her husband was ravishing his mistress, Tor Summershill was also reclining in splendour. The sun was low in the sky, ready to drop like a fat peach from the tree, and Tor was stretched out on a teak steamer, eyeing the honeyed glow on the children's naked bodies that made them appear even more luscious than usual. Their busy baby chatter as they tucked into their lawn picnic was nothing more than a tranquil buzz, and Tor made a mental note to get some

more of those diddy organic cocktail sausages – so much easier for little fingers and milk teeth.

Mmmm, bliss, she sighed. Still, having a garden bigger than a bikini helped. There weren't many places in south-west London where you could stick the kids out of earshot in an orchard. One hundred and thirty feet of London lawn came with too many zeros for most people.

God, Cress was lucky. She sighed deeply, breathing in the first delicate scent of the night-flowering honeysuckle, and stretched out further. Where the hell was she anyway? She'd been gone ages.

A distant crash and flurry of expletives answered her question and she shaded her eyes to search for her friend, just as the french windows burst open and Cress's slight, angry silhouette stomped down the lawn to the summerhouse. Oh God, what? What? WHAT? Tor frantically scanned over the list of possible disaster scenarios that might explain Cress's crossness – a leaky nappy on the Aubusson? Some broken antique blue and white porcelain? Felt tips on the Frette bedspreads?

Cress set down the tray of freshly-made lemonade with a clatter, and abruptly presented Tor with a glossy red sword.

'Uh, thank you,' Tor faltered. 'What's it for – besides battle, I mean?'

'Can you believe it?' Cress muttered. 'Rumbled already. And it's only bloody May. Bloody kids.'

'What's rumbled?'

'Christmas!' sighed Cress. 'That sword was part of my Santa stash. One of the kids has found it. God knows which one. It was lying on the stairs.' She stood there, hands on hips. 'If I put it in their stockings now, the game is up. They'll know Father Christmas is a myth, I'll be exposed as a liar –

because it will of course be *my* fault that he doesn't exist – and that'll be it, end of their childhood; next stop, smoking and snogging behind the scooters . . .'

'Jago's at a boys' school,' Tor interrupted.

'Precisely!' Cress exclaimed triumphantly.

Tor grinned and took a sip of lemonade. 'Did you make this?'

'Yes. Why, is it disgusting?'

Tor laughed. Cress was many things – mother of four, business dynamo, social butterfly and intoxicating to her husband – but domestic goddess? Not a chance. Every dinner party was spooned from a caterer's Le Creuset, and when she stopped breastfeeding after three weeks, she joked it was because her milk was off.

'No, it's great,' she lied. She took another slug of lemonade to prove her point, and tried not to shiver.

'Well, that's it. Big Yellow Storage for me,' Cress continued, settling herself noisily on her steamer. 'The kids get into everything now and there just isn't the storage space in these houses.'

Tor looked up at the detached seven-bedroom pile and weighed in sarcastically. 'Yes, you're right. Five thousand square feet and not a cupboard in sight. It's pitiful. I don't know how you've put up with it for so long.'

Cress idled a hand in the grass, brushing it casually. 'Hey, why don't you get one too? Our spaces could be neighbours.'

'Thanks, Cress, but I really don't need to pay for any more square footage. Our mortgage payments are crippling enough. And anyway you know I'll just want to decorate it. Think about it – no natural light, low ceilings, no original features. My basic nightmare.'

Cress laughed, and they both tried not to drink the lemonade.

Tor squinted over at the toddlers now running amok around the crab-apple and plum trees. Marney and Millie were four and three respectively, but they still shared the padded thighs, bare pudgy bottoms and high, rounded tummies of their eighteen-month-old brother, and she felt brimful of love as they staggered shrieking through the sprinklers. She felt tempted to jump up and join them.

But only momentarily. Lying back doing nothing, for once, felt so good too. And anyway, Cress's stunning Swedish nanny, Greta, had emerged from an hour-long phone call to her boyfriend back home and was herding the children into fluffy towels.

Tor noticed that Cress kept squinting at her mobile on the table and checking the signal.

'So, what's happening at work?' she asked. 'You've been travelling a lot recently.'

'Tchyuh, don't I know it. The air hostesses miss me more between flights than the kids.'

'Mmmm.' Tor squinted at her in the sunlight. Cress's emotional isolation from her children – which she buffeted with a stream of nannies – was scarcely acknowledged and certainly never discussed. Cress was all about achievement, control and perfection, and Tor understood her friend well enough to know she needed to keep this 'blemish' below radar until she figured out how to nix it.

To look at her, nothing – apart from the red sword – was out of place in Cress's world. Not her career, not her house, not her marriage, not even her hair. Cress's bob – tinted a shade too blonde – was so sharply styled it looked like it had been cut with lasers. The style was perfect for framing

her small heart-shaped face and offset her steely blue eyes, but Tor was always on at her to let it grow out a bit more, get it to look 'a little more relaxed, more natural'.

But then nothing about Cress was relaxed or natural – why should her hair be any different? She was a mini dynamo, a five foot two vortex of energy – running between deadlines and flight schedules and spinning classes and bedtime stories. That hair had to toe the line.

Cress raised her face to the sky and shielded her eyes. 'But yuh. I guess you could say work's going . . . well.'

Something in her voice caught Tor's attention. Tor looked back at her friend. Wearing giant shades and a tiny green towelling beach dress that showed off a figure few thirty-three-year-old mothers of four could boast without drastic plastic surgery, Cress was brushing the grass casually in a bucolic manner. She looked uncharacteristically relaxed.

Tor was instantly suspicious. 'Cress, what is it?'

'Hmm?'

'You're trying to tell me something.'

'No, I'm not.'

'Yes, you are.' Tor looked at her, suspiciously.

There was a long pause. 'You want me to beat it out of you.'

Cress giggled. 'I do not.' She began humming lightly. Tor's flecked hazel eyes narrowed further. The women's friendship spanned fifteen years – formed over a mutual ex who had two-timed them at Bristol University – and there was precious little they didn't know about each other. She sank back into her chair, then suddenly gasped and clapped her hand over her mouth.

'Oh my God – you're having an affair!'

'Sssssht! Tell the neighbours, why don't you!' Cress looked

annoyed. 'Actually, no. I'm not having an affair – and I'm shocked that you think I would.'

'Then good God, woman – what is it?'

'I'm *considering* having an affair.'

'No!'

'Yes.'

'No! Who with?'

'With whom,' Cress corrected. 'With Harry Hunter.'

'Nooo!'

'Yes.'

'Nooo!'

'No, you're right. I'm not really.'

'Oh, for God's sake.' Tor, deflated, sank back into the chair and absent-mindedly took another sip of the rancid lemonade. Dammit.

'But he is completely delicious, isn't he?' Cress asked rhetorically. 'And who could blame me, now that I'll be working so closely with him. I mean, I do think Mark would actually understa . . .'

'What?' Tor shrieked. 'What do you mean, working so closely?'

'Well, he's signing with me on Monday – that's what all the travelling's been about.' She smiled impishly and threw her arms around herself in a hug. 'Oh yes. That man is mine, all mine. I'm pinning him down to a five-book deal. Plus backlist.'

Tor couldn't take it in. Harry Hunter? She couldn't believe she was only one degree removed from him. Oh please, please, let her meet him. Harry Hunter's face was more familiar to her these days than her own husband's. But then, Hugh was never anywhere to be seen and Harry Hunter was everywhere you looked – bearing down from bus bill-

boards, beaming out from the society pages, falling out of nightclubs in the gossip columns, and flirting up a storm on the telly chat-show circuit.

You'd have had to be living in Neverland not to know who Harry Hunter was. He was the publishing world's latest sensation, his books selling by the millions, topping best-seller lists simultaneously all round the world. He'd been translated into thirty-eight different languages and now Hollywood was adapting the books into blockbusters.

His breakthrough book, *Scion*, had been a sleeper hit which had swept the nation, and then the rest of the world, only five years ago. He'd quickly followed it up with *The Snow Leopard* and *The Ruby Route*, which were critically mauled but still sold in their millions because of his name. But it wasn't so much his sales as his torrid, tempestuous nine-month marriage to Lila Briggs – the chart-topping, multi-platinum-selling, stadium-filling singer – which was played out through the tabloids, that ensured that the former housemaster's name had stayed in the headlines ever since. Six foot three, with a curly mop of buttery blond hair, flashing green eyes and rugby-muscled shoulders, he was now a rampant lady-killer, rarely seen without his signature cashmere tweed jacket on his back and some society darling on his arm.

'God, I'd leave Hugh in an instant if Harry Hunter even so much as looked my way.' She stretched dreamily at the thought and Cress enviously noted her muscle tone. Tor had danced her way through her teens and twenties, and although at fifteen and five foot eight she had recognized that she was too tall and not quite good enough to make the corps in a professional dance company, her recompense was an easily toned, low-maintenance figure that made Cress – who fasted for one day every week – want to weep.

In fact, much about Tor's effortless elegance made Cress well up with envy. Her unbleached, rich caramel hair – blonde around her face – that fell in sheets to her shoulder blades; her distinctive almond-shaped hazel eyes that didn't need mascara; and those faint freckles – which opened up in the sun like daisies – covering her cheeks and nose, which kept her forever looking no older than twelve.

'Well, I'm glad you feel that way because, to celebrate, I'm throwing a welcome party for him next week, and you're invited – naturally.'

Tor's jaw dropped.

'No!' She was struck by panic and took all her wishes back. 'There's no way I can party with Harry Hunter. I mean, you know I'll get drunk after half a glass and start to stutter and suffer stress incontinence . . .' Her voice trailed off as she clocked Cress's bemusement. 'Well, what's the dress code? You know I've got nothing to wear.'

'Cocktail,' Cress said, crunching hard on a clutch of ice. 'And I know precisely the opposite.' Pre-babies, Tor had slowly but surely scaled the heights of fashion retail. It hadn't been a meteoric rise, owing to a sensational lack of ambition, but the design houses' sales teams admired her easy chic and instinctive eye. She could put together a rail that even they hadn't considered, and more often than not she left them with more tips for the forthcoming season, than the other way round. She was always invited to the first round of buying appointments, sat in the front row at the shows, and by the time she fell pregnant with Marney she was chief buyer at Browns in South Molton Street. It was a nomadic life, though, regularly flying to Milan, Paris, New York and Los Angeles, and not one she'd wanted to continue once the children were born. She wanted to be a hands-on,

stay-at-home mother, and although she increasingly found herself drawn to interior design these days, she still had a wardrobe of eveningwear that Cress lusted after like a little sister.

'Well, I'll still need something new. This is no time for hand-me-downs,' Tor muttered, trying to work out how much weight she could shed in a week and whether she'd be able to get Fabien for a blow-dry at such short notice. Did Hugh have anything in his diary?

Talking of which, how had they left it for Kate and Monty's tonight? Was he going straight from the office? She tried his mobile but it was switched off.

Tor checked her watch and started gathering the children's beakers, swim nappies and discarded clothes.

'Millie, Marney, Oscar,' she called to her waddling, toddling brood. 'Over here, please. Let's get you dressed.'

The sun had plopped from the sky now and her legs goosebumped in the dusk. She shivered and shrugged on her pale grey cashmere jumper (M&S, machine washable, but with the label cut out, who knew?). There were only two hours till dinner at Kate's, and with three kids under five and still bath and bedtime to get through, it was a tight schedule. Time to get a shift on.

Cress waved and smiled cheerily as Tor reversed out of the drive. She closed the front door slowly and leant against it, deliberating whether to make the phone call, or go and bath the children. She could hear their shrieks and splashes three floors away – God only knew the amount of water there must be on the floor.

She checked her watch. He hadn't rung – but then she'd known he wouldn't. The New York flight was due to leave

in twenty minutes. She pressed her fists against her eyes as she faced up to the fact she was out of choices. If she was going to stop him getting on that plane, she was going to have to play her hand.

Navigating her way past the abandoned toys and strewn clothes – Greta could pick them up – she marched past the children's bathroom, just as Felicity, her youngest and barely three, clambered over the side of the bath.

'Mummy!' she yelled. Darting past the towel Greta was holding wide like a windbreaker and throwing her arms around Cress's legs – her long, wet hair slapping Cress's thighs – she rugby-tackled her to a halt. Cress wobbled and fell forwards on to her hands in a rather ungainly downward dog position.

'Oh Flick, get off!' Cress said crossly, trying to push Felicity off her legs. 'You're getting me soaked.'

'But you're already wearing a towel, Mummy.'

'No. It's Juicy Couture and it's dry clean only,' she said huffily.

'Now you know that's not true,' said an amused voice.

Cress tried to look back over her shoulder, but being still a dog that was downwards and not suitably warmed up, she couldn't. She peered through her legs instead.

'What are you doing home so early?' she cried.

Mark was standing at the top of the stairs, pulling off his tie. 'Meeting ended early,' he grinned, faint laughter lines tucking in around his clear blue eyes. He oozed mischief and looked considerably younger than his thirty-nine years. Even the sprinkling of salt in his pepper-black hair seemed to twinkle. 'And clearly you were thinking what I was thinking.' He walked up to her and planted a kiss on her butt cheek. Even after nine years of marriage, the chemistry

between them was as strong as it had been the night they first met, when she had been embroiled in an affair with his married boss and he'd had to smuggle her out of the bank's summer party after his boss's wife made a surprise entrance.

Felicity extricated herself from her mother's heap and – along with Orlando, four, Jago, six, and Lucy, seven – threw herself at her father instead. Mark disappeared under a wriggling mass of pink limbs and downy hair.

'Come on, you lot. Bedtime story,' he said, giving Flick a piggyback up to the nursery rooms on the top floor. 'I'll be back for you in a few minutes,' he winked to Cress.

Cress winked back, and blew goodnight kisses to the children, who didn't notice. She blanched at their unintentional slights but decided to put that one down to the excitement of the moment.

Anyway, she had other things on her mind. She didn't notice Greta standing in the bathroom, holding the damp towel across her chest and listening to every intimate word between husband and wife.

Cress stalked across the landing to the master bedroom, her perfectly pedicured feet sinking into the plush cream carpet, and shut the door behind her. Picking up the red leather Smythson diary she'd left on the bedside table, she flicked through the pages until she found the number she was looking for.

She stared at it. Her destiny lay in those digits. Everything she had ever worked for, striven for – hell, neglected her family for – came down to this. It was do or die.

Her company, Sapphire Books, had risen to spectacular heights in eight short years, presciently foreseeing the blogging phenomenon as a kissing cousin to the publishing industry. While the naysayers decried these web books as the

napsters of the publishing industry, she saw beyond the initial drift. Though the most successful blogs boasted millions-strong readerships, they appealed mainly to the computer-nerds. Cress knew most people preferred to read from a physical page. They liked the feel of a book in their hands when they were lying in bed, on the bus or at the poolside. And she knew that her precision editing and slick polish could package the same material to an even broader audience.

Her first six blog-books had gone straight into the top ten of the *Times* best-seller lists, but sales on titles since had cooled and she needed to look beyond diarists and virtual lives. She couldn't afford to stay so niche. The blogging trend was peaking and Sapphire Books needed to break into the mainstream.

As usual, luck had been on her side. Her first foray into fiction had been picked by Richard and Judy's all-powerful book club and sales were now nudging a million copies. But she had nothing with which to follow it up.

So when that innocuous brown envelope had landed on her desk, handing the biggest name in publishing to her on a plate, it had seemed too good to be true. Clearly, it wasn't something she could show to her legal team. She had to do this alone. It was dodgy ground. Oh, who was she kidding? It was criminal, face it.

She'd tried doing it straight, meeting him socially at various parties in London, New York and Boston, letting the acquaintance bud until she felt she could table a meeting with him.

They'd met up at the Portobello Hotel – small, intimate and off the corporate track, like Sapphire – and she'd delivered a sensational pitch, boasting of Sapphire's impressive profitability and its reputation as the fastest-growing, most dynamic publishing company around. They were the

mavericks, just like him. The chemistry between Harry Hunter and Sapphire – between him and her – was sizzling, and Harry had been surprisingly impressed.

He'd only agreed to the meeting, intending to get to the pink and black lace balconette bra she was wearing beneath her grey georgette blouse. But her impressive engagement ring had winked at him like a jealous child on a single mother's first date – no woman kept her ring freshly polished after nine years of marriage unless she was still in love with her husband – and when he'd suggested finishing the meeting 'somewhere more private', they had stalled.

He liked a challenge, but he didn't have the time he'd usually devote to breaking and bedding her. Manhattan was waiting, and she wasn't even in the same ball-park when it came down to money. Reluctantly, he'd had to let her go for the time being but, not wanting to burn his bridges – knowing they'd bump into each other again on the publishing circuit – he'd left it that he'd 'consider' her proposal.

The minutes had ticked by all week and she'd barely slept. She'd fingered the brown envelope constantly, like a worry bead. Did she dare cross the line?

Now, she couldn't put it off any longer. Time, tide and air traffic controllers wait for no man. She had to do it.

The phone rang five times before he picked up.

'Cressida,' he smiled, though there was a faint note of impatience in his voice, now that she was no longer an imminent prospect. 'I'm sorry. I meant to get back to you. It's been a crazy week.'

Cress had seen the pictures of him in the *Mirror*, tumbling out of Whisky Mist with a blonde on each arm.

'I know. I won't keep you,' she said levelly. 'I just wanted to check you weren't getting on the plane.'

'What?' he said, alarmed. 'Has something happened? Is there a security alert?'

Cress could hear a rumble of commotion around him.

'No. No security alert. Nothing like that.' Cress heard him break off to reassure the passengers around him. 'Sorry. Didn't mean to panic you,' he was saying, with what she could well imagine was a boyish grin. There was another pause. 'Yeah, sure. Who should I make it out to?'

He came back on the line.

'Sorry. Autographs,' he said, clearly cradling the phone on his shoulder. Cress visualized him scribbling on various people's magazines, cheque-book stubs, arms – breasts, no doubt.

She waited.

His voice was distracted. 'So are you ringing to tell me there's something new you can do for me?'

'In a way, yes.'

She paused, letting his frustration mount.

'Which is?'

'Well . . .' She took a deep breath. 'I can agree not to tell the world about Brendan Hillier.'

Chapter Two

Dinner was supposed to be at nine sharp, but it was already half an hour past that and Kate was still waiting on one couple. Monty had gone back out with the last-but-one bottle of fizz, but they hadn't catered for the pre-dinner drinks lasting two hours and he'd soon have to start on the Pouilly Fumé. Bloody hell. He hated the food and booze being out of synch.

Kate stirred the sauce in silent fury. They'd been tense with each other all week and she knew he was deliberately avoiding ringing her at work. If she confronted him, he'd hold out his palms and blame back-to-back meetings, but they both knew they were in retreat from each other, from the red stain they'd woken to on the bedsheets, and what it meant. Again.

She didn't ask why any more. There were no answers, no more tests, no more doctors. Everyone said they should just hang in there – count themselves lucky that there wasn't an actual reason for failing to conceive. It meant it could still happen. They just had to have Hope.

What those people didn't realize was that Hope was the worst part. Counting the year, not in weeks or months, but in private twenty-eight-day cycles, thinking maybe this month would be the month – constantly on the watch for water

retention, talking herself into nausea, deluding herself she had a heightened sense of smell, praying that her tightening waistband signified the beginnings of a new life, not a new diet – only to have it dashed month after month after month.

No, Hope was not her friend. And when those oh-so-well-meaning people squeezed her hand comfortingly, support and sympathy written all over their faces, her smile was frigid with resentment.

Kate took another sip from her glass and looked at the clock. At this rate they wouldn't get to bed before 1 a.m. Not that it mattered so much – after all, the one upside of not having children meant late nights could easily be supported by lazy mornings. But as a top libel lawyer in London's most prestigious and profitable reputation management firm, Saturdays were often her busiest days. She had to have a clear head for threatening the editors who were getting ready to bump up their Sunday circulations with juicy scandals featuring her celebrity clients. She was on first-name terms with all the newspaper editors, London agents and LA publicists, and she had the home and mobile numbers of most of the football premiership and several Russian billionaires.

Tor walked in with an empty glass, looking stunning in a cream silk backless Temperley dress. 'I've come to join you,' she said, going straight to the vast American fridge and pulling out the last remaining bottle of Moët. 'I'm fed up with being ignored by my husband.'

Hugh had come to Kate and Monty's straight from the office, and Tor was sulking that he hadn't bothered to come home first to get changed – his suit was rumpled and he needed a shave. She hated arriving at parties on her own – even when they were being hosted by their best friends.

Apart from briefly asking her if the children had finished their supper and whether she had money for the babysitter, Hugh had gone on to spend most of the evening engrossed in conversation with a rather voluptuous – well, plump actually, Tor thought – freckly woman with a fabulous mane of auburn hair that she kept tossing about like an excited pony. Hugh liked women with some meat on their bones. He probably thought she looked as though she would be good in bed.

'Any reason why you're starving us all?' Tor asked.

'Well, clearly because you've just let yourself go and really need to lose the baby weight,' Kate drawled.

Tor smoothed her dress over her tummy and smiled back, self-consciously.

'Joke!' Kate cried, tossing her auburn hair off her shoulders. Her friend's insecurity was maddening. A neat size ten, Tor had never really shrugged off the body fascism that came from an adolescence spent staring at herself in a mirror all day, practising kicks and pliés next to five-foot featherweights who could tuck their ankles behind their ears. But quite what she had to be insecure about was beyond Kate. Keeping herself to a size twelve was a constant battle. She knew that inside her gym-honed curves was a size fourteen waiting to burst free. Not that being curvy was all bad. She was tall enough to carry it off – five foot nine in stockings – and Monty said her magnificent cleavage was his pride and joy, his own set of twins to play with.

'Good tan too,' she reassured.

'Thanks – this one didn't leave me smelling like roast beef. Here, sniff.' Tor held out her arm and Kate sniffed appreciatively.

'Well, hello, ladies,' said a smooth voice. 'Do you need

any help with that?' They looked up. Guy Latham, an old uni friend of Monty's, had sauntered in. He did something 'technical' in the City. Looking taller than his six foot in an exquisitely cut bespoke grey suit, lime silk lining flashing, he was clearly doing well.

His wife, Laetitia, confirmed his successes with some ambitious networking of her own and was completely terrifying. She was one of those slick charity hostesses you always saw in the society pages at the back of *Tatler* and *Country Life*, and was best friends with Daphne Guinness and Tamara Mellon. Brought up in Martha's Vineyard on America's East Coast, she had been bred to the power charity circuit, and her life revolved around lunches, shopping events and 'intimate soirées' with the great, the good and the generous. Tor, Cress and Kate thought she was a social climber with ropes on her back, but Tor couldn't deny her presence here tonight added a frisson of exclusivity to the gathering.

Guy took the bottle from Tor, who was going faintly purple.

'Allow me,' he said, taking the bottle from her. Without taking his gaze off the two women, he expertly opened the champagne. It popped elegantly and he poured them each two fresh glasses.

'Now. As you were,' he said with a wicked smile.

'Huh?' Tor was lost.

'Sniffing each other. It looked surprisingly erotic.'

They both frowned at him, Tor in confusion, Kate with thinly veiled disgust, her green eyes flashing.

'Oh well, it was worth a shot,' he smiled. He picked up the magnum and headed out of the kitchen. ''Don't do anything I wouldn't do, ladies,' he called over his shoulder.

'God, he's patronizing,' Kate muttered under her breath.

'I eat his clients for breakfast and he treats me like the little woman.'

Tor took a sip and enjoyed the feel of the bubbles fizzing on her tongue. 'Forget him. He's a prat.' She walked over to the door. 'Tell me this: who's the fat bird who's been chatting up Hugh all night?' Tor watched them, feeling suspiciously like she was spying on them. They seemed so – intimate.

Kate tutted disapprovingly. 'You cannot, in this day and age, call someone "a fat bird", Tor Summershill. That's the kind of slur that brings me lots of money.'

'I guess,' Tor conceded. 'But she is chatting up my husband.'

'Yes, I noticed that.' They stood at the doorway together, glasses in hand and eyes narrowed. 'Her name's Julia McIntyre. Guy suggested we invited her. I can't stand her but she's just destroyed her husband in the divorce court, so Monty's angling to invest some of her millions.'

'Aaah.' She turned back, bored by her husband's flirting. 'Anyway, back to my original question. When are we eating? I'm going to pass out with hunger in a minute.'

'I'm just waiting for one more couple.'

'I take it there's a life or death situation which is making them so bloody late?'

Kate chuckled. 'There is, actually. He's an obstetrician, stuck at a birth.'

Tor rolled her eyes and pulled a goofy face.

'Oh, hang on. You know him, don't you? James White – wasn't he yours?'

'Oooh,' Tor smiled, bending at the knees. He'd delivered all her and Cress's babies, and they both had a long-standing crush on him. 'God, is he really coming for dinner? How fantastic. Who've you put him next to?'

'You, of course.'

Tor's stomach rumbled loudly and she clapped a hand over it. 'Well, look, I really don't think you can hold up dinner any longer, even for the deeply charismatic Mr White . . .'

'Uh, Lord White,' Kate corrected, smiling.

'Is he a Lord?' Tor whispered, intimidated.

'Well, when you deliver the royal babies, you're going to be top of the list, let's face it.'

'Wow,' Tor muttered. Did Cress know a Lord had delivered her babies, she wondered? Surely not. Else she'd never have heard the end of it.

Her tummy rumbled again.

'Well, *Lord* White could be hours, yet. And if you don't get some food down everyone's throats, I swear they're going to be so lashed they'll start playing spin the bottle. And I, for one, do not want to have to kiss my husband.'

Kate chuckled.

'I'll send Monty through, shall I?'

With the zeal of the half starved and completely pissed, Tor manoeuvred everyone towards the round pedestal table while Kate started ladling out the portions of monkfish, which by now were looking tougher than a Thai kickboxer.

Kate had laid the table beautifully. Her parties were always themed. Tonight's was Oriental Pearl. The black linen tablecloth was set off by a trail of white orchids that fragrantly wove around dainty tealights, and tiny ecru blind-embossed place-names perched on antique ivory chopsticks – a nightmare to read but they looked great.

Tor stood behind her chair – she saw she had Guy Latham to her left and James White to her right. Hugh was opposite her but may as well have been in another room for all the

attention he was paying her. She tried joining Guy's conversation with Monty, but it was something about the pensions crisis and she stood awkwardly mute as she ransacked her brain for a single opinion to offer up on the topic.

Thankfully, she was saved by Kate triumphantly setting down the meal, and all conversation ceased as everyone inhaled the aroma.

'Apologies, all,' smiled Kate. 'We shall have to start without the last guests. Please tuck in.'

Nobody needed to be told twice, and over the clatter of forks, Guy and Monty picked up their conversation where they'd left it. For a few moments, Tor didn't care. She was just grateful to be able to eat at last – she'd skipped lunch so that her tummy was flat for this evening and felt exceptionally light-headed. If she could get some food into her system, she might sober up a little.

Kate had calmed down from her inward histrionics in the kitchen and was sitting regally, feeling satisfied that her evening – if not her life – had finally come together.

The doorbell rang. Typical!

She sprang up and came back into the room moments later, crying, 'A little boy. Hurrah!' Everyone cheered, even though none of them knew who'd just had the little boy, and raised their glasses in a display of drunken conviviality.

Then just as quickly as the table had roared approval, it fell silent. Following Kate through the door came a ravishing brunette, petite, with porcelain-fine bone structure and an elfin crop. With a casual hand on her shoulder was a tall, dark-haired man with strong cheekbones and deep-set chocolate-brown eyes. He was carrying a bottle of Pétrus, which cheered up the men, who were depressed that the Parisian – for what else could she be? – was accounted for.

'Everyone, this is James White and Coralie Pedeaux.'.

The men perked up again upon hearing that Coralie was not yet married, conveniently overlooking the fact that they all were. Monty – desperate not to let his long-awaited supper go cold – briskly did the introductions while Kate served up the last two portions.

The latecomers took their seats, James kissing Tor on both cheeks before tucking his chair in and shaking out his napkin. 'How lovely to see you again. May I call you Victoria, seeing as we're off-duty?'

'Oh, please, call me Tor.'

'Tor, then. Are you well? You certainly look it. Hospital gowns clearly didn't do anything for you.'

'Thank you.' She smiled brightly at the compliment and nodded towards Coralie, who was positioning herself daintily between Monty and Guy – both of whom were holding out her chair. She was wearing a navy knitted dress, with a deep scooped neckline and a tantalizing scarlet ribbon that threaded over a small but perfectly formed décolleté which had clearly never breastfed three children. A shapely back wasn't the only reason Tor preferred backless styles these days.

'Your girlfriend is far too beautiful to be sitting at a dinner party in the inner city suburbs,' Tor asserted in mock outrage. 'Shouldn't she be at a grand prix or on a gin palace in the Med?'

James laughed. 'I know. Half the time I take her out, she gets taken to the VIP area and I get barred at the door. It's so embarrassing. I have to keep pretending I've been paged.' He shrugged self-deprecatingly, and she laughed.

'Have you been together long?'

'Mmm, about a year? Just under, I think. Or is it more?

Hang on a second.' He frowned, mentally scanning for a reference point.

'Oh, you're such a boy.' Tor scolded gently. 'So rubbish with dates. Tsk.'

'Yes, I know. It's pathetic'. He hung his head in mock shame, and Tor giggled.

He was surprisingly relaxed off-duty. She leant in conspiratorially. The champagne in the kitchen had hit her and she felt playful.

'Of course, are we allowed to speak?'

He looked at her, puzzled.

'Socially, I mean.'

'Ah'. He leant in. 'Are you a spy too, then?' He looked furtively round the room. She giggled again.

'No. But you know jolly well what I mean. You are – were – my doctor. Doesn't our meeting here contravene the doctor-patient relationship, ethics, thingy?'

'Oh, I see, yes, the ethics-thingy.' He nodded sagely. 'Well, are you pregnant?'

'No, I'm not.'

'Are you planning to get pregnant again?'

She snorted before she could stop herself. 'Chance would be a fine thing.'

He cocked an eyebrow.

'No, no.' She coughed and fidgeted. 'Definitely no more.'

'So you're not planning to see me again?'

'No.'

'Charming!' He grinned, and she thought how boyish he looked. He'd always seemed so – patrician, in his white coat. He picked up his knife and fork again and leant in to her. 'Then it's OK. We can meet here, no jeopardy – or thingies.'

They smiled at their japes, and she was surprised at how

completely at ease she felt in his company. She knew, of course, that sitting next to James White at a dinner would be considered by most of south-west London as a huge coup. Cress would just die. She might have Harry Hunter, but Tor had James White. He was the best obstetrician in London, and Cress used to joke that it was worth getting pregnant just to see him. Nearly all his patients were madly in love with him – he was their knight with shining stethoscope – and would gladly make up excuses to increase their antenatal visits and delay being discharged after the birth. Oh, the cruel irony of having to be pregnant by another man just to see him!

Being a James White patient was like being in a very exclusive club – one for which the husbands paid dearly, at over ten grand for a C-section – as he only took four patients a month. Those in the know took their pregnancy tests at four weeks and often booked him before their husbands even knew they were pregnant. Cress, typically, had cunningly forged a close telephone relationship with his secretary – the gatekeeper – just to get first dibs.

'So how do you know Kate and Monty?' Tor asked, just as he put a forkful of food in his mouth.

'Mmm,' he paused, trying to chew quickly. 'Old family friends. And then Monty went out with my baby sister for a while. Not long. Couple of months? Broke her heart of course, the scoundrel.' He tried to scowl. Tor laughed. 'Naturally, I threatened to beat him up with my very heavy medical textbooks, but he wriggled out of it with a David Bowie album and the secret of his bacon sarnies.'

'Yes, they are legendary, aren't they?' Tor smiled. Monty's renowned breakfasts had been the bedrock of the three couples' friendship as the toll of Cress and Mark's, and Tor

and Hugh's consecutive babies and broken nights rendered them all unfit for night-time socializing for a good few years. 'Gosh. So that must have been ages ago.' Tor paused, trying to work out dates. 'Because Monty and Kate have been together since – what – they were sixteen?'

'Um . . .' He refilled his glass. 'Yes. But they broke up for a bit at the beginning of university. As I understand it. That's when he had a dalliance with my sister.'

'Ah. This was all before my time.' She uncrossed and recrossed her legs.

'How do you know them?' James, tucking into his dinner, didn't look up. He was clearly famished. Close up, his eyes looked tired. She wondered how long he'd just worked for? He'd been up all night for her with both Marney and Millie, although Oscar had been a planned C-section, mid-morning.

'Well, it was the boys who were friends first. My husband was at Wellington with Monty so they've known each other since they were only just out of short trousers. I met them when Hugh and I got together after university, and Kate and I just clicked immediately. It was like I'd known her my entire life.'

'Is your husband here tonight?' he inquired politely.

'Yes, he's over there.' Tor nodded briefly in Hugh's direction but she was eager not to bring him into the conversation. She was beginning to find his ceaseless admiration of his buxom dinner companion embarrassing. She hurried along. 'Actually, I always thought you were married.' Tor was sure she recalled seeing a photo of him at the Gold Cup polo a few years back, with a stunning brunette.

'I was. Until three years ago.'

'Oh, I'm so sorry. I had no idea.' Tor felt embarrassed.

James shrugged. 'It was a long time coming. Casualty of

my job, unfortunately.' He sighed. 'The hours are long, unsociable, demanding. You can probably imagine. She grew tired of going to dinners and parties on her own . . .' Tor resisted the urge to empathize with his ex. Her situation was quite different. Definitely.

'. . . Of me getting out of bed in the middle of the night to go into the hospital. Can't blame her really. In the end, she . . . well, she's remarried now, to a colleague of mine, a plastic surgeon. Much better hours.' He smiled wryly.

'Still or sparkling, Tor?' Guy interrupted.

'Oh, still, please. I've had enough bubbles for one night,' she smiled.

Guy filled her water glass and emptied the bottle. 'James?'

'Yes, same, please.'

Tor scanned the table and saw another bottle further down. It was too far from Guy. 'I'll get it,' she said and stood up to reach over to it, the side of her dress falling forward and inadvertently casting James a superb flash of her breasts.

Guy joined their conversation, trying to engage James in the pensions discussion, but he heroically resisted, keeping the topics to Cornwall versus Norfolk and the differences between baby boys and girls. Tor fell a little bit more in love with him for being so sweet to keep her in the conversation, and the rest of the evening flew by. In fact she felt quite disappointed when the doorbell started ringing solidly at quarter past midnight, as everyone's pre-booked minicabs arrived so that they could dash home to relieve the babysitters.

Monty was holding Tor's coat open for her when James came to say goodbye.

'It's been such a pleasure seeing you again this evening,' James smiled down at her. 'But remember . . .' He looked furtively left and right. 'You haven't seen me.'

She giggled and he kissed her on both cheeks. Coralie was standing at the door, shivering. Without a word, he placed his jacket over her bird-like shoulders, and guided her out. A moment later, Hugh sauntered up, hands in pockets. Where had he been?

'Wasn't that our baby doctor chap?'

Whatever his insouciance, Hugh must have been jealous of Tor's spirited conversation with James, for he was all over her in the taxi. She had intended to be cross with him for ignoring her all evening, but as he slid his hands around her back and under her dress, she was too pleased by his ardour to care.

They gave the taxi driver quite a peepshow, writhing on the back seat like teenagers, and when they got home, Hugh kept the taxi running outside and vastly overpaid the babysitter, practically pushing her out of the door. Tor was plumping the cushions on the sofa in the drawing room when he came up behind her and deftly untied the velvet ribbons holding up the top of her dress so that it fell to her waist. She gasped in surprise that he couldn't even wait to get upstairs. The skirt of the dress was too tight to pull down, so he hitched it up, revealing the tiny white lace G-string she'd worn on their wedding day. It rolled down easily beneath his fingers, and he left it suspended around one ankle as he bent her over the sofa. They were both frantic with hurry. Five weeks – the last time they'd had sex – had been long enough.