

Fanning Old Flames

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Chapter 1

It all started with a phone call.

'A day at a health farm?' The words struck instant terror into Maggie's heart. She could immediately visualise a room full of Caprice, Elle and Naomi-like figures mocking her saggy stomach and whispering, 'Tummy tuck, darling. I'll give you a number. There's a marvellous chap on Harley Street. I could fast-track you in there next week.' The nightmare quickly moved on to her being rushed off to hospital after collapsing over an exercise bike.

'I ... I ... don't think I'd have the courage ...' she started, gazing round the kitchen with its pile of washing up waiting to be done. The sinkful of plates and pans might have made the shortlist for the Turner Prize but they weren't going to provide any inspiration for an excuse.

'Nonsense.' Pam's voice came firmly down the line. 'It'll be heaps of fun. And anyway, I want to celebrate being forty, not roll over and begin a slow death. Besides, I want to share it with you.'

Maggie knew from Pam's tone that she wasn't going to take no for an answer. She couldn't even wriggle out of it with the excuse of clashing dates. The voucher that Pam had been given by her work colleagues to mark that mid-life milestone could be taken any time to suit. And clearly Pam was determined the date was going to suit them both.

'It's really kind of you, but ...' she tried again. But there was no budging Pam.

'Listen, Maggs, you give me a list of dates you're available and I'll just book one of them. OK. Bye.' The phone clicked off.

Maggie replaced the receiver and thought for a moment. A health farm? It sounded like organised torture. Armies of Lycra-clad beauties admiring themselves in mirrors while being pampered by equally beautiful women in white coats with white marble complexions. Root canal work could have been a tempting alternative.

She wandered over to the sink to begin the dishes. As she reached to turn on the tap, she noticed her hands, skin tired and wrinkled, nails dry and flaking. Liver spots were probably only a matter of days away. She was ashamed to realise she couldn't

remember the last time she'd bothered with nail varnish, apart from an emergency attempt to stop a ladder in her tights with a timely blob.

Bloody typical of Pam, she muttered to herself. She'll be in her element having what she'll see as a wonderfully pampering day out, and I'll be dreading the ordeal of having perfect strangers gazing at my flabby thighs.

Funny how opposites attract. She and Pam had been best friends since Weltham Grammar School days, although even then they were just as dissimilar. Pam, the taller of the two, was the first girl in the class to go blonde: a full-on platinum job bought with her Saturday girl discount at Boots and shoved on the minute she got home. She'd then survived a run-in with the headmistress the following Monday – and kept her hair colour after her mother waded into the fight – which ensured her place up there amongst the great school icons.

Pam always seemed to be ahead of the game. The first in the class to wear heels and lipstick, produce a packet of ten Embassy tipped and then brazenly light up behind the bike sheds. She had style from the word go, even interpreting the school uniform to give it a modern twist. Tie worn loose, shirt collar fashionably turned up, school jumper knotted casually over her shoulders. As well as being tall and thin, she walked like a catwalk model, so even the regulation pleated skirt somehow looked impossibly trendy on Pam.

Maggie, on the other hand, had never quite mastered the art of putting clothes together. Being somewhat heavy in the hip department, she spent her entire teens trying to find ways of disguising them. The search for a minimising pair of jeans became the start of a lifetime mission. Not having Pam's courage, she knew that colouring her dull brown wiry hair any colour other than mousy wasn't an option. And besides, the embarrassment! Someone might have noticed! Or, even worse, said something.

Make-up had also been a bit of a mystery never really solved. Maggie gave up poking herself regularly in the eye with an eyeliner brush and settled for mascara that, no matter how she applied it, always dried in clumps. While Pam sported immaculate scarlet painted talons that always survived an entire weekend, somehow Maggie always had a couple of chunks missing from her nail varnish before she'd even left her house. These days, with two feuding teenaged children, a lazy husband and no dishwasher, there was no time for a social life, let alone shoving Rouge Noir or Ruby Sorbet on her fingertips.

As she started scrubbing the plates, she racked her brains to think of a really convincing reason not to go to the health farm with Pam. She could plead lack of a decent track suit, but she knew Pam would cart her off to the shops and insist she treated herself. Or, worse still, buy it for her. She'd have to come up with something. The thought of some perfect stranger massaging her saggy neck and offering tactful tips about laughter lines was no joke.

For a few seconds, she contemplated asking the kids to help with the dishes, but she could already hear a row brewing up between them in the sitting room. By the time

she'd finished the last of the pans, the squabbling was at fever pitch. As always, it was over the same thing.

'OK, who's got the remote control?' she demanded wearily, standing in the doorway. Beth and George were sitting on the sofas opposite each other, snarling like a couple of feral cats.

'Stupid question,' shrieked Beth. 'He's just a bully. We've had bloody bloody football for the last ten minutes and it's supposed to be my turn now.'

'Well, I can't stand your stupid girly programmes. All that fashion and soap rubbish,' George retorted. 'And anyway it's a crucial match for Southampton. Win this one and they could be in with a serious crack at winning the league.'

'I don't care,' Beth mocked him. 'Football's all the same. Hours and hours of kicking a ball up and down a bit of grass. All the matches are the same. All the outfits are the same. Even the bloody ball looks the same.'

'Same with your soap drivel,' he sneered. 'They're always either in the pub or in the café and everyone's either rowing or kissing.'

Beth picked up a cushion and threw it at him.

'In case you haven't noticed, dolt brain,' she shouted, 'that's exactly what happens in football. They're either kicking or kissing each other.'

'OK, if they're exactly the same, then shut your stupid face and watch the footie.' George heaved the cushion back at Beth. She burst into noisy sobs, but as Maggie noted wryly there was a complete absence of tears. A roar went up from the capacity crowd at St Mary's.

'Now look, you bitch, they've just scored and I missed it because of your stupid whingeing.'

'That's enough,' Maggie finally shouted above the din. 'Calm down, the pair of you, and stop swearing. Your dad will be home in a minute and he'll go berserk if he hears all this. I'll have that remote control. Now.'

Beth got up from the sofa, glared at George and then stalked out of the room.

'Go and phone one of your sad little friends,' George called after her. 'Go and spend a couple of hours having an in-depth discussion about your boy bands.'

There was a faint response which sounded suspiciously like 'F off yourself' as Beth clumped upstairs noisily to her room.

Maggie held out her hand for the remote control.

'But Mum ...'

'No buts,' she announced. 'For chrissake, go and watch the bloody football in your room and give me some peace.'

George opened his mouth to bark back at his mother but the sound of the front door slamming shut silenced him immediately. Without another word, he handed his mother the remote control and headed for his bedroom.

Maggie sighed. With Beth aged thirteen and George turned fifteen, there were an awful lot of hormones washing around. She just wished they could get on occasionally.

She turned to confront a very stropky-looking Garth, standing in the doorway, his dark eyes blazing.

'Had a good day, love?' she asked, pretending not to notice the black mood that was coming off her husband in tidal waves.

'No I bloody haven't,' he announced crossly, parking himself firmly on the sofa and kicking off his boots. 'Fanbelt's gone again on the effing van. What's for supper?'

'Chilli,' Maggie replied, with forced jollity.

'I suppose that'll do,' he said ungraciously. 'And I'll have it in here. There's a really important match on tonight and I don't want to miss it.'

Football was king in their house. Garth, who'd entertained dreams of playing in the premier league and possibly for England, had been spotted as a schoolboy player. He'd been signed up by Southampton in his teens but never even made it to the subs' bench, thanks to an Achilles tendon injury. Physically, he still had a footballer's body, tall and muscular with strong legs and arms, but mentally he'd never quite got over a career so brutally cut short. These days, sporting a black beard and a shock of curly black hair now speckled with grey, he could only speculate about what might have been. Occasionally, after a beer too many, he'd let slip just how bitter and cheated he felt about the Beautiful Game. And that running his own gardening business would never – could never – compensate for the fame and riches he might have earned.

Maggie knew from long experience never to discuss it with him. She went straight back into the kitchen to resuscitate the rest of the chilli con carne, glad of the respite. She knew she was partly to blame for their all being so lazy around the house. She should have laid down ground rules years ago but it was difficult when your husband, instead of supporting you, set such a poor example. No one lifted a finger unless she made a fuss. The only advantage to that was that at least the kitchen provided an escape zone from the constant bickering. No one ventured in there, just in case they were asked to do some chores. If the coast was clear, though, they all snack-raided the fridge.

By the time she'd heated up the chilli and cooked some more rice, she could hear renewed sounds of arguing. When she appeared at the sitting room door with a tray

for Garth, the Battle for the Remote had resumed. George, hearing the football on again, had ventured back downstairs, hotly pursued by Beth who was now noisily proclaiming that it was all unfair and that men thought they could rule the world, a sentiment that Maggie privately agreed with.

'Can't you get these kids to shut up?' Garth growled as he snapped the ring pull on his beer and took a glug.

'Not if you insist on watching the footie,' said Maggie resignedly. 'Come on, Beth, be a love and go and have an early night. You look really tired. We'll go into town tomorrow and I'll treat you to that nice jumper in Warehouse you fancied.'

George whipped round angrily. 'Hey, that's not fair. Why does she get a present?'

'Because you've got the footie.' Oh, God, this was wearying. Perhaps Pam was right. A day at a health farm might actually be a good idea. She could just imagine Garth's reaction. He'd dismiss it as a load of kooky nonsense or condemn it as a blatant rip-off probably run by eunuchs. In a single sentence, he would spoil what pleasure there might have been in a day of being pampered head to foot.

But hang on a minute, she wasn't going, was she, because she was too terrified of being intimidated by all those perfect creatures in her mental picture. Sometimes, she reflected, out-of-season Siberia could seem an attractive destination when Garth and the kids were in full flow.

By Monday morning, even a winter break in Antarctica might have taken on a rosy glow. The post produced a frightening number of bills that were going to push their overdraft to the max and probably beyond. Garth's black mood of a few nights before resumed when he saw the size of his mobile phone account. But, Maggie reasoned with him, running a gardening services business and therefore being outside all day meant he conducted most of his business on it. Why he should be so cross when (a) it was tax deductible and (b) it was he who had run up the calls? Maggie could only put it down to male time of the month.

He casually threw the last item in the pile, an ominously large envelope, across the kitchen table towards her. It was addressed to her in vaguely familiar writing. She ripped open the envelope to find a glossy brochure inside.

Welcome to Juicy Lucy's Health Farm, a magical retreat from the maelstrom of life, a cool harbour in the frenzied forest of twenty-first-century living, an oasis in the desert that is your office. As welcoming as a lay-by in a traffic jam, an armchair at a bus stop or merely an upgrade on a cheap long haul. Come and be pampered by our fully qualified staff. People from all walks of life enjoy Juicy Lucy's. Our regular guests include top models, pop stars, City movers and shakers, media moguls, and

professional sportsmen and women, all seeking that magical world of spiritual and physical well-being that J Lu can provide ...

Oh, God, Maggie groaned to herself, J Lu. How naff's that? She retrieved a piece of writing paper stuck inside the brochure with Pam's distinctive loopy writing on it.

I've booked us in for Saturday week. Got Beth to check on your kitchen calendar. No more excuses. Love Pam xx