Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Idol

Written by Carrie Duffy

Published by Harper

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

CARRIE DUFFY

Idol

HARPER

This novel is entirely a work of fiction.
The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are
the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to
actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is
entirely coincidental.

Harper
An imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*
77–85 Fulham Palace Road,
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB

www.harpercollins.co.uk

A Paperback Original 2011
1

Copyright © Caroline Duffy 2011

Caroline Duffy asserts the moral right to
be identified as the author of this work

A catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library

ISBN: 978 0 00 742150 3

Set in Melior by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted,
in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior
permission of the publishers.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not,
by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out or
otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent
in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it
is published and without a similar condition including this
condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.



Mixed Sources
Product group from well-managed forests and other controlled sources
www.fsc.org Cert no. SW-COC-001806
© 1996 Forest Stewardship Council

FSC is a non-profit international organization established
to promote the responsible management of the world's forests.
Products carrying the FSC label are independently certified
to assure consumers that they come from forests that are managed
to meet the social, economic and ecological needs
of present and future generations.

Find out more about HarperCollins and the environment at
www.harpercollins.co.uk/green

To my Mum and Dad.
Although you probably shouldn't read this.

PART ONE

1

The bulletproof limo sped down London's Park Lane, making a left as it swept up to the entrance of the Dorchester Hotel.

Jenna Jonsson peered out through the tinted windows in disbelief. Everywhere she looked she saw crowds of people – hysterical fans pressed tightly against the metal crash barriers screaming her name, the waiting paparazzi poised for the killer shot.

Jenna inhaled sharply, her dazzling green eyes widening in astonishment. She was 23 years old and breathtakingly beautiful, the hottest property in the music world right now.

'My God, it's crazy,' she murmured to herself.

Gerry King, her manager, looked over. 'Are you okay?' he asked, concerned.

'I'm fine,' Jenna insisted, trying to fight the feelings of insecurity rising in her chest. It was her first major event following a well-publicized break, and being back on the scene was overwhelming.

'Don't worry. You look sensational,' Gerry reassured her.

He wasn't lying. Her skin was tanned and flawless,

her incredible body encased in shimmering Roberto Cavalli, cut high on the thigh and slashed heart-stoppingly low at the front to reveal her magnificent cleavage. Diamonds glittered at her ears and throat, and a mass of glossy, blonde curls tumbled down her back. She was the epitome of raw sex appeal.

'Thanks,' Jenna smiled gratefully.

The car pulled to a halt and the silent, dark-suited security guard seated opposite her jumped out. Jenna watched as he spoke to the security team, his eyes scanning the tightly packed crowd, constantly alert for any possible threat. The fans were working themselves into a frenzy; in spite of the freezing winter weather they'd turned out in force, waving banners with her name and singing the chorus of 'Sexual Rush', her latest hit.

'See you on the other side,' winked Gerry, as the guard headed back across to the sleek limousine. At a signal from inside he opened the door. Then Jenna stepped out and the place erupted.

Flashbulbs exploded like firecrackers in the night sky, the noise from the crowd reaching a deafening roar as Jenna hit the red carpet on spike-heeled Jimmy Choos. It was as though someone had flicked a switch – the adrenaline kicked in and Jenna felt her nerves instantly vanish, shining like the superstar she was.

She placed a hand on her hip as she turned to face the cameras, catching her breath as she took in the sheer number. She could hardly believe that they were all there for her.

'Jenna – over here!' came a yell from the press pit where the world's media, banked steeply on their step-ladders, waited eagerly for their piece of her.

Instinctively Jenna broke into an irresistible smile,

her lips full and glossy, her eyes sparkling with excitement. This was the shot that would grace every tabloid front cover the following morning – Jenna Jonsson, the newly crowned princess of pop, fresh from her unprecedented victory at the MTV Europe Awards where she'd just won an incredible six gongs.

'Jenna, what can you tell us about the rumours you've split with Will?'

Jenna froze. Her smile died on her lips, the pain in her eyes impossible to hide.

'I . . . I really don't want to talk about that . . .' Jenna began hesitantly, the memories of Will's infidelity still fresh in her mind. Horrified, she felt tears prick at her eyelids and she bit down hard on her lip. '. . . But what I will say is that I have no ties, no commitments, and I intend to enjoy myself tonight. Bring on the champagne!'

Jenna's pulse was racing, her breath coming fast, as she heard the reporters rush to share the news with fans watching all over the globe.

'You heard it here first, folks. Jenna Jonsson exclusively confirmed to us that she *has* split with Will Rothwell, son of multi-millionaire property developer Charles Rothwell. That's right guys, Jenna's back on the market . . .'

Pull it together, Jenna admonished herself, all too aware that every emotion would be magnified by the cameras. The question about Will had upset her more than she'd expected. She'd been counting on him to accompany her to the awards tonight; she needed that emotional support of having him on her arm. And then she'd found out he was cheating on her. The girl was just 17 years old, at boarding school with his younger sister. How fucking humiliating. Apparently he was finding it 'difficult' dating someone so successful, so

he'd needed to screw some barely legal bimbo without an original thought in her head.

Jenna had told him to grow a pair of balls and walked out, shaking with anger. She was hurting badly, but she didn't intend to give him the satisfaction of seeing her like that.

Will Rothwell was history, Jenna vowed. Tonight she had her mind on something – and *someone* – far bigger.

The rumour was that Phoenix were going to be attending the after-show party. A world-famous American rock band, with looks to die for and an insane amount of talent, Phoenix had exploded onto the scene five years ago and their reputation was wild. Jenna was beyond excited.

Get a grip, she told herself firmly.

With a final wave at the crowd and the drooling paps, Jenna let herself be guided into the hotel. It was a jaw-dropping sight and she stared round in awe, noting the way the marble floor shone like glass, the whole ballroom bathed in a soft, pink light. Huge vases of white lilies had been mounted on podiums and looked spectacular against the black and gold classical backdrop.

Jenna scanned the room, smiling in thanks as she accepted a glass of champagne from a passing waiter. Then she raised it to her lips and almost dropped it.

Christ, it was him. It was Nick Taylor.

Jenna's pulse went into overdrive, her heart beating out of control. Nick Taylor was the drummer with Phoenix and the hottest guy on the planet – five feet eleven inches of strapping, blond good looks with piercing blue eyes and a killer smile to boot. To a London girl like Jenna, he looked like the ultimate American cowboy, with his powerful, muscular body and sexy, Southern accent. But Nick was more interested in riding

women than horses. He exuded sexuality, smouldering with an animal magnetism that women seemed powerless to resist. And he did little to discourage them. Jenna wasn't stupid – she'd heard the stories and knew that his womanizing was notorious. He was legendary for never being pictured with the same girl twice, yet the ladies still flocked to him, and Jenna was as smitten as any of them.

She was vaguely aware that someone was trying to speak to her, but she wasn't paying attention. She couldn't take her eyes off Nick as she watched him make his way across the room, radiating confidence and charisma. The crowd pressed against him, the women vying for his attention. Jenna wasn't surprised – he looked utterly gorgeous, devastatingly handsome in the Armani tux he was wearing. His bow tie was undone and thrown around his neck with an almost arrogant indifference; his shirt unbuttoned just enough to show the smooth, tanned flesh beneath.

Then, almost as if he'd known exactly where she would be, Nick raised his head and looked straight into Jenna's eyes. Her stomach went into freefall, a bolt of electricity surging through her as she heard herself gasp in shock. Nick's face creased into a smile of recognition and he began slowly walking towards her. The sea of people parted to let him through – he didn't even have to push, just walked with that easy swagger, the crowd moving naturally out of his way. And then suddenly he was standing right in front of her, so close that she could see every lash framing those amazing blue eyes, each curve of that luscious mouth . . .

'Congratulations,' Nick murmured. His voice was rich and gravelly, deliciously sexy.

'Thanks,' Jenna squeaked, horrified to discover her voice seemed to have gone up two octaves. Her heart

was pounding and she knew her cheeks must be flushed. She lowered her head in embarrassment, not realizing how impossibly cute it made her look.

'Good to finally meet you,' Nick said smoothly, in that low, Southern drawl. He leaned in to kiss her on the cheek, his fingers resting lightly on her waist. Jenna was sure she would melt right there and then, dissolve into a puddle at his feet.

'You too,' she faltered. 'I can't believe you're here. I mean, I heard you were coming and I hoped it was true but I didn't know for sure . . .' she raced on, mentally cursing herself for saying something so stupid.

'Well I definitely noticed *you* were here.' He looked her up and down with a slow, assessing and decidedly sexual gaze. Jenna felt the heat rising in her face as waves of lust flicked through her belly.

'I . . .' Jenna began, but she had no idea what she was trying to say. He was mesmerizing. If he'd taken her hand right there and then she would have followed him without hesitation.

'Aren't you going to introduce us?'

Someone beside them spoke and Jenna tore her gaze away to see Zac Knight, lead guitarist with Phoenix, standing with his arm around his supermodel girlfriend, Amber. Zac was almost as gorgeous as Nick, but in a very different way. Where Nick had classic boy-band good looks, Zac was the archetypal rock star, with his dark, wavy hair and razor-sharp cheekbones. His chocolate-brown eyes swept quickly over Jenna as he told her, 'Amber's been dying to meet you.'

Jenna thought she might hyperventilate. *This* was unprecedented!

Zac was legendary for avoiding industry events like this. He'd married young, before the band took off, and he'd been through a messy break-up with his wife,

Jessica. He'd fallen head over heels for Amber when they met backstage at New York Fashion Week, wrestling with his conscience as he agonized over whether or not to leave his wife. Amber had finally solved the problem for him by breaking the story to Page Six of the *New York Times* and ensuring that a first-edition copy was hand-delivered to Jessica Knight. It was a hell of a way to learn that your marriage was over.

Jenna could still remember the vitriolic headlines and stared curiously at Amber, the woman who'd been labelled a home-wrecker for luring Zac away from his childhood sweetheart.

'We met once before,' Jenna told her breathlessly. 'At a party in Marrakech.'

'I don't remember,' Amber told her blankly, looking at her with an expression of disdain.

What a bitch! thought Jenna, returning the haughty stare.

Okay, so Amber was undoubtedly stunning, Jenna conceded grudgingly, as she took in the silver column dress that emphasized Amber's slimness and poise. The sleek curtain of copper hair and flawless pale skin demonstrated why she had become the darling of the fashion pack – and why she had become Zac Knight's girlfriend. But her attitude certainly left a lot to be desired, thought Jenna, bristling with indignation at the put-down.

'Well, it's great to meet you,' Zac said lightly. His laid-back accent and relaxed manner quickly melted Jenna's rigid expression. It was impossible to stay mad on a night like tonight, when she was standing between Zac Knight and Nick Taylor!

Very gently, almost possessively, Nick put a hand on her arm. It was a gesture of complete confidence, and Jenna caught her breath at the skin-on-skin contact.

‘I don’t wanna be greedy, but I think I’d like to monopolize you this evening,’ he said silkily, his gaze never leaving her face. Jenna felt her stomach flip-flop at the way he looked her over.

‘I guess we’ll catch up with you guys later,’ smiled Zac, as Amber slipped a wafer-thin arm around his waist.

‘Over here, baby, there’s some people I want to introduce you to. It was nice to meet you, Jenna’ Amber lied, steering Zac through the crowd as she led a chorus of exclamations and air kisses.

As Nick bent his head low to speak to her, Jenna thought she might pass out. She could feel the warmth of his breath against her ear, the intense contact making her skin tingle. And that accent! Phoenix were named after the band’s home city in Arizona, and all the guys spoke with a slow, sexy drawl. It was so fucking delicious, Jenna didn’t think she could ever get tired of it.

Amazingly, the crowd seemed to leave them alone. It was as though Nick Taylor’s presence acted as a barrier that no one dared penetrate. He was sending out a clear message that Jenna was his and no one else should touch her. She could barely believe that he knew who she was, let alone that he wanted to spend the evening *monopolizing* her, Jenna thought, a thrill of excitement shooting through her as she recalled his words.

‘So,’ Nick began, breaking into an easy smile that lit up his face and made his blue eyes sparkle. ‘Enjoyin’ the party?’

Life had always come easy to Nick. Since his schooldays back in Arizona he’d had no trouble attracting the ladies, keeping the prettiest girls in class on a constant rotation. More interested in music than schoolwork, he found that being in a band sent his pulling power off

the scale and he exploited it to the full. He'd even managed to juggle two girls on the night of his high-school prom, making Kacey Ann Kruger wait in line for fruit punch and hotdogs while he deflowered Tiffany Wilkinson in a dark corner of the parking lot.

'Yeah – I mean, it looks amazing,' Jenna gushed, 'but I don't seem to have had a minute to myself.'

'Everyone's trying to grab a piece of you, huh? I'm not surprised,' Nick grinned, pointedly looking her over as he allowed his gaze to linger on that hand-span waist and those incredible breasts. Man, he certainly wouldn't mind grabbing a piece of Jenna Jonsson.

'So what are you up to at the moment?' Nick asked casually. 'Only me and the guys – well, you prob'ly heard what went down with Josh . . .'

Josh Starr was the lead singer with Phoenix and three days ago he'd quit the band. Rumours had been bubbling away in the press for months, with leaked reports that it had turned pretty nasty towards the end. Jenna was devastated.

'You're not splitting up, are you?' she asked in alarm.

'Hell, I don't know. I don't think so. I hope not anyway,' finished Nick, his tone suddenly despondent. He had to raise his voice to make himself heard above the flurry of conversations around them. 'We've talked about carrying on for a while – at least for another album – but with guest artists. A kinda collaborations project, I guess. But nothing's official yet – it's just an idea we've been throwing around.'

A thought suddenly occurred to Nick, and he began to speak before he could stop himself. 'Why don't you work with us on a track? It'd be awesome.'

'Work with Phoenix?' Jenna exclaimed, hardly able to believe what he was saying. It was her childhood

dream come true! The opportunity to record with her heroes, to see the masters at work – and, of course, to spend an insane amount of time with Nick Taylor . . .

'Are you sure? I mean, would the other guys want me?'

A sly grin spread across Nick's face. 'Yeah,' he drawled. 'We all want you.' She looked so cute standing there, those huge, green, baby-doll eyes full of insecurity. On the one hand, she was a ball of energy, bristling with confidence and a mesmerizing sexuality, yet there was an air of vulnerability that couldn't be hidden. He felt a strong urge to take her in his arms and protect her, and an equally strong urge to take her in his arms and fuck her brains out. *Don't think about that now*, he warned himself, feeling himself start to get hard. He would come back to that later, when he was banging some groupie.

Jenna blushed, glancing away in embarrassment. He was ridiculously handsome, able to make her dizzy with a single look. 'I'm such a huge fan,' she rambled. 'I've always loved your music, right since the beginning. This would just be a dream. I mean, I'd cancel everything to work with Phoenix.'

'So is that a yes?' Nick laughed.

'Yes!' Jenna exclaimed, her excitement impossible to hide as they clinked their champagne glasses to symbolically seal the deal. 'Yes, yes, yes!'

2

Sadie Laine was curled up on her sagging single bed, in the boxroom of the East London house share she rented for an extortionate fee. The walls were damp, the paint was flaking, and the mattress she was sitting on smelt faintly of mould. It was not, Sadie thought with a growing sense of frustration, the kind of place she had dreamed of living when she was a child.

The old-fashioned TV blared in the corner. No swanky flat-screen for her, just an enormous monster of a thing that was a hand-me-down from her parents and took up all the room on her tiny dressing table. Sadie squinted at the screen as she wrapped her duvet tightly around her and snuggled into it. Her long, slim legs poked out of the end, and her feet were swathed in thick, pink socks. The radiator was on the blink again, and the landlord hadn't yet made good on his promise to fix it.

Sadie let out a sigh as she pushed a few stray tendrils of hair away from her beautiful face. Her dark, glossy hair was roughly pulled back in a messy ponytail, perfectly framing her fine, angular features, but the crease between her eyebrows gave away her anxiety.

It's not fair, she thought miserably, as she watched the glamorous scene play out on the TV screen in front of her. Breaking off another piece of chocolate from the slab beside her, she popped it into her mouth, not caring that she'd already tripled her daily calorie allowance.

Sadie was watching the highlights of the MTV Europe Awards, where at this moment Jenna Jonsson was speaking into the camera. She looked incredible as she chattered excitedly to the interviewer about how thrilled she was to have won. She threw out some inane cliché about how all of her dreams were coming true. Sadie pursed her lips and pressed mute on the remote.

All of Jenna's dreams might have been coming true – life wasn't working out quite so well for Sadie.

For as long as she could remember, all Sadie had ever wanted to do with her life was dance. From the moment she had slipped on the obligatory pink leotard for her first lesson in the local church hall, she knew she had found her passion. Growing up in the London suburb of Streatham with her younger brother and sister, there wasn't a lot of money to spare, but her parents scrimped and saved, working extra shifts to ensure their beautiful, gifted daughter could pursue her dream.

It soon became clear that she was seriously talented, and by the time she hit her teens she was already competing on the national circuit, winning prizes in every category. Jazz, Latin, hip-hop – Sadie was a natural at every style she tried. She loved the way she could get lost in the music, relishing the grind of learning the routine and putting her own interpretation on it to make it truly individual – a hair flick here, a sashay of the hips there. Most of all, she adored the

adulation of being up on stage, addicted to the adrenaline rush that came with performing. It was the ultimate buzz.

Then came the big one – the National Championships, held in Manchester. The prize was life-changing: an all-expenses-paid trip to LA, to spend four weeks working with street-dance stars Ghetto Angels. Rumour had it that, if your work was good enough, you'd be invited to perform with them at their next gig.

It was an amazing opportunity. Sadie didn't think she'd ever wanted anything so badly in all her life. Ghetto Angels were incredible, the hippest things in the dance world right now, and she knew that this could catapult her into the big league. She worked on her routine day and night, rehearsing the steps obsessively until she could do them in her sleep. She was the one to beat, the dead cert to take the prize. That was, until Jenna Jonsson and her pushy mother had shown up . . .

'Knock knock,' came a voice at the door.

'Yeah,' Sadie responded lazily, recognizing it as her housemate Carla.

Carla poked her head round the bedroom door. She was a petite brunette with an English rose complexion and a body she could contort into positions that made men salivate. A fellow dancer, the pair had worked together one summer at a holiday camp. The show had been terrible – they'd got through it with good humour and a lot of alcohol – but by the end of the season each knew they'd made a friend for life.

'How're you doing?' Carla crossed the room and plonked herself down, cross-legged, on the corner of Sadie's bed.

‘Shit,’ Sadie replied succinctly.

‘Well I brought something to cheer you up,’ said Carla, brandishing a bottle of Smirnoff and two glasses filled with ice. Sadie’s eyes lit up. ‘But you have to *share* it with me,’ Carla warned her.

Sadie poured them each a generous amount and mixed it with Diet Coke. ‘One Skinny Bitch, on the rocks,’ she grinned, passing it to Carla. She settled back against the flattened pillows and the two of them turned their attention to the television, where the EMAs were in full swing.

‘Makes you sick, doesn’t it,’ Carla observed, as they watched yet another superstar receive a gong from a fawning presenter.

‘Uh huh. All those happy, smiling, Botoxed-to-the-hilt, nauseatingly rich people,’ ranted Sadie, warming to her theme. ‘They’re just hypocritical, self-congratulatory, sycophantic wankers,’ she finished triumphantly.

‘Wish you were there?’

‘Absolutely,’ Sadie agreed instantly, as the two of them burst into laughter.

‘You probably shouldn’t be watching this,’ Carla told her, as they re-ran footage of Phoenix receiving their Ultimate Legend award. ‘It’s going to make you feel even worse.’

‘Not at all,’ Sadie shook her head, making no attempt to change the channel. ‘Looking at Nick Taylor always cheers me up.’

‘He *is* amazingly hot,’ agreed Carla. ‘Especially in that suit. I bet he’s a total bastard though.’

‘Just my type,’ grinned Sadie, as she raised her glass at the TV screen. ‘I wouldn’t mind trying to tame him.’

Carla smiled indulgently. Then the image changed again, and the tiny screen was filled with a full-length

shot of Jenna Jonsson making her way into The Dorchester.

'God, that dress is gorgeous,' Carla enthused.

Sadie snorted. 'She's overdone it with the Fake Bake, though. I mean, *no one* can actually be that colour,' she sniped, as she took another slug of vodka. She was 23, the same age as Jenna, and yet the differences between their lifestyles couldn't have been more stark.

'Hon, you've got to get over it,' Carla pushed gently.

'I can't!' Sadie protested. 'You know that. However hard I try, I feel like that was my big chance and I missed it. I'll just be stuck here forever. Ninety years old and still in this shitty little boxroom.'

Her dance career had hit a lean patch that seemed never-ending. A few months ago she'd landed an ensemble role in a West End revival of *42nd Street*; it promised a one-year contract, a prestigious venue and fantastic exposure. Sadie was ecstatic. Then, two weeks into rehearsals, the company had gone bust and the producer had disappeared off the face of the earth. Since then she could barely get an audition, let alone a job. She'd been trying to cover her rent by doing promo work, which was badly paid and soul-destroying. You name it, she'd promote it, usually while trussed up in some ridiculous tiny outfit or freezing her ass off on a street corner handing out leaflets. It was hardly the glamour she was longing for.

'Well, I'll be stuck here with you,' Carla tried to cheer her up. 'Look at me – scraping by on the occasional bit of cruise-ship work, spending the rest of my time teaching yoga to a bunch of stuck-up, ungrateful bankers. *And* I've got a crap boyfriend,' she admitted, in a rare moment of frankness.

‘At least you’ve got a boyfriend,’ Sadie muttered. Her love life was about as successful as her career – going nowhere fast. She seemed to attract a succession of bastards and losers and she was sick of it. She knew it was un-PC to admit it, but she wanted a real man – someone confident and successful who could take care of her. Gorgeously fuckable was always a bonus, too.

‘Oh cheer up,’ Carla teased her good-naturedly, as she poured them both another drink.

‘Make mine a triple,’ Sadie said morosely. Despite what Carla had said, Sadie couldn’t snap out of her dark mood. The image on the screen seemed to taunt her. Jenna Jonsson – young and beautiful, with the world at her feet. It reminded Sadie of just how far their lives had diverged.

They’d known each other vaguely for years from the dance circuit. They’d never been close – mainly because Jenna’s domineering mother, Georgia, kept her well away from everyone else, worried that befriending the others would dull her competitive instincts.

Then five years ago came the Nationals. They were both eighteen, both in their final year of eligibility for the competition. It was the break Sadie so badly needed, and she was prepared to do anything to win.

So, apparently, was Georgia Jonsson. Sadie had seen her prowling backstage, her stick-thin figure poured into a low-cut dress, her ash-blonde hair teased up into a voluminous chignon. In her day, she must have been stunning. Now she was mutton dressed as lamb.

Jenna took to the stage before Sadie, giving a competent performance that was nothing to write home about. Nerves had obviously got the better of her, as she made

the occasional, well-covered mistake. But she looked fantastic, naturally, her blonde hair curled into ringlets and tumbling down her back, her revealing costume clinging to her newly acquired curves like a second skin.

Sadie had been so nervous she thought she might be sick. The venue was enormous, bigger than anywhere she'd ever performed. But once she hit the stage, the tension evaporated. It was as though her body knew exactly what to do and she let the sensations take over, a joyous feeling of freedom that she surrendered to completely.

Sadie had given the performance of her life. Technically she was perfect, but it was so much more than that. She danced with spirit and soul, her body moving like a dream. She blew the competition out of the water and she knew it. She could still picture it now – if she shut her eyes in the cramped bedroom she was transported back to that day, moving as though she was flying, her feet barely seeming to touch the ground. She'd been aware that no one in the room could take their eyes off her, the straight-laced judges in the front row captivated by her ability.

'And the winner is . . .'

Sadie recalled lining up on stage with the rest of the girls, looking out at row upon row of expectant audience members. Her heart was racing, but she was confident. She wanted this so badly, she could almost feel the hot Los Angeles sun beating down on her body . . .

'. . . Jenna Jonsson!'

Sadie gasped in astonishment. She remembered looking across at Dickie Masters, the head judge, with his shiny bald head and ginger moustache. He looked ridiculous – short and fat in a tweed blazer and

crumpled trousers – as he beamed at Jenna, his jowly face so red it looked as if it was going to burst.

Jenna seemed to be the only person more surprised than Sadie. Her mouth fell open; her face was a picture of confusion as she stared across at her. Sadie found that she couldn't meet Jenna's eyes. She looked away, found a knot in the wooden floor and concentrated her energy on that. That way, she could pretend it wasn't happening.

Jenna soon got over her reticence. She shrieked with delight, then burst into tears as they handed over the plane tickets. The next moment her mother was up on stage and they were posing for press shots with an enormous silver trophy. Jenna's tears had been dried and she looked her usual radiant self, sandwiched between her mother and Dickie Masters. That was the last Sadie had seen of her – she and the other girls had been quickly shepherded off stage, expected to pick up their belongings and get out. Nobody loves a loser.

Back in the changing rooms, the others had commiserated with her, said they couldn't understand what had happened. A few of them went further – thanks to her mother, Jenna wasn't popular on the circuit and the bitchy comments flew. Then one by one they'd left, leaving Sadie sitting alone in the changing rooms. She felt dazed as she went over and over her performance in her mind. Was it possible she'd been wrong – that what she'd felt inside was so different to what the judges saw? But then why had everyone told her she deserved to win? It didn't make any sense.

Gradually the numbness faded, replaced by a cold, hard ball of fury that began deep in her stomach and spread throughout her body. She *should* have won.

She *deserved* it. No one had worked harder than she had and no one had given a better performance. So what the hell was going on?

Suddenly she jumped up, changing out of her costume in record time and snatching up her bag. She didn't even bother to take off the heavy stage make-up, her face a riot of colour and sparkle as she raced out of the changing rooms and back through the main hall. It was empty now; the audience had left and the seats were being cleared away as the cleaners moved in. It seemed sad somehow; nothing like the glamorous, noisy spectacle it had been earlier. Sadie didn't stop to reflect. She wanted answers.

As she reached the judges' room, she got them. The door was ajar and at first Sadie thought everyone had left. Then she caught a glimpse of Dickie Masters. He wasn't alone. Pressed up against him, her hair flying wild and her skirt hitched up, was Georgia Jonsson.

They looked so bizarre together that Sadie almost laughed out loud. Georgia towered above the diminutive Dickie – his nose barely reached her breasts; but that seemed to be just the way he liked it. His head was redder than ever, his face buried in Georgia's cleavage as he made a noise that could only be described as snuffling. Georgia was stroking his smooth, bald head.

'Oh yes, Dickie, that's the way Mummy likes it,' she purred.

Dickie's hands seemed to be everywhere, fighting to pull Georgia's dress even higher. He squealed in delight as he encountered the top of her stockings, his chubby fingers running feverishly over the garter straps. Then his hands moved to his trousers, struggling to pull off his belt and unzip his fly as he released his white,

flaccid cock. It hung, small and limp, from his Y-fronts. Georgia took it in her hand and squeezed. It instantly responded and Dickie shuddered.

'That's right,' whispered Georgia, 'Mummy will make it better.'

Some instinct made her look up – right over Dickie's head and straight at Sadie. Sadie expected her to cry out, to jump away in embarrassment. Instead Georgia had merely smiled, her expression triumphant. Then she had raised one stiletto heel and kicked the door shut in Sadie's face.

'Sadie, are you okay?'

Sadie started, aware that Carla was looking at her worriedly. Even now, the memory of the anger and injustice she'd felt was overwhelming.

'It's just so unfair,' Sadie burst out, startling Carla with her ferocity. 'Life, I mean.'

'I know, hon,' Carla sympathized. But Sadie was on a roll.

'Aren't you sick of all this?' She waved her hand around, indicating the messy room with the holes in the carpet and the furniture that was falling apart. 'This is not the life I'm supposed to be living. Do you know what I mean?' she asked desperately. 'I don't want the nine-to-five grind, watching every penny with never enough to spare. I want excitement and glamour and hot sex with a gorgeous man who showers me with diamonds . . .'

'You're drunk,' Carla told her gently.

'What if I am?' Sadie shot back, all her pent-up frustration spilling out. 'I'm sick of living like this.'

'So change it,' Carla said simply. 'You're the only one who can.'

Sadie fell silent, thoughtful for a moment. On TV the cameras had gone to a wide shot, showing Jenna

Jonsson in all her glory as she waved at the crowd, signing autographs and blowing kisses.

'You know what? You're right.' Sadie sat bolt upright, her eyes fiery. 'I'll show Jenna bloody Jonsson. Anything she can do, I can do better. I'm going to make it, Carla – all the way to the fucking top. And I'm not going to stop till I do!'