chapter one

'Not too tight, is it?'

Gina wriggled, gave Connor a dirty smile and tried to bite him. The rope tightened around her gloved wrist, as he secured the other end to the post of his wrought-iron bed, the most recent addition to his Camberwell flat.

'C'mon, Gina. Let me take this make-up off. At least let me get rid of the skirt.'

'Think of it as a kilt.' Gina tried not to laugh. 'Of course, if you don't want to carry on making this video, then just untie me and—'

'All right, all right.'

He couldn't believe she had gone to so much trouble. Oversize women's clothes from a charity shop was bad enough, but when she insisted on applying mascara and lipstick to his face . . . home porno, loved up on pills and MDMA powder or not, he'd almost called it off.

It was due to the age-old problem: what happens after a home porno is made? Who gets to keep it? What happens if the relationship ends? Is there a handover ritual? How can each party be sure copies haven't been made, or vindictively placed on the internet?

Gina had therefore insisted that Connor appear in drag, the theory being that he would be too embarrassed ever to let anyone else see it.

Of course, this worked both ways.

'Gina, what if you show it to one of *your* friends?'

'Girls aren't interested in pornos.'

'Bullshit. *You* watch them.'

'Only ones with a decent storyline and good-looking actors.'

'Good-looking! What about Ron Jeremy?'

'He's got a huge willy.' At this Connor looking slightly concerned. 'It's OK, babe, you've got nothing to worry about. Don't you remember we measured it? You're well above average.'

'Only because I had the tape measure halfway up my sphincter.'

'Well, if I were you, I'd be more worried about looking like Dame Edna Everage's mutant sister.'

'Right, that's it!' Connor leapt up and playfully tightened the rope still further.

'Have we started?' she asked.

'Huh? Oh, why not? I'll just get a drink from the kitchen then come back in character, OK?'

Gina giggled. 'Hurry up. I can feel myself coming up on that last bit of MDMA powder.'

Role-play. He hadn't felt entirely comfortable with the idea when Gina first suggested it. Not that he was prudish, or had any kind of averseness to the rough sex she liked, it was just that sometimes he felt, well . . . slightly embarrassed, almost as though he could imagine one of his mates watching and thinking what a prat he looked. Also, it wasn't always easy to get in character, especially last time when she'd suggested he pretend to be a psychotic dentist who tied his patients up before having his wicked way. (The Ikea office chair Gina suggested as a prop simply did not cut it.)

But this time it was going to be much easier. Firstly, the MDMA had made him infinitely less self-conscious. Secondly, in the fantasy scenario they were about to play out, Connor was to interrogate Gina about a fictitious drugs stash hidden by her two brothers, Rik and Buster. They were bouncers at a local club and, it was commonly known, second division drug dealers. Connor had never been keen on them so he was almost looking forward to the opportunity of verbally abusing them – albeit from the safety of make-believe.

As he went to the kitchen he caught sight of himself in the hallway mirror and almost screamed. Gina was clearly more astute than he gave her credit for – he doubted if even *he* would ever watch the video dressed like that.

'Scary!' he said to his reflection.

He too could feel the effect of the last dab of MDMA powder. Fantastic. He *so* needed a night like tonight. An escape. A chance to switch off. The last few months felt as though he had jumped on a treadmill that somebody else was controlling. There was no option other than to keep on running, yet the more tired he became and the more he wanted to stop, the faster the bastard machine would go. His work as an IT recruitment consultant, an upcoming big deal, his relationship with Gina; all these seemed ever present in his mind, despite his attempts to ignore them.

Connor wandered back from the kitchen as the MDMA crept up on him.

Gina Searle. He knew that if ever they were to split up she would have to be the one who ended it. Connor always preferred to be the dumpee rather than the dumper, primarily because it meant that come Judgement Day he was absolved of responsibility, just in case he had inadvertently missed out on the love of his life, or as he called it, the 'Big Adventure'. Gina had not started out as the Big Adventure but with his thirtieth birthday recently under his belt, he was beginning to wonder if being reasonably compatible with someone was enough.

Of course, the fact that Gina had such fantastic tits and was up for making a home porno and necking loads of pills made her more compatible than most.

He entered the bedroom and slowly paced around the bed, trying to ignore his quickening stream of consciousness, attempting to forget how stupid he looked and to concentrate on matters carnal.

'Right then,' he said, getting into character, 'I've just spoken to the rest of the gang and they've told me to do whatever it takes to find out where those drugs are hidden.'

'Do what you want.'

'I intend to.'

He took her nipple between his thumb and index finger and gave it a sharp pull. Gina didn't make a sound. He nodded slowly then grabbed her hair.

'If you don't tell me where those wanker brothers of yours have stashed the gear, you're going to get this,' he pulled out a rubber dildo from under the pillow, 'and this,' he lifted the asinine skirt he was wearing and pointed to his own bursting member.

'Never! I don't care what you do, I'll never tell you.' Gina glared and grinned.

'Right then.'

He tied her legs together and pulled them up so that they too were fastened to the bedstead. Then, picking up a belt, he lightly whacked her backside.

'Do you know what your problem is?' he said, still in character. 'You respect your brothers too much. Repeat after me: "My brothers are a pair of muscle-bound wankers." Come on, say it.'

'No.'

He just managed not to laugh. 'Didn't you hear me? "My brothers are a pair of cardboard gangsters who watch too many films." ' *Whack.* ' "My brothers are a pair of fags who just act tough." ' *Whack.* 'Say it.'

'Fuck off.'

'Don't tell me to fuck off.' *Whack.* 'They shag each other up the arse.' *Whack.* 'They're full of steroids and they're pansies in the gym.' *Whack.* 'They're wankers.' *Whack.* 'Ugly wankers.' *Whack, whack.* 'Ugliness runs in your family, you fucking whore.' *Whack, whack, whack.*

'Hey!'

'Oh, sorry. Was that too rough?'

'Lay off the ugly family stuff, Connor.' She ignored the faint trace of a smile forming on his lips. 'I tell you what, I don't think I can wait any longer. Untie me.'

He contained his urge to laugh and undid the ropes. Once Gina's hands were free she grabbed his rock-hard manhood and guided him in. He felt a mini-rush as her warmth enveloped him. She let out a long satisfied groan as he slowly buried himself.

A little onward lend thy guiding hand . . .

Fuck off! It always happened when he was really buzzing. Poems he'd studied more than a decade earlier would suddenly burst into his consciousness. It wasn't normally even stuff from his English degree, but half-remembered lines learned for his 'A' level. And it always seemed to happen when he was having sex, or dancing with a girl in a club. He'd concluded this had to have something to do with Miss Cooke, his old English supply teacher, whose cleavage had sent adolescent boys into hormonal apoplexy and Kleenex shares soaring.

He who shall teach the child to doubt

The rotting—

'Connor, not quite so hard, honey.'

'What? Oh, sorry.'

Must concentrate. All those pills earlier. Now that MDMA powder is kicking in. That's it, nice and slow. Not too hard to start.

Gina's not a bad girl really. But there's something . . . can't put my finger on it. Shame about her brothers. Nasty pieces of work. Won't ever catch me anywhere near her flat. Haven't been near it since I found out she was related to them. But God. Sex with her is soooo good . . .

Yeah, Gina's all right. At least I don't have to go to weddings on my own any more to get fixed up with some mingin bridesmaid. And you know what? I actually quite like getting Christmas cards to Connor and Gina. And the sex . . .

Maybe it's time. Maybe that's what getting older is all about – compromise. Maybe the Big Adventure, the ten out of ten, doesn't exist. I've already compromised with work, after all. Positive Solutions. Positive bloody Solutions. The fastest growing IT recruitment company in the UK. So they say anyway,

with their poxy pseudo-Californian ra-ra-ra attitude. Why is it the more I hate it there the better I do? Weekend trips away, prizes, flash restaurants. New company car next week. Mercedes no less. Assuming I get that big deal. Gina does go on about it a lot though. When are you getting the big deal, Connor? Don't forget you promised me that bracelet, Connor. She loves a bit of Tom. Loves going out, and the status. Oh yes, she fucking loves it.

Without realizing, Connor was thrusting more aggressively.

Living in the material world . . .

Where did that come from? Hardly fucking Blake or Wordsworth. Makes a nice change. Change. Maybe that's it. But what though? No, fuck it. Things are good. The sex is good. What have I got to be unhappy about? Earning decent money. So what if I don't enjoy it? Gina loves it. Gina loves it. Give it up, Connor. Why chase the dream? Look at Stuart King. Sorry, Mr King. Boss. Only a bit older than me. Wanker. But is he happy?

. . . In solitude

What happiness? who can enjoy alone

Or, all enjoying, what contentment find?

Fuck off, Milton. Where was I? Stuart King. Stuart 'it's what you've earned, not what you learned' King. What a tosser. His stupid Ovation guitar, never missing an opportunity to play it on sales conferences, always slipping in a couple of 'songs I've just written'. Wanker. Fucking wanker.

'Aahhhwoow.' Gina half moaned in pleasure, half in pain as Connor pounded away ever more forcibly.

And what are those stupid photos of him playing in a band on his office wall all about? And those faded press clippings from local papers? No way is he happy.

'Steady, Connor.' The comment barely grazed Connor's consciousness.

When I get that big deal this week, that'll show him. Maybe I'm not doing something I really like. But what do I like? What is the dream? Going back to Ibiza? Yeah, right! The boy most likely to become a recruitment consultant – what a joke.

'Connor!' The bed was banging against the wall like a kick drum at a Jungle rave. Connor was still lost on planet ecstasy.

Am I happy? But what is happiness? Doing what you want? Being a good person? I nearly always treat people with respect. I try not to hurt people . . .

'Oooooowww – my head!'

This time Gina's scream was shrill enough to drag Connor back. He stopped and looked down at her.

'What's up?'

'You were going too hard. My head was banging against the wall. Get

off a minute.' As Connor rolled off, Gina went to sit up. 'Ouch. Shit, I can't move. My head's stuck.'

Sure enough, the top of Gina's head was squashed between two of the bedstead's bars.

'You're winding me up. Here we go . . .' Connor tickled her, which made her wriggle involuntarily, then yelp in pain, as her head remained where it was. 'Fuck. Let's try to ease it out slowly. I'll put some baby oil on it.'

He poured liberal amounts of oil around her temples then put one hand through the bars and rested it on the top of her head ready to push down. He put the other on her shoulder. Gina gripped hold of the bars.

'Right, are you ready? One, two, three . . .'

They pushed.

'Ow, ouch, fuck, stop, *stop*! You're going to turn me into a bloody conehead.'

They pondered different ideas for a few moments, had another couple of tries, then gave up.

'This could be a job for the fire brigade,' said Connor, only half-joking.

'Oh, great. Rik and Buster would be over the moon if they found out.'

'Yeah, well we don't want that.' Connor cogitated several impractical solutions before clicking his fingers. 'I've got it! A car jack. That'll ease the bars apart. I'll borrow one from the boys up at Bounty FM; they should be up and transmitting this time in the morning.'

He switched on the alarm clock radio next to the bed and was greeted by the familiar sound of UK Garage, courtesy of the new pirate radio station his two best friends, Dex and Luc, ran. 'Yep, they're on air. It should only take me half an hour. I'll be back by . . . no later than seven. Shall I leave the curtains drawn or do you want some daylight? Radio on or off?'

'Radio on, and don't even think about opening the curtains.'

Connor went into the kitchen and came back with a glass of fresh orange juice and a large saucepan.

'What's the saucepan for?'

'In case you need to . . . you know . . . call of nature.'

'Don't you *dare* take that long.'