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Jellybird

Written by Lezanne Clannachan

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Jellybird

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I

October 2012, Seasalt Holiday Park

Jessica arrives at the caravan park sometime in the night.

'You sure this is the right place?' the taxi driver asks, staring at the closed gates, the blacked-out campsite beyond.

It belongs to my mother, she could explain, if she were able to dredge up the words. The fare shows up in sharp, red lines but the numbers slip about like oily fish in her head. She hands the driver a note, hoping it's enough, and gets out.

When he's gone, she stands in the lane surrounded by blackberry bushes that in summer whisper with a sea breeze but are now frozen still. She'd forgotten how dark it could get. She presses the night bell and waits. Minutes later, torchlight weaves through the mobile homes.

The gates rock back and her mother, nightgown brushing the muddy toes of her wellingtons, fixes the beam in Jessica's face. 'What's happened?'

'I just . . .' Her voice sounds distant, as though someone else is speaking through her. 'Woke up this morning thinking about this place.'

It's not true, but Jessica can't say about the kitchen floor; how she lay on it until the wooden boards pressed bruises like thunderclouds onto her shoulder and hip.

She follows her mother through the unlit park, the night so dense that nothing exists unless the torchlight flashes over it. It makes Jessica feel bodiless, like she could slip outside of the shivering exhaustion and aching limbs. She wants to keep going but then they reach the caravan that is both her mother's home and office.

'You could stay with me, I guess,' her mother says, 'but there's only one room.'

'How about Caravan Nineteen?'

Her mother sniffs as though the choice displeases her. She disappears into her caravan and comes back with a key. A blue enamel flower dangles from it. Her mother made it, years ago, on some course. One for each caravan and an extra one for Jessica, who stops walking, trying to remember when she last saw her key ring. The loss of it is sudden and sharp as gunshot.

'This way. You remember.' The torch in her mother's hand draws fleeting lines on the black gravel.

Inside Caravan Nineteen, her mother slaps dust and dead spiders from the sofa cushions.

'There are extra blankets under the bed.'

'I remember.'

When her mother leaves, Jessica stands in the centre of the snug sitting room, facing the sofa. She flips over

one of the seat cushions then kneels before it. Her fingers trace a faint brown outline like a smudged cloud. A washed-out stain. Too old to be certain it is blood.

Hugging her rucksack, she lies down, pressing her cheek to the mark. She doesn't sleep. Before dawn, she walks out of the holiday park.

Opposite the park lies a derelict pleasure garden. A sudden moon has opened up the night, structures emerging – the boarded-up pavilion, the empty lido, her own body. She reaches a gap in the picket fence where a gate used to be. Past it, the raw edge of the cliff and a flight of rickety steps leading to a horseshoe bay. She feels her way down the stairs and onto the beach. The sand creaks with ice beneath her feet.

As she waits for first light, she takes a cuckoo clock out of her rucksack and cradles it in her hands.

From a distance, it is a perfect miniature of an alpine chalet. Up close, its plastic seams become obvious. The walls, once slaughterhouse red, have faded to a hammy pink; the roof bleached in patches like stale chocolate. Jessica no longer winds it up. It had been bought as a joke, after all.

The key is Sellotaped to the bottom. She scratches it free and winds it up. A slow tick starts inside the woodchip walls like a tutting tongue. Jessica moves the minute hand to twelve. Two windows above the clock face spring open. A peg figure appears in each, one in a white dress holding a bunch of painted-on flowers, the other in a funereal black suit. The groom's black eyes peer sideways at his bride as he hovers in his window.

Then they jerk across empty space to knock heads in a clumsy kiss beneath a scroll declaring *You'll Find Love in Longhaven Bay*.

Jessica stares at the peg-man. His eyes, with their sideways glance, now look away from the embrace, over his bride's shoulder at something – or someone – behind her. She takes hold of the little groom, making the clock's mechanism squeal and shiver as it tries to pull him back.

With her thumbnail, she scratches off his eyes.

When the sky opens up in morgue blues and purples, she lifts the cuckoo clock above her head and hurls it at the water as though she's bringing down an axe. It disappears into the ocean with a viscous gulp.

Job done.

Ten minutes later, she arrives at the park in time to see her mother leaving Caravan Nineteen, a lumpy bin bag tucked under her arm. There's a breakfast tray on the kitchen counter.

'How long will you be staying?' her mother asks.

'Just a few days, Birdie.'

They both know that isn't true. 'The Premium and Superior caravans are empty, you know.'

'Here's fine.'

Her mother strides away, the plump pads of her hips wobbling through her fisherman's jumper.

The breakfast tray contains three triangles of toast and a pot of bitty marmalade. It sparks a memory of the French toast her mother used to make on Sunday mornings – cinnamon bread, butter-gold with fried egg

and maple syrup. The thought of food nauseates her. Sliding the tray outside, she locks the door.

In the bedroom, she finds her clothes are no longer on the floor where she'd dumped them before walking to the beach. The bin bag under her mother's arm takes on a new significance. Rather than crawling into the bed – narrow and comfortless as a ship's bunk – she has to go in search of her few belongings.

The deserted holiday park is picture-still as she heads to the laundry block. Jessica touches the walls of the boarded-up mobile homes, offering them comfort. The desolation of the place suits her, like stepping into water already wet.

The laundry block is a square cement building with a flat roof and slit windows for ventilation. Years back, her mother, in a flight of artistic fancy, painted one of the walls with a jungle of creepers and exotic birds. The colours have dimmed and the birds have become sinister, blurry-eyed beings among the trees. From inside comes the sound of voices and wet sheets being flapped out.

'The girl's a wreck.' Grannie Mim, her mother's best friend. Jessica recognises the slight wobble in her voice. It isn't age; she has always sounded the same. 'I saw her staggering off to the beach this morning. Dawn, it was.'

'Bit of sleep, that's all Jessica needs.' Her mother, so flat and practical. 'She's tougher than she looks.'

'Why's she here?'

In the pause, Jessica peels off a curl of paint from the body of a fat, blue bird.

'I don't know,' her mother says. 'It's none of my business.'

'But it is, Birdie. She's your youngest.'

'She's twenty-nine.'

'Still your baby.'

'She doesn't want anything from me. Never has.'

'You still have to offer it.' Despite her frail-sounding voice, there's nothing meek about Grannie Mim.

Jessica waits for her mother to respond. When she hears nothing but the accelerated snap of damp linen, she goes back to her caravan, climbs fully dressed into bed. As she drifts off to sleep, a noise startles her. She kneels at the window, convinced she heard a handful of pebbles dashed against the glass. There's no one there. Just a seagull in the sky, suspended against the wind like a kite on a string.

Birdie calls this the dead season.

Jessica sleeps away a whole day and night, waking on her second morning at the park to the blind whiteness of the room, confused, disorientated. She finds her watch on the floor where she has thrown it off at some point. It used to make him laugh, how she'd discard everything in her sleep until she was utterly naked. Her wedding ring often disappeared in that way, found days later in a crack in the floorboards or inside the pillowcase.

You trying to tell me something? he'd tease. *Everyone's honest in their sleep.*

Jessica checks her left hand, and sure enough the ring is gone. Just as she lifts her pillow, she remembers

where it is. Making a circle in the gathering dust of a mantelpiece far from here.

She peels off the sheets, damp with sea air and pushes the curtains open with her socked feet. Spotting blue sky, she sits up. At the far end of the park, Grannie Mim is returning from the beach, hair like brittle wool. She follows the shingle path which runs like a corpse's vein through the caravan site, heading straight for Caravan Nineteen. Hearing the front door open, Jessica pulls the sheets back over her, closes her eyes.

Mim doesn't knock; walks straight into the bedroom and grips Jessica's foot through the covers.

'Up you get.' She gives Jessica's foot a shake. 'We can't have you sleeping your life away.'

Retreating to the door, she nudges a parcel of laundered clothes into the bedroom with the toe of her walking boot. 'Your ma's done your clothes.'

Jessica waits for the door to close before getting out of bed and inspecting the bruises that run from shoulder to elbow on her left arm. The flesh feels pulpy and tender. She chooses a thick-knit jumper, loose and concealing, checking her reflection in the window as she dresses. *Clean jumper, tick. Hair brushed, tick.*

In the kitchen, the old lady hands her a mug of tea.

'It's good to come home when you're running low,' she says with a look from under her patchy eyebrows that implies layers of meaning. Grannie Mim's digging.

'It's more your home than mine,' Jessica says. 'How many years have you been at the park now?'

Grannie Mim ignores the question. 'At some point, you have to move on.'

'Someone's been talking.'

'Your ma's said nothing.' Mim sniffs, pinches her nose and wipes her thumb on her trousers. 'At seventy-six you just know these things.'

The tea tastes like milky, boiled water. Jessica drinks it in the hope that she'll be left alone once it's finished.

'I heard sobbing last night.'

Jessica has to smile. 'I haven't shed a tear.'

'Maybe you should.' Grannie Mim leaves her tea untouched. 'I'll wake you again tomorrow.'

After she's gone, Jessica thinks about crying. She pokes about in old memories to see if something might startle her into tears, finally settling on the bedsit in Threepenny Row. Where it all started.

There's a quiet knock at the door.

'Tea.' Birdie holds out a steaming mug, looking straight past Jessica into the caravan as if checking for signs of disorder, something that might need setting right. 'How did you sleep?'

'Badly.' Not her normal answer. It's Grannie Mim's fault. All of a sudden Jessica wants to feel bad. Or at least pretend to, in the hope that a real sensation will follow.

Birdie nods. 'The gale kept me awake as well. There's storm damage to some of the roof shingles.'

Jessica suspects her mother's here on Grannie Mim's insistence. 'It wasn't the storm that kept me awake.'

'Well. I guess you're used to noise from the city.'

'Did I ever tell you about Threepenny Row?'

Her mother goes straight to the cupboard under the

sink and finds a duster. 'I visited you there, if you remember?'

Once. And she'd stayed on the doorstep, refusing to come in.

Jessica sits at the breakfast bar. 'It stank of mushrooms and rancid air-freshener, that place. Eau de Plastic Peach, we called it.' Softly to herself, she adds, 'Me and Jacques.'

Her mother, noticing Grannie Mim's mugs by the sink, empties them and starts washing up. 'You can see the water from Caravan Fourteen.'

'I like this one.' Jessica hugs her elbows, looking out over the campsite. The sky is now the same mottled white as the caravans. 'Threepenny Row was a hole. I could lean out of bed and light cigarettes on the gas stove.'

Birdie's nod is the gesture of a conductor, moving things along.

'Jacques was appalled. Said he couldn't sleep at night, imagining me burned to death in my bed. I screamed at him when he moved it.'

'Well, it sounds like a fire hazard.'

'He once took a blue biro and joined up all the freckles on my back.' Jessica discovers the bar stool squeaks, if she shifts her weight. Interesting, how her mother can make her feel five years old again. 'He said I had the star constellation of a leaping salmon between my shoulders.'

Birdie turns her attention to the window above the kitchen sink, rubbing the glass with sweeping arcs that

strain her coat's stitching under the arm. 'And where is he now?'

Her mother's words do the trick; Jessica stops talking.

'I could do with some help mending the roofs this afternoon.' Birdie turns to go, then stops. 'I nearly forgot. Someone was looking for you yesterday when you were sleeping.'

'Who?'

'A woman.'

Adrenalin bursts under the shallow surface of Jessica's skin. 'What did she look like?'

She tries to sound casual but it's too late. Birdie must have seen something in her face because she looks away. Her mother is the only person she knows who can pass a car crash without a glance.

'I told her you weren't here,' Birdie says.

'Did she believe you?'

'I think so.'

The tension in Jessica's neck eases, her shoulders drop. 'Thank you.'

She wants to sound grateful but Birdie's merely doing her a favour. One favour requires another in return. 'Let me know when you're going to fix the roofs.'

By the afternoon, an Atlantic gale is blowing. The caravan creaks and judders as Jessica pulls on as many layers as possible under her thin jacket. Her newly laundered clothes smell of hot-ironed soap powder.

She finds her mother balanced on a ladder at Caravan

Two, her ankle-length skirt of tropical greens gathered and tucked between her knees. Thread veins map the contours of her stout calves through beige nylons.

'That looks dangerous,' Jessica says, the ladder shaking with the vigorous jack of her mother's elbow as she crowbars broken shingles off the roof.

Birdie peers through her armpit. 'Hand me the new shingles, if you would. And some nails.'

With a steadying hand on the ladder, Jessica does as she's told. Her mother positions the shingles, humming a tune Jessica doesn't recognise and keeping time with the hammer as she drives the nails in.

'You're actually enjoying yourself, aren't you?' Jessica tries to grind the blood back into her fingers. 'Is there nothing you can't fix?'

'Cars.'

Jessica can't tell if her mother is being serious or not.

'Cars and people,' Birdie adds.

Raindrops, glutinous with unformed snow, burst on Jessica's face and hands. 'I'm not here to be fixed, if that's what you think.'

Her mother drops the crowbar and hammer into the deep pockets of her skirt, gently touching the newly positioned tiles with her fingertips like a blessing, before climbing down. Eyes on her mother's impassive face, Jessica helps gather up the damaged shingles from the sodden ground.

'Like I told you, Jessica.' Birdie straightens. 'Cars and people.'

Jessica clamps her teeth down on her tongue, looking over her mother's shoulder. Beyond Seasalt Park's

hedgerow boundary, she can see the sloping roof of the house she grew up in. Purbrook Rise. Smoke wisps out of the chimney, catching and tearing in the wind. A new family in her old home.

'When was it you sold the house? January?'

'March.' Birdie glances across at the roof. 'It feels longer though.'

The thought makes Jessica dizzy. She remembers coming down from London to clear out the few remaining items of her childhood from her old bedroom. It was the day she took the sea-dragon box from its secret place in the chimney flue. If only she'd left it there, she thinks.

Which brings her to Libby. Had she already met her by then? What came first – the box, or Libby? Gnawing the tip of her thumb, she tries to sequence the events. She senses a pattern, a series of incidents that appeared random but were invisibly linked; a net waiting to catch her. If she'd only left the box in its hiding place; if only she'd never met Libby. Jessica squats down, head low to bring the blood back.

Birdie's feet stop in front of her. 'I'm surprised to be saying this, seeing as you slept the whole of yesterday away, but maybe more rest is what you need.'

It's the most her mother has said since she arrived.

'Sleep does wonders,' Jessica says. Her mother's favourite saying when she was a child. She watches Birdie stuff the tube of roofing tar and remaining shingle into her pockets and walk away, the silhouette of her skirt disfigured by sharp angles.

When she was little, Jessica used to fish her hands

into her mother's bottomless pockets, hunting for treasure. On the rare occasion she came up empty-handed, her mother would say, *Oh, but you gave up too soon*, and with a magic flourish of her hand produce a chewy sweet or a marble or a nail bent into an improbable shape.

2

Nine months earlier, January 2012, London

Every surface in the restaurant is a droning white, making Jessica's head ache. In contrast, the sprouting green of her wool dress looks vulgar and her leather boots far too earthy.

The box sits in the middle of the table. Against the starched white of the tablecloth, it too looks cheap and garish, with a swirling oil-on-water pattern of pink and silver; the product of an entire evening trawling through packaging on the internet. She should have chosen something plain.

Through long windows overlooking the restaurant's walled garden, she can see falling snow, the sky a cool metal-grey. The cold looks delicious, making the airless, overheated restaurant suffocating by contrast. The wool against her skin starts to itch.

The woman she is waiting for, Elizabeth Hargreaves – she must get her name right – is late. Five more minutes and she'll leave.

The waiter offers her a choice of rolls in a silver basket, spilling crumbs across the lid of the box. As she brushes them away, a sudden flurry catches her attention. It's not so much a noise as a ripple through the air, like something only animals sense, heads craning. Jessica's first impression is of a violent pink that seems to burn a hole in the restaurant's pristine white. A woman, whose magenta jumper is making Jessica wish she'd worn her green dress with similar audacity, studies the other diners. There's something compellingly physical about the woman's presence that keeps drawing Jessica's eyes. She is tall, wide-shouldered, and her face, framed by a black bob, is strong, almost masculine. Standing among the tables, she is clearly enjoying the attention.

Here comes drama, Jessica thinks, smiling to herself. Then, as the woman's eyes fix with sudden intent in her direction, she experiences a vague sense of panic.

This is Elizabeth Hargreaves.

'You must be Jessica Byrne.' The woman thrusts out her hand as she reaches the table.

'How did you know?' She shakes Elizabeth's cool, dry hand, aware of how unpleasantly damp her own is.

'A clever guess.'

Jessica waits for the woman to sit down, flap out her napkin and smooth it across her lap before pushing the box towards her. 'Here it is.'

Elizabeth ignores it, regarding Jessica instead. Her mouth curls in a small, secretive smile that sends another woollen prickle through Jessica. It reminds her of their telephone conversation a few days earlier. How

Elizabeth had taken her time to say who she was and why she was calling. Jessica had come away with the distinct impression that the woman had enjoyed her confusion.

'I know this must seem odd. I'm sure you've never met your other internet clients before.'

'No.' Jessica nearly adds that her website has only been live for three weeks.

Elizabeth nods. 'I am, after all, interested in your entire Deception range. I can hardly rely on internet pictures alone.'

'Of course not.' Jessica tries to match the woman's smooth, even tone. 'It's a pleasure for me to show you.'

Elizabeth signals the waiter to clear a space for her. Once her plate and cutlery have been removed, she places the box in front of her. Instead of removing the lid, she says, 'Do you know, we have quite a lot in common.'

Jessica holds back a sigh. *Open the box. Just open it.*

'I grew up in Barnestow.'

'Barnestow. I know the place,' Jessica says, trying to concentrate. 'It's about forty minutes from where I grew up.'

'I know. I read the profile on your website.' The box lies forgotten between the woman's hands. 'You must know Seasalt Holiday Park?'

Jessica straightens. 'It's my mother's. I grew up there.'

Elizabeth hides her mouth behind her hand, her eyes wide with astonishment. 'What a coincidence. I used to visit it as a child.'

Jessica smiles, her shoulders released from their tense knot. 'I used to hang out with the Caravan Kids, as my sisters and I called them.'

'Perhaps we played together.' The woman is smiling now, and Jessica is struck by how it transforms and softens her face. She is, in fact, beautiful.

Elizabeth turns her attention to the box and finally lifts off the lid.

'You've taken a lot of trouble with the packaging.'

Inside, each piece of jewellery has been wrapped in black velvet and tied at either end with orange ribbons, like oversized confectionery. Elizabeth takes them out of their nest of shredded tissue paper and lays them in front of her.

In spite of her nerves, Jessica is fascinated by the slow ritual of a client unwrapping and handling her jewellery for the first time. Last night, she had tried to explain to Jacques why she was putting so much care into the packaging when the sale was yet to be agreed.

It's the moment I always imagine but never get to see.

Elizabeth takes her time untying bows and unrolling the velvet, her face severe once more in its lack of expression. Against the pale tablecloth, the glinting oranges and reds of her necklace shout out like a battle-cry. Jessica sighs with pleasure.

It almost doesn't matter what anyone else thinks.

'May I?' Elizabeth takes off her pink jumper, undoes the top two buttons of her white blouse, pulling the collars apart, and clasps the necklace around her neck. 'Do you have a mirror?'

'Sorry, no, I didn't think . . .' Her voice trails off

as Elizabeth gets up. In a bubble of anxiety, Jessica watches her head towards the Ladies.

She studies Elizabeth's face when she reappears, but the woman is busy glancing around the restaurant, the necklace seemingly forgotten.

'According to your reviews,' Elizabeth says, sitting down, 'you're some sort of alchemist.'

'I wouldn't go that far.'

'But you take pieces of rubbish and transform them into treasure?'

Jessica nods, heat rising in her face. In a minute the woman will walk off and she'll be left alone, under the eyes of the other diners, to put it all back in that silly, whimsical container.

'So. Spill the beans. What exactly am I wearing about my neck?'

Jessica thinks she catches a fleeting look of humour, but she can't be sure.

'You want a list of the materials?'

'My friends will ask.'

She takes a breath. *What the hell.*

'Unpolished citrines and topaz. Paste jewellery from old theatre costumes, pieces of broken tile – see those swirling orange and purple pieces? Fool's gold, glazed petals of a fake rose I found in a charity shop, and those shiny yellow-brown bulbs are actually teeth from an old stag's head.'

Elizabeth says nothing. She motions the waiter over. Jessica feels an odd sense of relief. *All over now*. But instead of asking for the bill, she orders a bottle of champagne and then winks at Jessica.

'I think a celebration is in order.'

'You like it?'

Elizabeth reaches forward so abruptly that Jessica almost flinches as her hand is grasped. 'It's fabulous. I can't wait for my friends to gush over it, only to be told it's a load of old rubbish, if you'll excuse the expression.' The fingers of her other hand trail over the necklace's rough surface as she speaks, her face pink with sudden enthusiasm. 'I absolutely love it.'

'If you take it off, I'll show you why it's called Deception.'

Elizabeth hands the necklace to Jessica, who flips it over and points out the row of heart, diamond, spade and club pendants that form its base.

'Fascinating. But you can't see those shapes from the front.'

'Deception,' Jessica says. 'Its true form is hidden because the eye is distracted by all that colour and glitter.'

'Oh, Jessica. You are a genius.'

When the champagne arrives, Elizabeth proposes a toast.

'To us becoming friends.'

As they chink glasses, she adds, 'Oh, and it's Libby, by the way. My friends call me Libby.'

3

February 2012

Jessica can still taste whisky and cigarettes from the night before. Even with the sour, hollow pit in her stomach, she's happy to be propelled along by the late-morning crowd in Columbia Road Market. With Jacques holding her hand, they walk in awkward single file through trolleys of fresh-cut flowers and sculpted trees. She squints in the glare of a brilliant February sun, drifting along in a dazzled impression of bodies and foliage, full of aimless well-being. The air smells crisply green.

Neither of them knows much about plants, and Jacques is making up names as they wander through the flower market. 'Moon Roses. Fatboy Dahlias. To your left, Jessie – the greater-spotted Fernicus Flower.'

'Fornicus Flower, don't you mean?'

'Of course. The *Fornicus* Flower. A favourite of mine.' Jacques has pulled his woollen hat low over his

eyes. His face – angled and drawn from lack of sleep – softens as he turns to smile at her.

'I need to eat,' he says.

They find a tapas bar at the far end of Columbia Road, away from the crowds and shouting street vendors.

'Let's buy some mini-trees,' Jessica says, once they have sidestepped their way through the busy restaurant to a table by the window.

'Olive and lemon,' Jacques agrees. 'And tomato plants for the roof terrace.'

Last night Jessica had conceded it was time to make their flat more homely. Less crash pad. She suspects this brings them a step closer to the day when Jacques will suggest converting their boxy study into a nursery.

As always, he over-orders. Terracotta bowls of chorizo, garlic prawns, spicy *patatas bravas* and oily sardines arrive; they eat in greedy silence until Jessica sits back. 'I've gone too far. Should've stopped eating ten minutes ago.'

'You need to practise, sweetheart.' Jacques forks a piece of chorizo off her plate. 'Ma Larsson is suspicious of girls with small appetites.'

Jessica pinches his thigh. 'She's had years to get used to my lack of appetite and childbearing hips.'

'She loves you the way you are, you know that.' Orange grease glistens on his bottom lip. 'She just wants grandchildren.'

Jessica reaches across and wipes away the grease with her thumb, bringing it to her mouth afterwards. 'Ma Larsson will just have to wait.'

She's smiling as she says it. Her mother-in-law's longing for grandchildren is a comfortable, well-worn carpet of conversation; perfect for hung-over Sundays when the idea of babies is nothing more than the notion of foreign lands yet to be explored.

Right now, she can't bear the thought of sharing Jacques with another living thing.

'Let's go home,' she says.

Her husband leans across the debris of half-eaten food and kisses her. He tastes of spicy sausage and stale alcohol; she opens her mouth, her hands in his hair, pulling him in.

'We mustn't kiss any more. Not after five years of marriage.'

Jacques nods. 'It's downright inappropriate.'

They grin at each other and Jessica feels a squirm of complicit pleasure, the two of them cocooned against the rest of the world.

'Look what I found.' Jacques pulls his wallet from his back pocket, leafs through old receipts until he finds a creased photograph. He holds it up for her.

A figure sits cross-legged on an unmade bed. Legs naked except for thick socks bunched at the ankles, a slight body swallowed up by a grey sweatshirt. Jacques' old walking socks and jumper; the young girl is herself.

'Where did you find it?'

'I was clearing out some of the boxes in the study.'

She decides not to ask why. 'I must have been seventeen. There's that revolting sofa bed in Threepenny Row.'

Jacques turns the photograph back towards himself;

regards it with such tenderness that Jessica feels a pang of envy for her seventeen-year-old self.

'I always loved that look on your face,' he says.

Scraping her chair closer to his, she frowns at the picture. Her face looks wide-eyed and sleepy as a child's, her mouth loose; no words waiting to be spoken. 'I look vacant.'

'Open,' Jacques says.

An electronic melody of bells sounds from under her chair. Jessica scoops up her bag and stirs its contents in search of her mobile. It takes her a moment to place the voice. 'Elizabeth?'

'Libby. I keep telling you. Only my maths teacher called me Elizabeth, and that was to conceal his lust for me.'

'Where are you? It sounds busy.'

'At the flower market,' Libby says. 'I thought you said you'd be here. With Jacques.'

'We're in the tapas bar. Come and join us.'

Jacques mouths, 'Who is it?'

Jessica ends the phone call. 'Elizabeth.' When he looks blank-faced she adds, 'The one who bought my entire Deception range.'

'Ah, yes. Your internet stalker.'

'Best behaviour, please.' Jessica nudges him with the tip of her boot. 'She's on her way now. Hope you don't mind.'

'Not at all, honey.'

'She's been wanting to meet you. Apparently you sound too good to be true.' Jessica is anticipating the look of appreciation on Elizabeth's face when she meets

Jacques. Her new friend is showy and expressive in a way that's alien to Jessica. It intrigues her.

A woman walks past the window, her white coat unbuttoned, billowing in the wake of her stride.

'In fact, that's her now.'

Jacques sits upright, twisting in his chair as though he has a sudden, sharp pain in his side. 'That's your new friend?'

There's something in his voice that makes her glance at him but then the bell above the door rings and Elizabeth walks in. She stops in the centre of the restaurant, looking about her. She's wearing a black trouser suit with a white, masculine shirt that stretches tight at her chest and huge gold earrings like autumn leaves dangling from her black bob. She's like a wave cresting over the room, everyone holding their breath, waiting to be swept away.

Jessica smiles to herself. *Here comes drama*.

'We're over here.' She waves, glances back at Jacques. There's a look on men's faces when they see Libby, she's noticed, something close to greed.

But Jacques is the only person not looking as he frowns out of the window.

'Libby?' he's muttering, and Jessica elbows him.

'Short for Elizabeth. Try to keep up.'

'Jessica, you gorgeous thing.' Libby comes over and they exchange kisses.

Jacques offers a brief handshake without standing up. He's put his hat back on as though preparing to leave. 'Nice to meet you.'

She waits for Jessica to clear their coats off the third

chair and smiles across at Jacques. 'As handsome in the flesh as your wife said you were.'

'Can I get you a coffee?' The cheery rise in his voice sounds like a stumbled attempt at running up a hill. He's looking pale again, which makes the darkness of his stubble stand out like theatre paint.

'Coffee would be lovely, thank you,' Libby says.

Jessica catches his hand as he gets up. 'Are you feeling OK, Jacqy?'

He nods, stroking his knuckles briefly against her cheek. 'Back in a minute.'

Libby gives Jacques an oblique look as he walks away. 'I was expecting a real charmer.'

'We had a messy night at a comedy club in Camden.'

'I guessed as much from the boozy haze.' She gives Jessica's arm a friendly squeeze. 'So now that I've met your husband, it's time for you to meet mine.'

Jessica watches Jacques over her new friend's shoulder, dawdling by the cakes at the counter. By the time he returns, they've agreed a date.

'We're having dinner on Friday the sixteenth,' Libby says as he approaches with a tray of coffee and cakes. 'Your lovely wife has checked the diary and you're both free.'

'Wonderful,' Jacques says but he doesn't smile. 'I'm sure my lovely wife will look forward to it.'

They both sit back. Libby looks amused; Jacques takes off his hat, ruffling his hair. Jessica has an odd sense of having missed something.

'Where shall we go?'

They both look at her blankly.

'Matthew will make a reservation somewhere,' Libby says after a beat. 'He's good at that kind of thing.'

'Matthew being your better half?' Jacques asks.

'My *other* half, yes.'

Sugar is added to coffees, followed by careful stirring and tentative sips. Jacques eats both the carrot cake and the chocolate cake while Jessica tries to think of something to say. She had imagined an instant, easy flow between the two of them.

'I can't remember if I told you, but Libby is a florist. She has her own shop. E.H. Flowers.'

Jacques nods. 'You said.'

The three of them reach simultaneously for their coffees.

When they say their goodbyes outside, Jessica worries that Libby's mouth looks a little tight. Jacques holds his hand up in a short farewell and goes to inspect a row of blue-glazed pots on a nearby stall.

Under her breath, Jessica says, 'I don't know what's got into him today.'

'I'll wear him down, you'll see.' Libby's voice is so low that it draws Jacques' attention. From the corner of her eye, Jessica sees him watching them from under his hat.

Blowing kisses, Libby heads back into the crowded market.

Jacques puts down the vase he was holding. 'Tell me again how you two met?'

'She was my first online customer. You and I disagreed on the price, if you remember.'

'All those hours you spent on it. She pretty much got it for free.'

She can't understand why it's upsetting him now. He'd been delighted when she came home from White's and announced she'd sold the whole range.

'No wonder she's such a fan,' he adds.

Jessica stops walking. 'As opposed to the quality of the workmanship?'

'Sorry.' Jacques takes her hand, still not looking at her. 'I'm sure she loves your jewellery.'

'What's bothering you, Jacqy?'

He is squeezing and kneading her knuckles. 'Why would you want to be friends with a woman like that?'

'A woman like what?' Jessica raises her eyebrows at him. Jacques is the most tolerant, easy-going person she knows.

'I just don't get it.' He drops her hand, pushing his deep into his pockets, shoulders hunched. 'You're a very different person to her.'

'Exactly. I like that.'

'She's all glitz and no substance. You can't trust someone like her.'

The way he is keeping his eyes dead ahead makes Jessica suddenly uncomfortable. 'Is it because you found her attractive?'

'What? Christ, Jessica.' It's Jacques' turn to stop walking. 'I do not find her attractive.'

'You don't have to pretend she's not.'

He shakes his head. 'Can we stop talking about her now?'

She doesn't try to take his arm again and it feels odd walking side by side, not touching. 'Weren't you the one who thought I needed more friends?'