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Rosie Meadows Regrets

Written by Catherine Alliott

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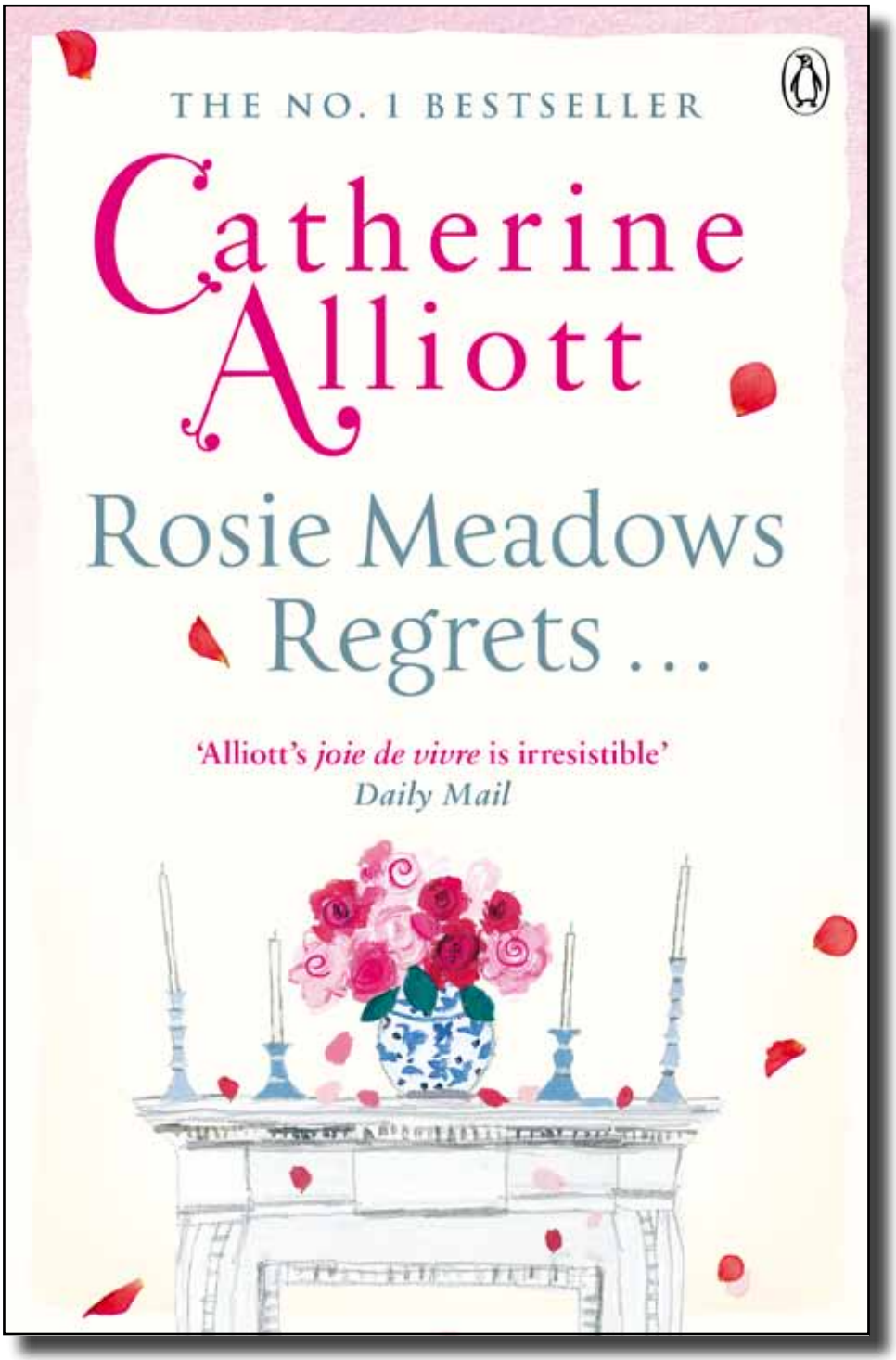

An extract from Rosie Meadows Regrets . . . by Catherine Alliott
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Rosie Meadows Regrets . . .

by

Catherine Alliott

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Chapter One

'So anyway, Charlie here turned to me and said, "Okay, Charlotte, if you're such a crack shot, how about a game of strip shooting in the field!" – expecting me to swoon and reach for the vapours or something. So I said, "All right, you bastard, you're on!"'

I took a sip of wine to steady my nerves and gazed at my raconteuring hostess over the mahogany dining table. I certainly couldn't look at Charlie's wife, Lavinia, down the other end.

'So out we all went with our shotguns,' Charlotte went on, 'drunk as skunks – well, Charlie and I certainly were – into the paddock, and someone managed to focus long enough to send up the clays and I hoisted Daddy's Purdey up into my shoulder and – well!' She paused, suspending animation just long enough to draw a few dutiful gasps of admiration from her guests. 'Blow me if I didn't get every single one of those clays and these bastards didn't get a dicky bird!'

Raucous laughter and much table thumping greeted this, particularly from my husband who was going to put his fist through his side plate in a minute. I watched as he roared away, his round, moon-like face gleaming as red as the foppish hanky sticking out of his breast pocket, upper lip perspiring freely, eyes gleaming lasciviously.

'And did they?' he bellowed. 'Strip?'

'You bet they did!' came back the retiring Charlotte. 'Stark bollock naked every single one of them *and* I had them standing to attention presenting arms – amongst other

things – before I moved along the ranks inspecting them with a riding crop – ha ha!'

'Oh, Charlotte, you *didn't*!' shrieked a horsy girl to my left. 'You are a *scream*!'

Yes, wasn't she just? I didn't notice Lavinia screaming too much though. I glanced at her flushed face. She'd just about managed to bare her teeth in a brave semblance of a smile as she pushed a piece of Brie around her plate. I sipped my wine and flashed a look at Charlotte's husband, Boffy, wondering how he was taking all this. On what passed for his chin, apparently, judging by the way he was doubled up with mirth, spluttering Stilton down his red braces. Clearly he couldn't have been more pleased that his wife took such a keen interest in other men's anatomy.

As I gazed around the table at the assembled port-swilling, braying throng, it did occur to me to wonder, though, whether I was being entirely fair here. Wasn't I being just a little bit jaundiced on account of the company? A little bit partisan? If this had been a dinner party at one of *my* friends' houses for instance, and had it been Kate, say, or Alice doing the story-telling, might I not have found it amusing? Wasn't it just the fact that it was one of Harry's friends that made it all so puerile?

'Rosie, get that port moving,' bellowed my shy hostess. 'I've got a hell of a thirst on over here!'

'Oh, sorry.' I dutifully shoved along the ship's decanter which had obviously been stuck in front of me for some time and cleared my throat which was dry from lack of use.

'Actually,' I said bravely, trying to catch Harry's bloodshot eye, 'I think we'd better be making a move soon. I told the baby-sitter midnight and it's half past already . . .'

'Is it?' Charlotte flashed up her Rolex. 'Christ! I've got a bridge lesson first thing in the morning. Come on, you lot,

get out of here. Go on, bugger off. I'll get the Hoover out in a minute!'

There was a great deal of laughing and scraping back of chairs but not many bottoms were off the tapestry seat covers quite as smartly as mine. Two seconds later I had my coat on and my bag firmly over my shoulder. Five minutes went by and I was still smiling fixedly, waiting patiently as Harry did his usual protracted round of leave-taking, slapping backs heartily and collecting prospective engagements wherever he could.

'Charlie! It's been far too long, we must get together again soon . . . Oh, really? On Thursday? No, not a thing, yes, we'd love to come, wouldn't we, darling? Hey, Rosie, social secretary – wake up! Drinks party on Thursday night all right?'

'Charlie and Lavinia live in Hampshire, Harry,' I said quietly.

'So what? Won't take long, we'll be there in an hour, won't we, Charlie? Charlie?'

Charlie broke off from talking to someone else. He turned to Harry as if he couldn't quite remember him. 'Hour and a half from central London, old boy.'

'Much as that, eh? Can't think why you live out there in the sticks, takes me eight and a half minutes to get to Sloane Square!'

Charlie raised his eyebrows. 'Eight and a half minutes? I'm only halfway down my drive.'

Much guffawing greeted this, with Harry promising, nonetheless, that we'd be there come hell or high water, eh, Rosie?

'Fine,' I said nodding, grinning, and wishing to God Harry wouldn't do this. If Charlie had wanted us there in the first place he'd have sent us an invitation. I gave a tight little smile. 'We'd love to come, Charlie.'

Finally we were at the door, planting more kisses, making more false promises.

'Rosie, *do* come and make up a bridge four some time,' insisted Charlotte. 'I know you're crap but it doesn't matter in the least, no one minds, really!'

'You're sweet,' I lied. 'And I'll ring you, really I will. Thanks so much, Charlotte, it was a lovely evening, delicious supper. 'Night, Boffy.' I pecked their cheeks.

''Bye, darlings!' Charlotte carolled as we went off into the night. 'And don't forget to ring, Rosie!'

'I won't!' I waved back to the light of the hall, keeping a bright smile going at the two figures silhouetted within it. At last the blue front door closed on them, shutting us out, leaving us to the welcoming cold night air. I gave a sigh of relief as it enveloped us and huddled down into my coat, breathing the icy wind in gratefully as I made my way along the slippery pavement to the car.

I got in quickly and waited, hand poised on the ignition, watching in the rear-view mirror as Harry made his habitually slow, stumbling progress round the back to his side. He fumbled with the handle, missed, tried again, opened it, and then with a great grunt lowered himself into the passenger seat. His huge bulk spilled out over the handbrake, his knees ending up somewhere near his nose. He sank back happily and sighed.

'Ahhh . . . well done, darling,' he patted my hand. 'Very well done indeed. I think that went extremely smoothly. Nine and a half, I'd say.'

I ground my teeth and turned the ignition. 'Good,' I murmured, wisely keeping my counsel. Gone were the days when I'd upbraid Harry for his loathsome habit of giving an evening marks out of ten when we'd just been to supper with someone who owned a grouse moor, or a salmon river, or a chalet in Switzerland, or any other sort of action that

Harry might want a slice of. No, the last thing I wanted was a heated row on the way home, only to crawl into bed with a raging headache, tossing and turning all night as Harry snored for England beside me.

As we purred slowly down the narrow, lamp-lit Fulham street, Harry settled his head back on the rest and closed his eyes.

'Just one teeny point though, darling,' he murmured. 'You were a bit sort of – quiet tonight. Bit mousy. You must try to loosen up with my friends, you know. I know you find them intimidating but they won't bite. It's all a question of confidence.' There was a pause. 'Oh, and one other thing.' He turned his head towards me. 'I overheard you talking to Boffy about going horse racing. It's racing actually, sweetie. A small point, but one worth remembering, eh?'

I didn't answer, just ground my teeth some more. Don't rise, Rosie, just don't rise.

'All right to drive, my love?' he went on sleepily. 'Not sure I'm up to it tonight, feeling a bit kippy.'

'Of course I'm all right,' I muttered, wondering why he even bothered to ask. I always drove home; in fact these days it was nip and tuck whether Harry could actually drive *to* a party depending on how many pre-dinner whiskies he'd sunk in his bath beforehand. I sighed and shunted up a gear. Oh, so what, Rosie, let him drink, at least it puts him to sleep, doesn't it? I glanced hopefully across at his slumbering profile but – hello, the eyelids were flickering again. He'd obviously remembered something crucial. He blinked his pale blue eyes and grinned into the night.

'I say, Charlotte's an awfully good sort, isn't she?'

Sort of what? I was tempted to ask. Sort of witch? Sort of trollop? But I knew better than that. I gave a twisted smile. 'Yes, isn't she.'

'Sound quite fun, these little bridge parties of hers. Why don't you go along? Do you good.'

I gripped the steering wheel hard, thinking I'd rather haemorrhage from the navel. 'Don't be ridiculous, Harry, how can I possibly play bridge when I've got Ivo to look after? What d'you expect him to do, sit in his high chair and count the rubbers?'

'Rubbers?' He looked startled. 'Aren't they – condoms or something?'

I grinned. 'No, Harry, it's a bridge term, although actually it wouldn't surprise me if condoms did make an appearance soon. If Charlotte's giving nude shooting parties it won't be long before she spices up her bridge afternoons too, turns them into Ann Summers parties or something.' I smiled to myself. Privately I'd always thought the C was silent in Charlotte's name.

Harry frowned, confused. 'Ann Summers? Don't think we know her, do we? Ah yes, got it, pretty little red-head, met her at the Compton-Burnetts' – father's a bishop?'

'Well, if he is, he's bitterly disappointed,' I muttered as I swerved dangerously round a midnight cyclist with an apparent death wish. 'No, forget it, Harry, you don't know her, but the point is I can't do anything remotely social during the day until Ivo goes to nursery school, can I? And that won't be for ages.'

'Well, get a nanny, everyone else has got one,' he said petulantly.

I dug my nails fiercely into the mock leather trim of the wheel. This was an age-old bone of contention.

'Everyone that *you* know has got one, everyone that I know either looks after their children or has a nanny because they go to work, they don't fiddle-fart around at bridge parties and coffee mornings. But look, darling,' I said quickly,

seeing him bridle, 'let's not discuss it now, okay? I'm tired and I just want to get home and go to bed.'

'Fine,' he said tersely. 'Fine. All I'm saying, Rosie, is don't expect invitations to shoot in Northumberland to fall into your lap, okay? You have to be prepared to put in a bit of groundwork first, you know!'

I smiled. Ah, so that's what this was all about. Shooting in Northumberland. Yes, well, I'd had such a terrific time there last year, no doubt I'd be round at Charlotte's first thing tomorrow, sharpening my pencils, turning in my tricks and singing for my supper with the rest of the gang. I sighed. Last year, due to the fact that one of the husbands couldn't keep his hands off the cook, goosing her every time she bent down to put the roast pork in the oven and then lying prostrate on her bed, naked but for a wooden spoon in his mouth and a strategically placed oven glove, the poor girl had finally collapsed in a heap and walked out, leaving muggins here to pick up the pieces and cook for fourteen. Well, it was either that or starve.

'Where are we going to find another one?' they'd all squeaked hysterically, looking around the room as if by chance they might find a stray cook hiding behind the sofa. 'We'll never get one from an agency at such short notice!'

'Of course we won't,' I'd said shortly, making my way to the kitchen. 'We'll have to do it ourselves.'

'Oh, good old Rosie,' they'd all chorused, 'she'll take the helm! Thank goodness someone knows what they're doing. I couldn't boil an egg!' Which left me to wonder, as they tore off to the tennis courts gaily swinging their rackets again, how it was that they were all so hale and hearty. You'd think they'd all have wasted away by now, wouldn't you?

'Yes, well, I'm not altogether sure I want another busman's holiday,' I said as lightly as possible.

'You said you didn't mind,' Harry said huffily. 'I distinctly remember, you said you quite enjoyed it.'

'I didn't particularly mind,' I said levelly, 'I just don't want to do it again, that's all.'

There was a long pause.

'I was very proud of you,' he said abruptly. 'Stepping in like that.'

I sighed. 'Yes, I *know* you were.'

God, yes, I remembered his face when everyone had patted me on the back and said what a little star I was, how he'd glowed and glowed with pride until I thought he was going to explode. And then, when everyone had disappeared to the courts, how he'd trotted off after them, last as usual, his thick legs rubbing together in his too-tight white shorts. I remembered watching him go, standing at the kitchen window, surrounded by eight uncooked lobsters and not a single offer of help from anyone.

'I just wonder if you should have been quite so proud,' I said quietly. 'I felt as though – well, as though somehow we were paying our way.'

'Oh, don't be ridiculous,' he scoffed. 'Charlotte and Boffy are my oldest friends! I don't have to buy my way into their house!'

Have to attend a few bridge parties though, make the right noises at the right social events, don't we? I thought privately.

Actually I hadn't minded doing the cooking that weekend. I'd put on my apron and rolled up my sleeves with alacrity, anything to get away from this hearty, bellowing crowd who did nothing but shriek about what a good time they were having and guffaw at unfunny jokes. In the beginning, when Harry and I were first married, I'd thought perhaps I was missing the point. They were, after all, a good ten years older

than I was and so naturally more sophisticated. In time, I thought, I'd get the jokes. But then I realized there was nothing to get. 'Having fun' was simply what they did, it was their raison d'être, and if something wasn't funny they'd roar with laughter anyway. These were rich, aimless people, buoyed up by trust funds, daddies in the City and the most exclusive educations money could buy. From a very early age they'd taken a long, cool look at themselves, found themselves to be utterly flawless and with that conviction ringing soundly in their ears had marched off from the nursery to shout as loudly as they could and do as they blinking well liked. Not for the likes of Charlotte and Boffy the anxiety and shyness most mortals suffer. Not for them the anxious words in the car on the way home from parties – 'You know when I said Amanda had lost weight, you don't think she thought I meant she was grossly overweight before, do you?' Or, 'When I said their Tommy was a quiet little thing, did it sound like I thought he was retarded?' No, no, Harry's friends were all imbued with the utmost self-confidence. They lacked for nothing in their lives, except humility.

I sighed and swung the wheel into the Wandsworth Bridge Road. And I'd tried, I really had. In the beginning I'd been so keen to get on with Harry's crowd, to find a girlfriend, a kindred spirit, one who perhaps wasn't as boisterous and outrageous as the rest, but they were all the same, and whereas at first I'd been in awe of them, thinking them such a fast, zany bunch, now they just made my head ache. And Harry too? I glanced across at him sitting next to me, head back, mouth open, pudgy hands clasped limply across his pinstriped waistcoat, snoring soundly. I smiled ruefully. The real irony was that when I'd first met Harry I'd thought him so different from the rest. What I hadn't known was that this wasn't by choice.

We'd met in Ireland, also at a house party, but this time it was very much a legitimate working weekend for me, as the cook, the hired help. It wasn't the sort of thing I usually did, I mostly cooked in London, working with a friend who had her own catering business, but an agency had rung at the last minute and begged me to take the job because some other girl had dropped out and the clients were apoplectic with rage. This, in itself, should have been enough to set alarm bells ringing, but instead I said, 'Oh all right, I'll do it,' and the following morning saw me setting off across the Irish Sea singlehandedly to cook breakfast, lunch, tea and dinner for fifteen guns and their wives.

Now under normal circumstances I wouldn't be nearly such a mug, but the truth was I was dying to get away from London and any excuse would do. I badly needed to bolt. You see, I'd just come to the end of a very one-sided relationship – heavy on my side and feather-light on his – with an extremely attractive landscape gardener called Rupert, who for the last nine months I'd considered to be the most delectable thing in faded corduroy trousers. Twinkly-eyed, tousled-haired, fatal sexy grin – he was the whole delicious package and I was smitten. True, I only managed to see him on Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday nights but that was because pressing tree surgery business took up the other evenings. He was a very busy man. Wednesday evenings therefore found me at a comparatively loose end, and if there was nothing on the telly, I tended to while away the hours pumping iron in the local gym.

One particular Wednesday I was down at my club as usual, keeping one eye out for royalty and another on the rampant cellulite, pounding away on my immobile bike, when the girl on the adjacent bicycle, with whom I'd previously only been on smiling terms, suddenly struck up a conversation.

'Fancy a break?' she puffed, pink leotard dark with perspiration.

'Oh – yes!' I gasped back piteously.

Needing no further prompting, we shot off to the cafe together. As we sat there in a window seat, basking in the beams of hazy evening sunshine which bounced off our sweaty heads, happily guzzling our high-calorie hot chocolates, we naturally, as strangers do, swapped our most intimate details. Fat, of course, was first and foremost on the agenda. Fat on thighs, fat on bottoms, fat on tummies and amid cries of 'Oh, don't be silly, my bottom's *much* bigger than yours!' we struck up a cosy camaraderie. Hair removal came next – waxing on my part, electrocution on hers – and then, of course, men. And, strangely, it transpired she had a similar problem. You see, it turned out that my new friend was also in love with a man she could only pin down to certain nights of the week, namely Monday, Friday and Saturday. Coincidentally, this man was also a tree surgeon and funnily enough . . . he was also called Rupert. I remember us staring at each other incredulously, skins forming on our cooling hot chocolates as slowly the respective pennies dropped with a resounding 'clunk'. Leg warmers tightened, trainers creaked, headbands shrank with horror until at last we found our voices and shrieked –

'No!'

'I don't *believe* it!'

'How *could* he!'

'He *couldn't*!'

'He bloody *has*!'

'The BASTARD!'

Quite a lot more outraged screaming and shouting took place before we stood up as one, threw our coats over our damp leotards and strode out into the night.

Tight-lipped we hailed a taxi and trundled round to Draycott Terrace where, of course, being Wednesday, we found him in, having his one night of the week off games. His bemused flatmate let us in and there was Rupert, stretched out on a sofa, watching *EastEnders*, eating an Indian takeaway and quietly picking his nose. Together we stood over his astonished form and told him, in graphic detail, exactly where he could put his trees and what sort of surgery we thought he really needed. Pink Leotard even went so far as to tip his Vindaloo into his corduroy crotch, which I thought was a nice touch.

That was the Wednesday. On Thursday I was still incensed, but by Friday the misery had well and truly set in. It was the end of me and Rupert and it was also, I determined, the end of my flirtation with the main squeeze of the species. You see, up until now I'd always eschewed these fast, glamorous men as being far too dangerous for me, my predilection always being for the sidekicks of life. Why, even at school, whilst other girls lusted after Napoleon Solo, I went for Ilya Kuryakin, while some screamed for Le Bon, I guitared with Taylor, and whilst some yearned for Bodie, I dreamed of Doyle. I'd felt happier that way, more comfortable, more at ease with my ever so slightly upper hand, and that's how it should have stayed. Until Rupert. The main attraction, the sublime tree surgeon who'd felled me at the knees.

Well, never again, I told myself firmly as I sobbed into the sofa in my flat that Friday night. Never, never again. It was back to the bargain basement for me, back to riffling through the rails hoping to find something more suitable, something someone else had cast aside maybe. Something a little bald, a little short, a little fat, a little thin – something I could *do* something with. And that's where I found Harry.

The agency had telephoned as I sobbed out my resolve into my cushion and I took the job out of sheer desperation.

'It's in Ireland,' they pointed out.

'I don't care!' I sobbed.

'You'd have to leave tonight.'

'Even better!'

'You'll be rushed off your feet.'

'It'll numb the pain!'

And that was how it came to pass that the following day I found myself on the west coast of Ireland, standing at a vast wooden table in the middle of a huge old kitchen that looked like something out of Mrs Beeton, staring miserably at a dozen woodcock that all needed plucking, gutting and cooking, and with the firm promise of a dozen more to follow shortly.

An hour and a half later with only three birds plucked, covered in feathers, guts and blood, and feeling decidedly ill and close to tears, I heard the crunch of tyres on the gravel outside. Glancing up, I saw a dirty old Land Rover draw up alongside the window. I remember thinking with horror – and a certain amount of mutiny – that if this was the other dozen birds appearing I'd either burst into tears or take the first ferry home, when out of the cab jumped Harry. He was wearing a rather smart lovat green shooting ensemble and bearing not six brace of woodcock but a bottle of champagne.

He was a huge blond man, six foot five at least and very broad, but without the weight he's carrying now. As he strode into the kitchen brandishing his bottle, it seemed to me the whole room went dark. I paused in mid-pluck, gazing up at this giant, waiting for yet more orders from on high. Instead, he took one look at my wobbly face and the feather-strewn kitchen, told me to go and wash my hands and face

and he'd do the rest. True to his word, he sat down on a stool, dragged a bin between his knees and set about expertly de-fluffing the smelly beasts while I sat beside him sniffing and sipping my chilled champagne. I could have kissed him. And of course that's all I should have done. Instead, I married him. Not just like that, of course, it was a few more months before I actually became Mrs Harry Meadows, but it was a fairly snap decision for such a momentous one.

Looking back, I'm not at all sure it didn't have a lot to do with my condition at the time of that very first meeting. I was so emotionally exhausted and pathetically grateful to this enormous, kindly – or so I thought – bear of a man, that I think I decided there and then that I'd been treated too shabbily for too long by too many smooth-talking handsome bastards – one, actually, for all of nine months – and that this straightforward, capable, decent man would do very nicely, thank you. Let's face it, I was rebounding like a cannon ball and I was flying faster than the speed of light. Someone had to catch me; it happened to be Harry.

I told myself I liked his eyes – blue, can't go wrong, Rosie – and his reassuring broad shoulders, and as far as I remember he made me laugh, which is strange, because he hasn't since. If I'm honest, I also liked the fact that I was better looking than he was, which was saying something actually, because at the time I was a good stone overweight and had just had an ambitiously short 'elfin' haircut which, considering I have neither the 'elfin' face nor the figure to back it up, resulted in me looking like a fat little pixie. But Harry saw none of this. I was blonde, I had beautiful green eyes – his words, not mine – my skin was peachy (ditto), I was voluptuous (the less said about that the better) and I was all his heart desired. Well. What could I say? If he was smitten then I

could be too, and I sank back into the whole cosy relationship with a monumental sigh of relief. I didn't have to try too hard, didn't have to be too witty, too amusing, too beautiful, didn't have to jump through any more hoops. It was like landing on a feather mattress after all those years of being Out There.

He was older than I was (by about ten years), taller than me (by about a foot) and yes, okay, maybe he was a bit pompous, a bit pleased with himself and a teensy bit on the dull side, particularly when he'd drunk too much, which was more than occasionally, but my goodness who *didn't* have their faults and he was, after all, a basically nice man, wasn't he?

I bit my lip and shifted angrily down to third as I took the bend too sharply at the Wandsworth roundabout. Harry lolled sleepily to one side, his head propped up against the window, mouth wide open, a tiny trace of dribble appearing at the side of it.

Mummy, of course, had been delighted. She'd opened the front door, taken one look at the whopping great sapphire on my left hand and almost gone down on her knees and kissed the hem of his Barbour, she was so excited. Beaming widely, she'd taken him firmly by the arm and marched him straight into the sitting room to draw up a guest list for the wedding, and from then on it was like a bobsleigh ride to the altar. Mummy was at the helm and the telephone was rarely out of her hand.

'He's some sort of relation of Lord Something-or-other-of-Somewhere!' I heard her squeak excitedly down the phone to her friend, Marjorie Burdett. 'Imagine, if *he* dies, and then his *cousin* dies and then someone a bit further down the *line* dies, Rosie might even end up being a lady! She might end up doing even better than Philippa!' This was almost too

orgasmic for words and she dropped the telephone with a clatter on the reproduction hall table, because Philippa's marriage, frankly, was hard to beat.

Philippa was my elder sister. She was not only a beautiful, willowy, swan-like creature but also highly intelligent to boot. Some years back she'd taken time out from her hectic schedule at a London teaching hospital where she worked as an anaesthetist – oh yes, seriously intelligent – to come home for a local dance. It was here that she'd met, captivated, and consequently married – or 'bagged' as my mother so tastefully put it – an extremely rich local landowner who, according to Mummy, lived in 'the only house in Gloucestershire really worth having, Marjorie!'

Harry then, with his pretensions to nobility, summoned up all the latent suburban snobbery in my mother's heart, and she went into overdrive the minute the engagement was announced. One day I was being whisked around Peter Jones to assemble my wedding list, the next she had me scrambling in and out of wedding dresses in Harrods, bullying the staff, reducing assistants – and sometimes me – to tears, dragging me into travel agents to check out the arrangements for the honeymoon, so that for one awful moment I was so confused I thought I was marrying my mother. All of this enthusiasm is perfectly normal in the mother of the bride, of course, but I couldn't help thinking there was an element of about-bloody-time about it too, for as she never failed to remind me, I was in my late twenties. As late as you can get, in fact.

The more the plans rolled on, the more she and Harry got on famously, with Mummy dribbling into her soup as snippets of well-connected friends and family fell from his lips. It didn't seem to matter that Harry didn't actually have a job, that he didn't have much money, and that all he owned was a

couple of small houses in Wandsworth and some mythical stocks and shares; the fact that he could mention Michael Heseltine in the same breath as the Duchess of Devonshire had my mother practically writhing on the carpet, kicking her heels and begging for more. I remember going upstairs with her one night after supper when Harry had regaled us with yet another close encounter with the late Laurens van der Post – so much easier for Harry if these friends were 'late', incidentally – and she actually squeezed my waist on the landing as she said goodnight.

'You've done it, Rosie,' she breathed, 'you've really done it!'

I stared at her in amazement, and I remember thinking, how odd. After all those years of disapproval, all those years of scruffy clothes and unsuitable friends and no ambition, of giving her nothing but disappointment, in one fell stroke I'd pulled it off. I'd won her approval and maybe even her love. And by what? By bringing home a complete stranger. I blinked at her and, funnily enough, I didn't recoil, I didn't scoff, I didn't bolt in horror. I just looked into her excited shining eyes and basked contentedly in their glow. It was so easy, you see, and it made such a change not to be fighting her, not to be the rebel. I never thought it had bothered me that I hadn't managed to please her as much as Philly had, or my brother, Tom, Philly's twin, but that night I went to bed feeling ridiculously, some would say pathetically, happy.

My father of course was another matter. His love had always been strong, upfront and unconditional and when he heard the news, he went very quiet.

'Well, if you're happy, love, then that's all that matters,' he said at length.

'But you do like him, don't you, Daddy?' I asked anxiously.

'Of course I do. Of course.'

We'd been sitting together on the old bench by the greenhouse and I remember sensing the tone of his voice, turning quickly, guiltily almost, for more reassurance. But he'd already stood up. He gathered up his gardening gloves, his secateurs, tapped his battered old hat smartly down on his head and moved on, down to the vegetable patch at the bottom of the garden. His tall frame moved as quickly and deliberately as ever, but was it my imagination or was there a slight droop to those shoulders, a drag in his step?

That was the first time I can recall being uncertain. The second time was just before I walked down the aisle. As I stood at the door of our village church on my father's arm, I suddenly had this overwhelming urge to rip my headdress off and run like crazy for the nearest number 9 bus. I gritted my teeth and told myself it was just pre-match nerves, and a second later 'The Queen of Sheba' struck up and I raised my chin and swept down the aisle. The third wave of uncertainty came an hour or so later, at our wedding reception in my parents' garden. It was the charmless Charlotte actually, who, incredibly tight and looking flushed and hot in a God-awful pink hat, had swayed up to me and brayed, 'Gosh, I *do* think you're marvellous to take on dear old Humpty, Rosie! How incredibly brave of you! Lord only *knows* what you're in for!'

'H-Humpty?' I stuttered.

'Yes,' she laughed gaily. 'An old nursery name. I expect you had one, didn't you?'

I didn't, and I was tempted to add I hadn't had a nursery either, but something more galling than this deprivation struck me smack between the eyes with all the force of a runaway truck. Good God. I'd married Humpty Dumpty. I'd married the stooge, the fat boy of the gang, and not only that, I'd been brave, selfless, done something no one else in

their right mind had wanted to do. I remember standing there in my cream silk gown, staring blankly after Charlotte as she sauntered away, gripping my glass, the champagne already feeling flat in my hand.

After that my world went slowly darker as little by little the truth emerged. I'd married a man who, at thirty-nine, was desperate to marry. I was the fourth cook in a row he'd come back to help pluck the woodcock. It was the fourth bottle of champagne, the fourth mop-up-your-tears-Cinderella routine. It was a standing joke, how Humpty tried to get his leg over. But this time – get this – *this* time, not only had he got it over, I'd actually *married* him too! Cue raucous laughter, howling mirth, hysteria, and – cut. Because, wait a minute. How were they to know that I didn't love him? How were they to know that it wasn't a marriage made in heaven, eh?

Sadly, though, I didn't, and it wasn't, so the joke was firmly on me. Because no sooner had I shaken the confetti from my hair than it became clear that Harry was not the man I'd imagined him to be. He wasn't just harmless, he was foolish. He wasn't solid, he was stationary – mostly lengthwise on a sofa with his eyes shut – and he wasn't just a heavy drinker, he was – well, the less said the better. Instead, let's move smartly on to the good news. My son, Ivo, precisely two years, two months old now, conceived on our honeymoon in India and born, funnily enough, nine months later. My darling boy – I smiled fondly over the steering wheel as I thought of him. My bright, blond, shining light who got me through my days, my marriage. The very epicentre of my world. For him, Harry – I glanced at him sideways – I thank you from the bottom of my heart. For him, I should be able to forgive you anything.

As we drew up alongside our house in Meryton Road, I sat there in the dark, willing myself to feel something, to

bring back, if not the love, at least the tenderness. Quietly I slipped my seat belt off and turned sideways in my seat. I gazed upon my sleeping husband. Try, Rosie. Try to summon up something. For Ivo. There must have been something there in the beginning, surely, some sort of magic. I reached out and stroked his hand.

'Darling?' I whispered.

Not a flicker. On he snored.

'Harry, darling, we're home.'

He smacked his huge chops and turned his face the other way.

'Harry.' I shook him. 'Come on, it's cold out here, wake up.' I shook him a bit harder. 'Come on, my love.'

'Bugger off,' he muttered.

My hand froze on his.

'Well, bugger you too, you stupid fat git!' I roared.

I slumped back in my seat. Yes, well, that had really brought back the magic, hadn't it? Really summoned up the tenderness. I sighed. God, if only I'd married Mel Gibson, I'm sure I wouldn't have had all this trouble. I looked at Harry, biting my thumbnail. I was sorely tempted to leave him there, to let him fight his own way out of the car at four in the morning, let him stagger up the frosty path, search hopelessly for his door key, wrestle with the latch, but I knew it was counterproductive. I'd only have to leap out of bed in the middle of the night to intercept him, to stop him crashing around and waking Ivo. I leaned over and found his ear.

'Harry,' I shouted, 'if you stay here you'll freeze to death!' My eyes sparkled briefly in their tired old sockets at this, but I bade them dim. No, no. Only in your dreams, Rosie. On he snored.

'Right!' I screeched importantly. 'That's *it*!'

I scrambled out of the car and ran round to Harry's side.

I flung open his door with a flourish. It was time for the Last Resort, a method thus far used only on a handful of occasions due to its inherent danger, but tonight was going to be one of them. I ran back to my side, got up on to my seat on all fours like a dog and began pushing Harry towards his open door. It was like moving a mountain. I put my shoulder against his and shoved for all I was worth, swearing and cursing, puffing and panting, when into my line of vision came an elderly man and his dog. They came along the pavement, stopped, and watched with interest, taking a moment out of their late-night constitutional to witness this piece of street theatre. I ignored them and pushed on regardless.

'He's going to fall on the pavement and crack his head open,' the man observed at length.

'That's the idea,' I muttered through clenched teeth.

There was a pause.

'Ah.' He nodded. Reassured, he moved on up the street.

Interesting exchange that, I thought, panting away. Obviously it was all right for me to inflict wilful bodily harm on my husband, it was accidental bodily harm that had bothered him. Finally, I gave one last superhuman push and Harry began to roll, and roll, and then j-u-s-t at the last minute as he was about to hit the pavement, he stuck his leg out and saved himself. Yes, well, he always *did*, didn't he? I sat panting, marvelling as he swung the other leg round and somehow stumbled to his feet, like a dazed elephant coming round from a drugged dart. Extraordinary, I thought, that inherent instinct for survival. It seemed that Harry, like the poor, would always be with us.

As he started to weave his way precariously up the garden path to the front door, I locked the car and quickly nipped past him, beating him to it. It was important at this juncture to stop him rapping on the knocker and hollering

'What-shall-we-do-with-the-drunken-sailor?' through the letter box, as was his wont.

'Well done,' he muttered as I opened the door and hustled him through. 'Well done, old thing.' Oh yes, I forgot to mention that. When I married Harry, I'd been lucky enough to lose my Christian name as well as my surname. I was no longer Rosie Cavendish, but Old Thing Meadows.

As I breathlessly steered him through to the sitting room, Alison, our baby-sitter, was already getting up from her chair, tucking her magazine in her bag and turning off the television.

'Had a good evening?' she asked shyly.

'Lovely, thanks, Alison, how about you? Has Ivo been all right, everything okay?'

'Oh yes, he's been an absolute angel as usual. He woke up at about ten o'clock so I gave him a drink and he went straight back down again. I hope that was all right?'

This was quite a long sentence for Alison and she went a bit pink. She was a sweet, shy girl of about seventeen from across the road who adored children, particularly Ivo.

I smiled. 'Of course, that's exactly what I would have done. Well done.' I had some money ready in my hand and I quickly slipped it into hers. 'Sorry we were a bit late, by the way.'

'Oh no, you weren't really – oh! No, that's far too much, Rosie.' She looked at the notes in her hand.

'No, please, take it.'

Alison was the eldest of five children and money was tight across the road. I knew that this was her way of getting a few nice clothes; in fact I knew for certain that her shiny black sixties-style mac which she'd proudly shown me when she'd arrived had been bought with her baby-sitting money.

'Thanks.' She beamed. 'I can get that miniskirt from Top Shop now.'

'Oh good,' I rejoined enthusiastically, and as I watched her glow with pleasure it occurred to me that perhaps that was what was missing from my life. A miniskirt from Top Shop.

'Well, I'll be off then,' she said. ''Night, Rosie. Goodnight, um, Mr Meadows.' She looked nervously at Harry. She never knew quite what to call him or what to say to him. He stood swaying in the sitting-room doorway, blocking her path to the hall. She edged towards him but he didn't move aside to let her through, instead he looked her up and down, his eyes running blatantly and rather mockingly over her youthful figure in her cropped Lycra top.

'Ah, you're off then, are you, um –'

'Alison,' I put in quickly. He never remembered her name and she'd been our baby-sitter for over a year now.

'Ah, yes, Alison. Son and heir been behaving himself?'

'Perfectly,' she said, trying to edge past him.

'Good, good.' He shut his eyes and swayed dangerously. Oh God. He wasn't just pissed, he was catastrophically drunk.

''Scuse me a minute,' he muttered. 'Must have a slash.'

He turned and stumbled from the room, but instead of turning right to the loo, he turned left, and opened the cupboard where we keep the coats. Without turning on the light and before I could open my mouth to speak, he'd unzipped his flies and started peeing. Noisily. At length. Against the coats. As I stood there frozen with horror, I heard the unmistakable sound of water on plastic, and I just knew. I knew because I'd hung it there not a few hours ago. He was peeing all over Alison's shiny new mac.

Alison and I stood shoulder to shoulder, waiting, aghast,

until the tinkling torrent subsided. There was a pause. Then a muffled, and slightly confused 'Bugger'.

A moment later, he staggered out.

'I say, I'm awfully sorry, Abigail old thing, I appear to have pissed in your coat pocket.'

It was at that moment that I knew for certain. I could no longer live with this man, he simply had to go.