

Made in Heaven

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Published by Orion

Extract

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Saturday



‘Parents of the bride meet parents of the groom. It’s a ritual that goes on in every society and has done for centuries.’

‘We’re not first-year archaeology students, Pa,’ said Zannah from the back seat of the car. ‘You’re in professor mode and you shouldn’t be. Just be normal.’

Bob Gratrix smiled. ‘What if professor mode *is* normal? What then? No, I’m only joking, Zannah. I’ll behave, I promise.’

Joss considered her husband’s profile. After thirty-one years of marriage, it was easy not to look properly at a person who had become completely familiar. One flesh . . . that was what they said and it was almost true. Joss didn’t feel as though she was fifty-two, and wondered how different she was now from the woman she used to be, years ago. It was hard to tell, when it came to judging yourself. Bob, with his sharp nose, thick, white hair and skin that had, after years of exposure to the sun, turned rather dry and leathery, was still reasonably good-looking. Perhaps it was his cheerful manner, too, which made him seem younger than fifty-six. So why, Joss wondered, do I feel so . . . so *unmoved* by him? He could be pompous at times . . . all that stuff about rituals in every society, but she loved him. I must do, she reasoned, or I wouldn’t have stayed married to him for so long. She refused to admit the possibility that remaining with Bob was tantamount to a kind of inertia; a lack of courage.

It was true that Gray had never, while they’d been writing to one another, suggested that she might leave her husband to come and live with him. He’d never said: *I can’t bear to spend a single day without you. Leave your whole life and start again with me.* Not once. Would she have

left Bob, with a bit of encouragement? Probably not. Her life was too settled, too comfortable, too much bound up with her daughters and her grandchild. Joss was not, and never had been, a rocker of boats. Perhaps, she told herself, I don't quite believe in Gray, but I mustn't think about him today, and I won't. Because he was in her thoughts most of the time, putting Gray aside and out of her mind could be almost pleasurable: like denying yourself a piece of chocolate when you were longing for one. I'll leave that till later. Today is Zannah's day.

Charlotte, Joss's aunt, was hosting the engagement party at her house in Clapham because Adrian's parents could get to it easily from Guildford, and she and Bob were always happy to come down and visit Zannah and Emily and Zannah's eight-year-old daughter, Isis. Everybody, she knew, regarded a trip up north as a 'trek'. That was how they put it: *a trek up north*, as though the Gratrixes lived in an igloo in the middle of a snowfield and not a spacious Edwardian semi outside Altrincham, on a suburban street that was proud of its fine trees. Also, (and this was more important even than the location of her house) Charlotte was on Zannah's side where wedding arrangements were concerned and eager to be involved in every phase of the planning. This was not quite true of Joss herself. Her feelings about the forthcoming bridal palaver ... perhaps campaign might be a better word ... were mixed, to say the least, but the one thing you did need for a proper family wedding was family – a grandma for instance. Joss felt a little guilty that she hadn't managed to provide one for her daughters, but, she reasoned, it isn't my fault my parents died so young. Bob was no better. His parents had been buried within months of one another just before Zannah was born. Charlotte, although technically a great-aunt, was, according to Zannah and Emily, better than any grandmother. She always knew how to provide precisely the right mixture of adoration and supervision, just as she had done when Joss was a girl.

Isis was filling the car with her chatter, telling her grandfather more than he could possibly take in.

'I'm going to be a bridesmaid, Grandpa,' she said. 'I'm going to have a pink dress with bows on and the skirt'll stick out really far and I'll twirl in it.'

'You don't know what colour your dress'll be, Icicle!' Zannah said. 'I haven't even picked a colour scheme yet.'

‘You sound like one of those glossy bridal mags.’ Joss turned round to smile at her daughter.

‘Don’t start on me, Ma,’ Zannah sighed. ‘I get the anti-big-wedding propaganda constantly from Em. I try not to listen. I’m the one getting married and this time, it’ll be just the way I decide to have it. I’ve been dreaming about it since I was Icepop’s age.’

‘*Icepop. Icicle.* You shouldn’t let them call you such things, Isis,’ Bob snorted in disgust.

‘I know,’ said Isis. ‘I’m named for an Egyptian goddess.’

‘Quite right,’ said Bob. ‘*Icepop* indeed.’

Joss looked out of the car window and marvelled at how little her daughters had changed since childhood. She could still remember a colleague of Bob’s from the university asking the girls what they wanted to be when they grew up. Emily was about seven and Zannah eleven.

‘An archaeologist like Pa,’ Em answered immediately.

Zannah took a few moments to think. Then she smiled and said, ‘When I grow up, I’m going to be a bride.’

‘But that’s not ...’ Bob had started to say, and Joss remembered sssshing him. *Leave her alone, Bob. Not now.*

‘We’re nearly there,’ said Zannah. ‘Come out of your daydream, Ma. You’re about to meet my in-laws to be, but they’re mine, not yours, so there’s nothing for you to be nervous about.’

‘I’m not nervous.’

‘You look a bit pale, though.’

‘Do I? Well, I can’t help that. It’s not nerves, honestly.’

Because of the way Zannah’s marriage to Cal Ford had ended, and because of the agonies her daughter had gone through when it had, Joss didn’t feel she could confess her misgivings; the pangs of regret she was feeling now. When Cal and Zannah had married, in a register office, with almost no one there and no pomp or ceremony whatsoever, she and Bob hadn’t minded a bit. Cal was ... still is ... a darling, Joss thought, and no one else, not even the handsome and thoroughly eligible Adrian, could change her opinion of him. Zannah still saw him often because he shared custody of Isis, but that wasn’t the same. Joss had always secretly felt she had a son while Zannah had been married to Cal. Perhaps she’d grow to feel more maternal towards Adrian Whittaker when she knew him better. He and Zannah

had been together for a mere six months and Joss had only met him twice before today and never really spoken to him properly. She also wondered what the chances were of her getting on as well with the Ashtons as she did with Cal's mother, even now after the divorce. They still exchanged Christmas cards and Joss never thought of her without wishing that they were still connected. There was also the matter of Adrian's relationship with Isis. Joss made a mental note to question Zannah carefully about that, and to watch out today to see how they got on with one another.

They were nearly there. The flowerbeds all round the circular drive in front of Charlotte's front door were particularly neat and the lawn looked as though it had been recently brushed and combed. Mauve swags of wisteria blossom drooped languidly around the front door. Camellias seemed to flower earlier and earlier and here they were in May with most of their blossoms already gone. The pink and white petals and dead heads had been swept away. The peonies looked as though they had every intention of being spectacular this year and Joss wondered whether Zannah was going to set a date that would allow her to include them in her bouquet. July? Was that the best peony month? Did peonies ever figure in bouquets? She realized that she was quite ignorant about such things. They hadn't seemed to be of the least importance when she and Bob had married. A pleasant ceremony in the local register office and a pretty bouquet to hold. As far as she remembered, she and Charlotte had simply gone into the florist's shop in the next street and ordered one to be sent to the house on the morning of the wedding. This was going to be quite different: another sort of wedding altogether.

Charlotte's house (detached, Edwardian, double-fronted, with an elegant porch) was imposing without being overwhelming; and when she had lived there as a teenager, Joss used to think the windows gazed out at the world in a friendly and welcoming manner. She still liked them. There was something about the way they'd been set into the surrounding brickwork that pleased her. The proportions were right. She gathered up the filmy dark-green skirts of her dress to get out of the car. This whole wedding thing was going to be, in the hideous modern phrase, a steep learning curve. Joss tried to imagine the slope of a hillside, or the sweep of a wave running to the shore, but that didn't

work and the image of a graph on squared paper . . . exactly the sort of thing that used to terrify her when she was at school . . . wouldn't go away.

Zannah was doing rather well with the introductions. Emily, her younger sister (not exactly hiding away but observing from the window seat) was quite impressed. That sort of thing was always like a dance where no one was sure of the steps. She looked good too, in a dark red linen trouser suit with her reddish-gold hair piled up on top of her head and long, jade earrings a delicious undersea green against the pale skin of her neck. Emily, with her short, spiky dark hair, and her habit of wearing only black or white clothes, knew she wasn't a patch on Zannah in the looks department. I've never minded her being prettier, she reflected. Didn't really mind her being much thinner than me, or taller, or having the kind of small breasts that made clothes hang so well. I must have spent hours, Emily thought, helping her to work out good ways of stuffing her bras even before I was wearing them myself. There's only one thing I envied her for and that was Cal. And they're divorced now, so I'm not even jealous about that any longer. She was determined not to think about her ex-brother-in-law today if she could help it. There was too much going on and she needed her wits about her. Zannah would interrogate her about everything once they were alone at home and Isis had gone to bed. This was something they'd always done, even though she was four years younger than her sister. Emily remembered many nights when Zannah had crept into her room after Pa and Ma were in bed. She used to push back the duvet and say: *You're not asleep, are you?* The standard, jokey answer was: *Not any more.* Emily smiled when she thought now about how they used to sit up for hours discussing this or that young man's kissing technique, or whether someone's dandruff made them unkissable. And I thought it didn't and Zannah thought it did. Considering how fussy she is, it's a major puzzle to work out why she's got a second fiancé in tow and I've not had a bite of one. Emily wondered whether she was on the shelf. She was twenty-six, for Heaven's sake! Well, if she was on the shelf, she wasn't too steamed up about it. Maybe being on the shelf was the new black. Or whatever.

The big round table from the dining room had been set up here

in the drawing room, which had been cleared of both armchairs and sofa, leaving only a few hard-backed chairs pushed up against the wall. It was a good idea, Emily thought. This room was the biggest in the house, with a bay window facing the drive and more than twenty feet away, French windows open on to the terrace and the garden on this sparkling day. The damasked cloth, the glasses and cutlery and vases of cream and pale pink roses were good enough to be in a photoshoot. Since she'd started working for a PR firm, she'd become much more aware of the appearance of everything.

Ma, for instance, was looking pretty but flustered. She very often did. Today, Emily could tell, she'd made a special effort to be smart in clothes that wouldn't let down the future mother of the bride. If they were a little on the hippyish side, if she wasn't in the same league as the groom's mother when it came to gloss and polish, her bones were finer and she was more instinctively elegant.

'Ma, this is Adrian's mother, Mrs ...'

'Maureen, please. We can't be formal if Suzannah's to be my daughter-in-law, can we?' She pronounced her own name in the melodious Irish fashion, with the emphasis on the 'een', Emily noticed. She insisted on it, according to Zannah. Emphasising the first syllable of the name, she'd decreed, made it sound common.

'Jocelyn,' Emily heard her mother say, 'but please call me Joss. Everyone does. And this is Bob, my husband.'

'Delighted,' said Bob. Emily felt proud of her father, who was not exactly pushing sixty but sort of waving at it as it came closer. He was still quite good-looking, with, as he put it, 'all my own hair and teeth.' He was getting a bit thick around the waist, and no one could call him really handsome, but he had a pleasant face and Emily noticed that Maureen was one of those women who turn up the wattage when they have a man in front of them at whom they can direct their smiles.

'I must apologize for my husband,' she purred. 'You're at the mercy of the system in his work. He's an anaesthetist in a big hospital. I always think that's such a terrifying responsibility.'

'Yes, indeed,' said Bob, and then, 'I'll go and get us a glass of wine, shall I? Shan't be long. And I'm sure you two have a great deal to talk about.'

Emily caught the panic in her mother's eyes, but she needn't have worried. Maureen had turned her attention to what was outside the open French window.

'This is a really amazing house and garden, isn't it? For Clapham ...' Was there a suggestion in her voice that Clapham was some kind of shanty town, Emily thought, or am I being uncharitable and imagining it? No, it was there all right: a badly disguised astonishment that an urban house could be so relatively spacious and have such a huge garden.

'Charlotte inherited it from her husband, who died about ten years ago. They were devoted.'

Emily noticed that Ma wasn't going into detail about how that husband had been Charlotte's second, and wondered whether Adrian had said anything to his mother. She assumed that Zannah must have told him about Charlotte's past, but maybe not. I'll ask her tonight, she thought. Surely even Adrian with the 'high standards' he kept going on about wouldn't let something that was so far in the past and of so little relevance to anything, make a difference to his marriage plans?

'How very sad!' said Maureen. 'But this is a splendid house. And so well-maintained ...'

She was fishing. Emily could see it in the way she was bending her head, as if she wanted to absorb any information that might be forthcoming. How, it was clear she was longing to ask, did a woman of over seventy manage? The pristine state of the decoration in Charlotte's house had always been a topic of amusement in the Gratrix family. Ma and Pa, Emily thought, believed in basic cleanliness and Ma wanted beautiful things around her and sort of believed in tidiness, but any kind of painting, wallpapering, carpet-laying skills; any d-i-y know-how whatsoever, had passed them by. The 'make your house gorgeous' gene was totally missing from their DNA.

Her father had an excuse. He was a professor. Papers and books over every surface was part of the job description. Sheets of notes and tottering piles of books obscured almost the entire surface of his desk. His computer was covered with dust even though it was constantly in use. The joke at home was: you couldn't see Pa when he was typing furiously for the clouds rising from the keyboard. His study had been a no-go area for years. But her mother ... well, Joss had very strong

views about what was beautiful (she was a poet, wasn't she?) but she could easily get carried away gazing at the heavenliness of a vase of tulips on the kitchen dresser and miss entirely the fact that the whole place could do with a coat of paint. Artistic, imaginative, dreamy but impractical: that was Ma.

'Charlotte has a lot of help in the house,' she was saying now. 'One of her lodgers . . . well, friends really . . . she has two friends who live here with her, both a little younger than she is. Anyway, one of them, Edie, has a son who's very good with his hands and that's been useful. And Val...that's her other friend, Valerie . . . is a passionate gardener herself and gets help with the heavy work.'

'What a stroke of luck!'

Emily thought she detected a note of rather grudging envy in Maureen's voice but perhaps, she conceded, she wasn't being fair. Joss was busy explaining Charlotte's domestic arrangements and making a muddle of it. Emily longed to interrupt and say something along the lines of: *She's got a chap who helps Val in the garden and someone else who comes to clean and Edie's son helps in all sorts of ways. And she manages very nicely thank you, with the money Gus left her and what the others pay her to live here. They play bridge with Nadia who lives down the road and have a whale of a time. So there!*

Maureen and Joss had now stepped out on to the terrace, which was always called that and not the patio. Patio, Zannah declared, was too *Brookside* for words. In Emily's opinion, this flagged space was rather small for a terrace but definitely bigger than a patio. Three steps led down to the lawn, which was smooth and unmarked and stretched for quite a long way to the hawthorn bushes blossoming into clouds of pink near the high wall at the end of the garden. The borders were crowded with plants whose names Emily didn't know, interspersed with rose bushes, just on the point of blooming, ceanothus (fluffy flowers exactly the same colour as a blue liquorice allsort) and camellia bushes (some with the odd cluster of pink petals still hanging on but mostly just glossy leaves). It was hard to tell from Maureen's back whether this sight was impressing her. All Emily could see was the rear view of the blue silk jacket she was wearing, and the almost helmet-like perfection of her hair, swept up into a French pleat of totally non-brassy and almost insufferably subtle blondeness. This signalled a fortune spent at some

salon that you had to put your name down for practically at birth. Her own mother's thick, dark, short hair, which was beginning to show grey in places, shone in the sun. It was well, if unimaginatively, cut by Maggie, who'd been doing it in exactly the same style for years and years. From behind, though, Ma seemed much younger than Maureen: almost like a girl with her slim figure and her rather Bohemian style. Maureen looked definitely middle-aged. I'm glad she's not going to be my mother-in-law, Emily thought and longed for the party to be over so that she could discuss her with Zannah.

'You all right, Chick?'

'Pa! Stop it!' Emily grinned at her father, who, she knew, had come to her in refugee mode: fleeing the social chitchat he would have had to make with other people. 'I'm too old for Chick.'

'Not for me you're not. You're my baby and always will be. How d'you feel about Zannah's wedding faradiddle? Is your nose even the least bit out of joint? Your secret is safe with me.'

'I'd rather be put in the oven with an apple in my mouth, if you want the honest truth. It's not my thing, but Zannah likes it, so ...' She let her voice fade away.

'You're being kind and supportive. Good for you.'

'Well, only up to a point. I'm enjoying my role as Devil's Advocate. I'm the one who points out other things she might do instead of pouring large quantities of money into this wedding. Does she listen? Three guesses. She might look pretty and wafty but you know how stubborn she is. Not in a nasty way, but like a cat. They never do what you want them to do either, do they? But they're so elegant and lovely that you indulge them while they pursue their own furry agendas. That's what Zannah's like. She does what *she* wants, but in the nicest possible way.'

'She relies on you a lot, you know. So do I. Who else would sit and sort out bits of old pottery with me for hours?'

'I don't do that much any more, though, do I? It's hard to sort pottery long-distance.'

'I know you're with me in spirit,' said Pa. 'That's the main thing. I'd better go and socialize, I suppose. Much rather stay here with you, but needs must.'

Emily was watching him make his way towards Charlotte (another easy conversational option) when someone touched her shoulder.

‘You’re miles away, Em,’ Adrian said, smiling at her, ‘but I’m about to make an announcement I’m sure you won’t want to miss.’

He was holding out a glass of champagne and Emily took it obediently, then went to stand with everyone else on the terrace. She remembered, with a small twinge of pain, the rowdy evening in the local pub when Cal had told a gang of friends that he and Zannah were about to get married. No fuss, no parents around, and an unassuming agate ring bought from the local health-food shop, which did a cool line in semi-precious stones set in silver. Friends, pints of beer and cider, laughter, casual clothes. Zannah was radiantly happy and I was miserable because I knew that Cal would be out of reach for ever. How awful it had been having to act ecstatic because of not wanting to hurt Zannah.

‘Okay, everyone,’ Adrian said. ‘I’ll ask you all to drink a toast to Suzannah, who has made me the happiest man in the whole world by agreeing to marry me.’

Cliché watch, Emily thought. Let’s count ’em. She knew she was being unkind. If you couldn’t use clichés on an occasion like this, when could you? Everyone did it, so why should Adrian be any different?

‘It’s a shame Doc’s not here yet, but I’m sure he’ll be along as soon as he can and, meanwhile, I know everyone’s getting hungrier and hungrier, so I’d just like to say, Zannah and I are going to be married and we’ve all been invited by Mrs Parrish . . . sorry, Charlotte,’ (with a graceful nod and smile at her) ‘to celebrate the occasion. I did try to persuade my lovely bride to accept a diamond or two but she wasn’t having that. She’s more determined than she looks, which you all know, of course, and this is what she chose.’

He took Zannah’s hand in his, and slid a ring on to her finger. Emily had seen it but everyone sighed to indicate how lovely they thought it was, and how well it suited her. It was a large antique ruby in a simple gold setting: square and plain and just right with Zannah’s colouring. She held out her hand and turned it so that the stone caught the sunlight and Isis, Emily noticed, was struck into uncharacteristic silence, her eyes wide at the sight of such splendour.

‘We’ve agreed on a date,’ Adrian went on, ‘and I hope it suits everyone. The first Saturday of the May half-term, next year. In other words, a year from today. It’ll be May the twenty-seventh and Zannah will have

a week away from school to go off with me on a short honeymoon. I'm not saying a word about where that's going to be, but plans are afoot.'

Everyone laughed. They raised their glasses and drank to what Emily was afraid would be known, from this day forward, as *the happy couple*.

'Zannah and Adrian!' everyone said and Emily joined in the toast, smiling with the others. 'Congratulations!'

'Look, Mum,' said Isis. 'I put those bits of parsley round the mousse. Those ones.'

'Lovely, darling,' said Zannah.

'And the strawberries. I helped put the strawberries on top of the lemon tart. That's fiddly work, Charlotte says. You'll see when it's time for pudding.'

'I'm sure they'll look terrific, sweetheart,' said Adrian, leaning across Zannah slightly and smiling, then starting to speak to Zannah before Isis could come back with another remark. She made a face and turned her attention to the food on the plate in front of her, which was much nicer than school food and nicer than Mum's food too, though Isis decided not to say so because she didn't want to hurt Mum's feelings. They'd had green soup first, with cream swirled into it. Charlotte said it was made out of watercress. There were big plates covered with slices of ham and chicken decorated with green leafy bits that weren't parsley, and the salmon mousse, which was what Isis liked best. In the kitchen, waiting to be brought in, were two huge round tarts in enormous glass dishes. One was apple and the other was the lemon one Isis had helped to decorate. The knives and forks were heavy to hold, but they were silver and probably the sort of things you'd have on your table if you were a princess.

Adrian and Mum had their heads very close together. Mum was blushing. She loved Adrian. Isis remembered how upset she'd been when Mum first told her this.

'But you loved Dad once,' she'd pointed out. 'Maybe you could love him again, if you really tried.'

'It doesn't work like that, Isis,' Mum said. She sounded sad. 'You can't help falling in love with someone. Adrian and I love one another. And we love you too, of course.'

‘Adrian doesn’t. He’s not my dad. How can he love me?’

‘He loves you because you’re my daughter and he loves me. After we’re married, we’ll be a family.’

‘What about Dad?’ A sudden terror seized Isis.

‘He’ll always be your dad. He’ll always love you best in the world. That won’t change. And you’ll still see him a lot, just as you do now.’

‘And will Granny Ford still be my granny, even though you and Dad aren’t together?’

‘Of course she will. Dad’ll take you to see her, don’t worry.’

Isis felt a little better after that, and remembered those words whenever Adrian annoyed her, which he did sometimes, even though mostly he was nice to her and brought her small presents practically every time he came to the flat. She’d noticed that when they were alone together, he didn’t speak to her. Not properly. He just made a remark about something he thought she might be interested in, but he never waited to see what she said back and he never went on with the conversation for longer than he could help. He found things to do: reading the paper till Mum was ready to go out with him, or turning on the TV and watching something boring like sport. Isis didn’t know if he did this because he was dying to see what was in the paper, or because he didn’t want to talk to her for any longer than he had to. As soon as Mum came into the room, he changed and became all smiley and friendly. He even told her how pretty she was looking sometimes.

The main good thing about Adrian was that he wanted the wedding to be a real, proper wedding with flowers and lovely dresses and best of all, a bridesmaid. That was what Isis was going to be and she was so excited by the idea that she’d long ago stopped worrying about whether she really liked Adrian or not. When Mum or Grandma asked her how she and Adrian were getting on, Isis always said that everything was fine. Which it mostly was.

All the grown-ups were talking: Em to Grandpa, Grandma to Adrian’s mother, who’d asked to be called Auntie Maureen, which was stupid, because she wasn’t an auntie, and also to Charlotte (who was Grandma’s auntie but liked to be called Charlotte) and Mum to Adrian. Adrian’s dad was late. Isis didn’t know his name but supposed he’d be Uncle Something. She picked up the heavy silver fork and began to eat

the salmon mousse which was delicious and a really mega-cool colour. Perhaps, she thought, I could have a salmon-mousse-pink bridesmaid's dress.

Zannah glanced round the table and recognized what she was feeling as happiness. She closed her eyes briefly, wanting to hold the moment in her mind; wanting to be able to bring it back and remember it over and over again. Darling Isis, Ma and Pa, Charlotte, Em, even Maureen . . . they all seemed absorbed in harmonious and delightful conversations. They'd have to get down to business later on; after coffee perhaps. This lunch was not just to get the two families together, but also to start a discussion about the venue for the wedding. Everyone agreed that this was the most important decision of all, and Zannah was determined that every arrangement should be made in an unhurried and unflustered state, where options could be rationally debated. She'd heard enough stories about families practically coming to blows over wedding plans and she was determined to avoid unpleasantness. Everyone, she was sure, would go out of their way to be helpful, but Em's reaction when she'd told her this had dismayed her.

'What you mean is,' she had said 'you're sure that everyone will roll over and do exactly what you want them to do. You don't see how they could fail to agree with you. I reckon you might get a rude shock.'

'I do not mean that!' Zannah had retorted, but now, thinking it over, she could see there was something in what Em said. She *had* made up her mind about certain things and anyone wanting to change it was going to have their work cut out.

I won't worry about that now, she told herself. The food is perfect, the house is beautiful. And Adrian. Thinking about him made Zannah feel faint. She remembered him beside her in bed last night and felt heat rising to her face. Sometimes, when a darker mood came over her, a tiny voice whispered in her ear saying, *the sex is so good, Zannah. Are you sure you're not being overwhelmed by it? Have you lost your critical faculties in a tide of lust?* The answers, of course, were always the same: no, and no.

Adrian Whittaker was handsome, clever, and he worked for an investment bank in the City at a job he enjoyed. He was, he told her from time to time, 'doing rather well considering I'm only thirty-one.'

Zannah thought he earned a ridiculous amount of money. ‘It’s not fair,’ she’d told Adrian, early in their relationship. ‘Teachers work far harder than bankers, plus we’re dealing with kids, real people, all day long. You do nothing but stare at a computer and move notional sums of money around. You go out for a boozy lunch most days. I should be the one with a silly salary.’

‘When we’re married, darling,’ Adrian answered, ‘what’s mine will be yours. You can leave your school and become a lady of leisure.’

The offer, Zannah was sure, was kindly meant but at once she felt a prickle of resentment. ‘I’ll do no such thing,’ she said. ‘I love my job. I love being a teacher and I’d be a useless lady of leisure.’

‘You could paint. You’re always saying you wish you had time for that.’

That was true, Zannah reflected. She’d married Cal even before she graduated from St Martin’s School of Art, and had then become pregnant with Isis before she’d had a chance to try being an artist. She was pretty sure she didn’t have the talent to make it, but it would be good, she sometimes thought, to have the luxury of trying. Still, as things turned out, she found she *did* have a talent for teaching, and a genuine liking for the children in her care. What she’d said to Adrian was no more than the truth. Her college friends were in advertising, and PR and some even teaching art, just like her. There wasn’t, as far as she knew, a single full-time artist among them. Only the Tracey Emins of the world actually made a living from Art, which, when she thought of it in this context, always had a capital letter.

Now, she looked at Adrian’s dark, soft hair and his beautiful blue eyes and remembered how that conversation had come to an end: with him pulling her into his arms and with her forgetting everything, as she always did when she was near him. I’m useless, she thought. However high-minded and principled I’m being, I become soft and giddy when he touches me. I wish we could go upstairs right now. I wish we were both naked. She took a deep breath and pulled herself together. This is not the time. This is my engagement party. I’m going to have the best wedding anyone’s ever had. I’m happy. I wish this moment could last.

The royal wedding had been thoroughly discussed, and Camilla’s dress at the Blessing pronounced both elegant and flattering.

‘And a gorgeous colour,’ Maureen added, ‘though I wonder whether it wasn’t perhaps a little tactless of the Queen to dress in cream, when she must have known, mustn’t she, what her new daughter-in-law was going to wear to the register office? And,’ she went on, ‘didn’t you just adore those blossoming trees in St. George’s Chapel? If you two got married in the spring, Zannah, you could copy that idea, couldn’t you? I thought it looked wonderful.’

‘We’ve set the date, Mum,’ said Adrian, smiling at his mother. ‘Too late for blossom! You’ll have to have some other bright idea. I’m sure you’ll come up with something.’

Charlotte caught the look that Zannah sent in her fiancé’s direction and smiled to herself. Adrian was tucking in to his food and missed it entirely but she’d have bet good money on her great-niece putting him straight as soon as she could. Zannah wasn’t someone who’d allow Maureen to decide on the floral arrangements for the wedding, wherever it took place. We haven’t even begun to discuss the venue, Charlotte was thinking, when the doorbell rang.

‘That must be my husband,’ Maureen announced. ‘Better late than never!’

She’d had a couple of glasses of wine and was smiling a great deal, Charlotte noticed.

‘I’ll go,’ she said. She pushed back her chair, and put her napkin near the plate that now held no more than a few crumbs of pastry from the really rather good *tarte au citron*. She hurried across the hall to the front door and opened it. Standing on the doorstep was a tall, thin man with wavy, brownish-grey hair flopping over his forehead and a smile that, with the hair and his horn-rimmed glasses, made him look boyish.

‘I’m so sorry. I’m Graham Ashton. I expect you’ve all finished lunch ages ago. My apologies.’

He took the glasses off and put them away and Charlotte saw that his brown eyes were flecked with green.

‘Do come in, Dr Ashton. It’s quite all right, really. We’ve kept you some food, of course. I’m Charlotte Parrish, Suzannah’s great-aunt.’

‘It’s good to meet you.’

Charlotte said, ‘We’re all in here,’ and smiled over her shoulder at him as she led him into the dining-room.

‘Darling, at last,’ said Maureen, wiggling her fingers in her husband’s

direction, sketching out a sort of wave and at the same time calling him to her side. 'Where on earth have you been? This is my husband, everyone, Graham Ashton.'

Bob, whose chair was nearest to the door, rose to his feet and extended a hand.

'Very glad to meet you. Do come and sit down. We've left room, and I'm sure there's some food. You know Zannah, of course, and this is my wife, Jocelyn. Joss.'

Charlotte saw what happened next, and yet, later on, when she told Edie and Val about it, and then lay in bed going over the events of the day, she was at a loss to understand the way one thing led to another. Joss's face: that was what she noticed first. She'd turned quite white, and both her hands were up in front of her mouth. She stood up and muttered something. *I must go. I can't.* Charlotte hadn't quite caught the words.

'Joss?' That was Bob.

'Ma? What's the matter? What's wrong?' Zannah and Em, getting up and moving towards their mother.

Isis sat quite still and stared. Maureen clutched Adrian's sleeve. Graham Ashton remained near the door as though he was never going to move again. He, too, was staring as though he'd seen a ghost. Joss got up from her chair. The French window was open behind her and she ran out on to the terrace and sat down on the top step of the flight leading down to the lawn. Bob moved quickly to follow her, indicating to Zannah and Em that he was in charge; had the situation under control.

Around the table, everyone hovered, uncertain what to do next. Charlotte could see that if she didn't say something, if she didn't restore order, everything she'd wanted this day to be was in danger of disintegrating. She said, with a great deal more confidence than she felt, 'Please sit down, Dr Ashton. And everyone . . . I'm sure we'll be back to normal in a minute. Let me get the coffee. Bob will take care of Joss. Don't worry.'

No one spoke. Maureen whispered to her husband, who had moved stiffly to sit beside her, looking trapped and uncomfortable. Zannah and Em, you could see, were longing to go and find out what was wrong with their mother. Isis said, 'Is Grandma ill?' and Charlotte, glad

of the distraction, had answered, 'I'm not sure, dear. Just sit still and finish your tart.'

Then Joss came into the dining-room again. Bob stood next to her, with one hand on her elbow. She said, 'I'm terribly sorry, everyone. I have to go home. I . . . have a migraine. I must go. Charlotte, thank you so much for everything . . . I . . .'

'Are you sure you don't want to go upstairs and lie down, Joss?' Charlotte said.

'Or I could take you home to the flat,' said Zannah. 'You could rest there.'

'No, really, I can't. I couldn't. Thank you, but I have to leave now. I can't . . . I want to go home. Now, please. At once. I can't tell you how sorry . . . how sad . . .'

Her eyes filled with tears and she seemed to be having some difficulty in breathing. She was still white, but now two red patches had appeared on her cheeks. Bob put an arm around her and led her out of the room. Charlotte followed them to the front door, and watched as they stumbled down the drive. As soon as the car door slammed behind her, Joss collapsed against the seat and threw her arm over her face, as though she wanted to hide, or not to see, or both. Charlotte waited till the car turned out of the gate and then she made her way slowly inside again. Joss had hardly ever had even a mild headache as far as she knew. The migraine was a lie. Why, Charlotte wondered, did she feel she had to run away? Because that was what she'd done. What could possibly have happened to make her flee her own daughter's engagement party? It wasn't a *what*, she realized, but a *who*. Joss had been fine till Graham Ashton appeared. She'd been better than fine. Her distress must have something to do with him. I'll ask her, Charlotte decided, when she's feeling better. I'm sure there's a perfectly rational explanation. She went back to the dining room, ready to make light of the whole thing: ready to corroborate the migraine story Joss had produced. She had never suffered from migraines as a child, but must have had a good reason for lying. Charlotte wondered what that could possibly be.

Joss was aware of Bob being aware of her, even though he was supposed to be concentrating on the road. She hadn't opened her eyes since she got into the car and was determined not to speak or move till they

reached home. I don't care if he's worried, she thought. I'll pretend to be sleeping. She heard his words as though he were speaking from a very long way away, instead of from right beside her, as though her ears were full of a thick mist.

'Jossie, darling' Years and years since he'd called her that. It made her feel queasy. 'Don't worry about anything. You're tired. We'll talk later. You sleep.'

He was so kind, so loving, that she felt as though something inside her was being wrenched apart. Now, now would be such a good time to stop everything: to say: *there's nothing wrong with me. I'm fine. I don't know what happened back there* and end all the speculation that must, she knew, be preoccupying Zannah, Emily and Charlotte, and probably Maureen and Adrian too. *Whatever was the matter with that woman?* she imagined Maureen asking her husband and could visualize her expression as she spoke: a combination of curiosity, distaste and an undercurrent of glee at the sight of someone else making a *faux pas*, putting a social foot spectacularly wrong. Maureen's husband. Gray. *My Gray*. More than any other feeling: more than embarrassment, or shame, or sorrow at wrecking her own daughter's engagement party was the anguish she felt at his betrayal. He'd lied to her.

Almost as soon as they met, the strange rules that were to govern their dealings with one another had been set out. Other people embarking on a relationship of any kind wouldn't have hedged it about with such conditions, Joss knew that. And yet for her it was part of the magic, part of the *separateness* of her feelings for Gray from anything else in her life. She remembered the night she had met him, at Fairford Hall. She'd decided, even before she went on her first course there, that day-to-day Joss would be left behind and Lydia Quentin the poet would expand and grow for once. She'd decided that, apart from the very basic information, married, with children, etc. she wouldn't tell anyone the details of her life. As it turned out, Gray was the first person to take an interest, to ask her about herself.

After dinner on the first night, a group of them had sat round the fire. Outside, November frost had iced the grass. They'd drunk a couple of bottles of wine between them, laughed and exchanged gossip and opinions. Then, one by one, the others had gone to bed. A single lamp shed a yellowish light and filled every corner with black shadows. The

flames had died into a cluster of embers, which glowed faintly pink. She was on the sofa, and Gray was sitting across from her on a low armchair. When they found themselves alone, he came and sat beside her, closing the distance between them, and Joss could still remember the tremor that ran through her as she looked at him. His thin face was half in darkness. She noticed his long eyelashes, how white and slender his hands were, and that the hair falling on to his forehead was glossy and dark and scarcely touched with grey.

‘Tell me something about yourself,’ he said.

‘I don’t do that,’ she’d answered. ‘I’m anonymous, when I’m here. I like being . . . well, not myself in some way. Lydia Quentin isn’t my name.’

‘But I like it. I’m afraid Graham Ashton *is* my name.’

What had made her say what she’d said next? Sitting so close to him on the sofa? The knowledge that he liked her? Admired her? The daring conferred by not being Joss Gratrix but someone freer, braver, more forward in every way? Anyway, she’d said it: ‘I’m going to call you Gray. That suits you much better than Graham.’

It was hard to see in the dim light but Joss thought he blushed when she told him that. He said, ‘Right. No one’s called me that before. And it’s a good word, isn’t it? *Gray*. All sorts of associations and a colour I like as well. It can be yours alone.’ He bent his head, and Joss could see that he, too, was embarrassed. He went on, ‘What I mean is: I won’t let anyone else call me that.’

A silence fell then. He broke it. ‘Are you married?’

‘Yes, I am. I’m fifty years old. I’ve got two daughters. I’m a librarian. I live up North.’

‘Tell me their names. I want to know about you.’

Joss could still remember how vehemently she’d shaken her head. ‘No, I’m sorry, Gray. I’m not going to say anything. I can’t. This . . .’ she gestured to include the whole room, indicating Fairford Hall, everything it stood for, ‘this place is far away from my daily life and I want to keep it separate. I’m so sorry.’

He said, ‘No need to apologize, as long as . . .’

‘As long as what?’

‘As long as the important things about you aren’t part of what you call your daily life.’

‘Oh, they aren’t,’ Joss said. The wine had made her feel light-headed, reckless. ‘They really aren’t. This, the way I am here, that’s the real me, I promise. My thoughts, my dreams, my ambitions, my opinions, the whole of my childhood, my memories, my work . . . everything. I’m happy to . . .’ Her courage failed her then. She had to pause to get her breath back before going on. ‘Happy to share all those,’ she said finally, almost whispering out of embarrassment at what she’d just done. What had possessed her? Why did she think this handsome man might be interested in – had she truly said it? How toe-curlingly *awful!* – her childhood memories?

She began to stand up, confused and wanting suddenly to go, to be in her room and away from his disturbing presence. He took her left hand and held it between both of his. Joss found herself sitting down again, every nerve-end charged with a kind of electricity, wondering what would happen next. The silence was unbearable. She turned to Gray and asked: ‘What about you? Are you married?’

‘No, I’m not,’ he said. ‘I’m going to do what you’re doing and keep my real life out of this as well. I’m fifty-one. I live in the south. I work in a hospital. That’s it. We’re going to be friends, aren’t we? Tell one another everything?’

‘Except the facts of our lives,’ Joss answered.

‘Facts! Who needs them?’ Gray said, and smiled at her so fondly, so lovingly that she felt an odd, liquefying sensation in her stomach. She stood up then, needing to be alone.

‘I don’t,’ she said. Then, sounding much too brisk and schoolmarmish to herself, she added, ‘I’m off to bed. See you tomorrow.’

‘Good night,’ he said, and she felt his eyes on her back as she left the room.

The sound of the car’s engine brought her back to the present. She half opened her eyes, glanced at Bob’s profile without moving her head and decided to keep on pretending to sleep. She couldn’t think of anything except Gray.

He’d lied to her. He’d deceived her from the start, from that first night. All through the time they’d known one another, he’d never said a single word about a wife or a son. He was single. He’d said as much. Perhaps she should have been more sceptical, asked more questions. Perhaps she ought to have wondered how a man as attractive as Gray

had escaped marriage. I didn't want to look into it too closely, she told herself. His being single was the one thing that kept me going. She realized it now: she'd relied on the knowledge that should she ever dare to go to him, or need to run away and find him, he'd be there for her. He would be waiting and wanting nothing but her. How many times had he said so? Words he had written over and over again came back to her. *You're the only one. There's no one else. My only only love. For ever.* God, how stupid she'd been. Now, her heart was breaking. She fancied she could feel it literally splintering into fragments, just there, under her ribcage, but for the moment everything else was obliterated by the force of a rage of such intensity that she was breathless. She could deal with the pain later on, and there'd be plenty of time to do that, because she had no reason to suppose it would ever stop. Her life, all the various strands of it that she'd managed to keep nicely separated, had come to resemble a mass of knotted threads, like the contents of an old tapestry bag that hadn't been touched for years. I wish I could cry, she thought, as she listened to the deafening shriek of her husband, her poor Bob, not speaking to her. Not asking her for an explanation. What was she going to tell him? She couldn't maintain silence for ever.

'You heard what Charlotte said. How she used to have migraines when she was a kid.' Zannah was lying on the sofa, still wearing what she'd worn at lunch.

'Then why,' said Emily, who'd changed into jeans and a sweatshirt the second they'd got home, 'haven't we ever seen her having one? Don't migraines keep happening over and over?'

'Well, what else could it have been? Ma'd rather die than make a fuss. It must be true.'

'It'd help if she answered her mobile. They must be home by now, surely. Even stopping off on the way up there.' Emily stood by the window, looking out at the London roofscape. Zannah knew her sister didn't think much of the view, even though if you leaned out far enough you got a glimpse of Highgate Wood. Emily didn't think things were beautiful unless they were deserts or mountains or countryside. And she'd picked up a love of anything ancient from Pa.

They were very lucky to be living in this flat. It belonged to one of their father's colleagues, Dr Farraday, who'd bought it more than

thirty years ago. He'd arranged to let Zannah rent it after her divorce for a nominal sum while he lived in a whitewashed cottage on a Greek island, enjoying his early retirement. It was much larger than the usual London cubbyhole: an enormous four-bedroomed apartment on two levels in a converted Victorian townhouse. When Emily arrived in London, shortly after Zannah's divorce, she had moved in to keep her sister company, and each was glad the other was there, even though they occasionally disagreed about how the place was run.

'Slut and control freak living together,' Emily used to say. 'Bound to be a problem.'

Zannah knew that Em was far from a slut and she certainly didn't think of herself as a control freak but basically that was the way it was: Em was messy and she was tidy and between them they were just right.

But she doesn't realize, Zannah thought, that I mean it when I say I like what I see out of that window, especially at night. Twilight had washed the sky in mauve and apricot and the edges of the buildings across the road were sharp and black against the pale background. It looked like the paper cutouts she'd helped Year Six to make before half-term: silhouettes of houses and people and animals that she'd spent ages sticking on to a background of orange paper to make a mural for the classroom.

Isis was kneeling beside the coffee table in her pyjamas, drawing on bits of rough paper with her felt tips, and keeping very quiet so as not to draw attention to her presence in case she was told she had to go to bed. She wasn't interested in what was outside the window, but had covered her paper with more and more elaborate dresses of the bridal variety. Let her stay there, Zannah thought. I'm too worried about Ma to think about bedtime. And it's Sunday tomorrow. No school and none the next day either or for a whole week. Lovely, lovely half-term.

She, Emily and Isis had been back in the flat for a couple of hours. Adrian had wanted to stay for supper, but Zannah had managed to persuade him to go out to dinner with his mother and Dr Ashton instead. Adrian always referred to him, rather disparagingly, as *my stepdad*, or sometimes *my mother's husband* or *Doc*.

'I can see you don't want me around,' Adrian had sounded a little petulant. He'd walked with her to her car, as they all left Charlotte's house.

Zannah said, 'It's not that, really. Only we're so preoccupied with Ma, it'll be boring for you.'

'I could come and pick you up later,' he whispered. 'Em's there for Isis, isn't she? I could bring you back to my lair.'

He leaned over and as he whispered these last words, he kissed her, just below her ear. Zannah shivered and pushed him away. 'No, honestly. I'll phone you tomorrow.'

'Hope your mother's all right. Let me know what you hear.'

All she and Emily had talked about since they got home was Joss and her flight from the lunch-table. They'd both tried phoning her mobile at half-hourly intervals, only to be met with her voice telling them to leave a message and she'd get back to them. Bob never used his mobile in the car and he was driving.

Emily said, 'Let's phone home. You try.'

Zannah dialled the number and almost dropped the handset when she heard her father's voice.

'Pa! You're back. We've been so worried! How's Ma? Can she speak?'

'I'll put her on,' said Bob.

Zannah tucked the phone into the crook of her shoulder and said to Emily, 'Go and listen on the extension. Then you can talk as well.'

Emily ran into her sister's bedroom as Zannah said, 'Ma? Is that you? Are you okay?'

'I'm fine, darling. I'm so sorry. I wrecked your party.'

'Nonsense. It's nothing to be sorry about. We'd had lunch. You'd met Maureen at least and you can meet Graham another time. No worries.'

Silence. Emily said, 'Ma, are you still there?'

'Yes, Em. I'm here. I'm going to bed now.'

'Was it really a migraine?'

'What do you mean?' Joss's voice sounded thin and wavery to Zannah, listening to her younger, braver sister questioning their mother's excuse and thinking that she'd never dare to do such a thing.

'Well, I can't remember you having one ever before.'

‘I haven’t had one for ages, that’s true. I used to get them as a child.’

Zannah interrupted. ‘Yes, that’s what Charlotte said.’

‘There you are, then.’ Joss’s voice was beginning to sound stronger. Perhaps there wasn’t anything really wrong. ‘Don’t worry about it, you two. I’ll be in touch in a couple of days. I’ve got to ring Charlotte now and apologize to her, so I’ll say good night, darlings.’

‘G’night, Ma,’ said Zannah.

‘Phone tomorrow,’ said Emily. ‘I want to speak to Pa as well, only I haven’t the energy now.’

‘Right,’ said Joss. ‘Kiss Isis for us.’

‘Will do.’

Emily came out of Zannah’s bedroom and flung herself back on to the sofa. She picked up the TV remote and started to fiddle with it. ‘I don’t believe her,’ she said. ‘D’you think she sounded convincing?’

‘Yes,’ said Zannah. ‘I think she did, on the whole.’

‘You just don’t like trouble.’

‘What trouble? What’re you talking about?’

‘Never mind. We’ll see soon enough who’s right. And I meant to ask you . . . have you told Adrian about Charlotte?’

‘No, not yet.’

‘Why not? You don’t think it’d put him off you?’

‘Don’t be ridiculous. It just hasn’t come up, that’s all.’

Emily made a face that meant: *I don’t believe you but I can’t be arsed to argue*. Zannah continued, ‘We’ve had other stuff to discuss. I’ll tell him. Or Charlotte will. You know she doesn’t hide it particularly.’

‘I don’t see dear Maureen taking something like that calmly, do you? She looks like someone who might care about her son marrying into a family with an ex-con in it.’

‘Charlotte is *not* an ex-con. She was innocent. Everyone knows that.’

‘Nevertheless, six months in jail makes you a con.’

‘Nonsense. And anyway it was years and years ago.’ She paused. ‘I’ll tell Adrian in time, don’t worry. I just want to choose my moment.’

Emily made an explosive sound halfway between a laugh and a snort and pointed the remote at the television. A picture flickered into life on the screen. Isis left her drawing and came to sit next to her. She put

an arm round her niece and squeezed her tight. Zannah stood up and went into the kitchen to see about supper. Charlotte's lunch had been delicious but she felt as though they'd eaten it ages ago. Perhaps, she thought, as she searched the fridge for anything remotely tempting, Em's right and I ought to talk to Adrian about Charlotte soon. She was probably also right about Ma covering something up. Tomorrow, she thought. I don't want to think about all that tonight.

'How about a cup of tea, darling?' Bob was at his most solicitous. Joss, sitting across from him at the kitchen table, wondered when he'd stop being kind and start asking questions. He wasn't a fool. He must know the migraine story was nonsense. She'd never been so glad to come home. Her house had gathered itself comfortingly around her as she moved through the hall into the kitchen. She'd spoken to the girls and reassured them that she was all right and now she was seized by a longing to run upstairs and hide in her study. She wanted to be the person who worked there. She wanted to be the other half of herself – the one whose work had appeared in magazines, who was about to produce her first collection, and who was acquiring a reputation for elegant and precise poems. Lydia Quentin was the poet. Because this was the name Gray used, it was the one she loved. She wanted to stop being Jocelyn Gratrix and hide for ever behind her pseudonym. She wished she could stare into the lighted window of her laptop and write to him. What would she say? How could she express her anger? He wouldn't have had a chance to write to her, but there was the secret phone, which she regarded as her most precious possession.

Last year, on her birthday, Gray had sent her a tiny Pay As You Go mobile. She kept it among the papers in one of the compartments of a plastic concertina file in the bottom drawer of her locked filing cabinet. He had an identical phone, which he used, he told her, for the calls he made to her and for nothing else. She felt weak with wanting to press the only number keyed into its memory and hear his voice. She couldn't. She had to stay in the kitchen and she knew what was coming. Bob had always been someone who *thrashed things out*. That was how he'd put it. Joss sometimes felt that he must have been the kind of child who poked and prodded at things to see how they worked. It wasn't just the physical world he was interested in, either. He sought the truth.

He wanted to know about motivation, reasons for actions, ideas and where they came from: all the things that Joss thought were probably better unexamined if you wanted to remain unhurt in life. Bob had never been able to leave anything alone. He believed in discussion. He believed in sorting stuff out, getting to the bottom of problems, making everything better. He was known among his students as someone who wouldn't be shocked whatever you confessed; someone who had answers to the more unanswerable questions. Good old Bob.

I mustn't be nasty about him, she told herself. He's doing his best. She could hear him putting their suitcase at the bottom of the stairs, and now he was in the doorway, asking whether she wanted tea. 'Yes, that'd be good. Earl Grey, please.'

Joss watched him as he moved around, taking the blue teapot from its place on the kitchen dresser and reaching up to find the packet of teabags in the cupboard. He poured the milk into a pretty jug and put it in front of her and, in spite of herself, she felt touched at this attempt to please her. On an ordinary day, on an unfraught occasion, he'd have put the milk bottle on the table and the teabags straight into the mugs. He was making an effort. Something, some moment, was coming towards her and she wouldn't be able to avoid it for much longer. Maybe it would be better to pre-empt his questions. No, she couldn't. What would she say?

Bob pushed one of the mugs towards her and Joss picked it up. She had no desire whatsoever to drink tea but it would give her something to do with her hands.

'Jossie . . .' How she wished he wouldn't call her that! She'd stopped being *Jossie* long ago. 'You do know I love you, don't you?'

She nodded, unable to answer. This was her cue to say, *Yes and I love you too* and she couldn't. The words wouldn't come. He went on, 'I know that something happened back there at Charlotte's and all the way home I've been trying to work out what it could have been. The migraine was just an excuse.'

He wasn't asking her. He was telling her. Still, she said nothing.

'It began when you saw Graham Ashton. I've gone over and over it in my head all the way home and I've come to the conclusion that you must have met him before. That's the only thing that would make any sense. You know him. Am I right?'

Joss looked down. If she kept on being silent, was it possible he'd get to the truth by himself?

'Where d'you know him from?'

'I met him on a creative writing course. Three years ago.'

'But he's a doctor. How come he's at a creative writing course?'

'He wanted to learn to write poetry. Lots of people do, you know.'

Bob didn't snort, but Joss knew that if this conversation had not been so serious, he would have done. He had a strange relationship with poetry, believing that it had come to a full stop around the end of the nineteenth century. He was suspicious of anything remotely modern and there were times when Joss half agreed with him. Towards her own poems, he maintained a loyal approval, although Joss was sure he rarely understood them, even when he did get round to casting an eye over them. He'd have been deeply shocked if he knew what some were about. He didn't exactly bust a gut begging to see them and she only showed him the more easily explicable ones and then rarely. She read his essays, but that, she knew, was only because Egypt and the ancient world interested her. She would certainly, she often told herself, not have been so dutiful if Bob were a physicist or a chemist. He regarded her writing, Joss knew, as something she did and which he didn't need to worry about. Lately, she hadn't minded this at all because she had had Gray to tell her how much he loved her poems; how much they meant to him. Gray claimed to know almost all of her work by heart. Perhaps he was lying about that too. Would she be able to trust him ever again?

'Okay,' Bob said. 'You met him three years ago. On a course. Have you seen him since?'

A chill had appeared in his voice. Joss said, 'He was at Fairford again two years ago as well. A bit more than two years. September 2002.'

'Bit of a coincidence, wasn't it?'

How could she answer? 'No, that time we arranged it. We booked to be on the same course.'

'So you'd been seeing one another? Between one course and the next?'

Joss shook her head. 'No. No, we never met. We corresponded. By email, mostly. We swapped poems. That's all.'

'I don't believe you, Joss. You're lying. Why on earth wouldn't you

meet, when you had a husband who was away conveniently so much of the time? A fool, you no doubt thought me, not seeing what was under my nose. And I was. Can't deny it.'

'You can believe what you like but it's true. The reason I didn't see him was so as not to hurt *you*. Not to hurt our marriage. I'd have thought you'd give me credit for that. We didn't lay eyes on one another for more than a year. I did it because I loved you, you bloody fool.'

But he's right in a way, she chided herself. I was unfaithful. Not seeing Gray didn't make any difference. She realized that part of the illusion she preserved of her own innocence was the fact that Gray didn't know her name. He's in love with Lydia Quentin, she told herself sometimes. That's not me. Not me in this house with a husband. That's another woman altogether. A woman with feelings Joss doesn't even acknowledge.

Would Bob know what '*correspondence*' meant? She'd emphasized the email, but Gray wrote her proper letters too sometimes, sent to the library, which was the only address she'd given him. The only address she had for him was his hospital. He gave her gifts. Most of the small objects on her desk, her precious things, had come from Gray. She answered him on the most beautiful postcards she could find, always enclosed in an envelope. She used to picture him holding what she said in his hand, touching the card she'd touched, kissing it and then sitting down to answer her. When she read his letters, she could feel how much he loved her. *We didn't need to meet*, she wanted to tell Bob now. *There was so much emotion. So much passion*. That was what had gone from her relationship with her own husband. She'd been at a strange time of her life, at the beginning of 2000. Zannah had left home and going through all the trouble with Cal and Isis, darling Isis, was a toddler. When Zannah had got over the worst effects of her divorce and returned to London, Emily went with her, just about to start work. Suddenly, the house was empty and Joss turned more and more to her poetry.

She'd been writing it for years, but now, with more time and the house so often echoing empty in the evenings and at weekends, she began to submit her poems to magazines and to enter competitions, which, to her surprise, she sometimes won. Then, she went to Fairford for the first time, and her life changed completely. She realized almost as soon as she met Gray that her love for Bob, though it was still there,

had turned into something different from what she was feeling now. She'd forgotten what that kind of mad, exhilarated, lifted-in-the-air feeling was like. Looking at Bob now, she thought that perhaps their love had been buried: covered up by layer upon layer of habit which was probably normal after so many years of marriage.

With Gray, the padding of domestic life was missing, and passion was all she had. Every morning, she would hurry through getting the breakfast ready, making sure that Bob remembered to take his briefcase, his lecture notes, his car keys and then, when he'd gone, she'd rush upstairs to her study, turn on the computer and read the email she knew had been waiting there since the early hours. Gray always wrote very late at night. She always printed out the email and kept all the messages at the back of one of the drawers of her filing-cabinet. She read them so often that she could recite whole paragraphs by heart. As she worked at the library, as she walked through the rest of her life, she found herself unable to concentrate on anything but Gray, and having to make a huge effort to keep the real world – the world she lived in, the library where she worked, the shops she went to – everything else but him somewhere in a mental landscape that had become nothing but his face, his words, his love for her and hers for him. And yet she told herself that she was being good. She wasn't being unfaithful, not really, and she congratulated herself on behaving well and not jumping into bed with someone she'd only just met.

'What about the second time?' Bob brought her back to the present. 'Have you seen him since then?'

'No, of course not.'

'Why not? Most people who're unfaithful to their spouses manage to get away for a dirty weekend or even a quick shag in a hotel on the odd occasion, don't they? Bit of illicit nookie in a motorway motel.'

Joss stared into her teacup. 'I'm not most people.'

'But you don't deny you're unfaithful, I notice.' Bob pushed his fingers through his hair. 'Did you sleep with him?'

She almost told another lie. Then the words came out before she had time to consider what she was saying. 'Yes. Yes I did.'

Bob stood up and walked over to the window. Joss knew him well enough to realize that he was hurt. His back, his shoulders, slumped in a kind of defeat. He looked suddenly much older. Should she say

something? What could she say? If she kept quiet, would he ask her something she didn't want to answer? She took a deep breath and spoke as gently as she could. Damage limitation. 'It happened *once*, Bob. Only once, I promise. It was one night, more than two years ago. It didn't mean anything.'

Oh God forgive me for such a lie. It had meant everything. It means everything. It's governed every single thought in my head since it happened. She glanced at her husband to see whether he believed her. He was still staring out of the window. A silence stretched between them and Joss wondered what he'd say next. He couldn't really object. There was the time, very soon after they were married when he'd confessed, tearfully and full of anguish, to a one-night stand while he'd been away at a conference in Istanbul. She'd almost, but not quite, forgotten the pain she'd felt at the time. She'd forgiven him because he'd begged for forgiveness and she was pregnant with Zannah and had a terror of her life, whose elements she'd constructed with such devotion, coming to pieces around her. She was someone who needed to keep things as they were. In the past, she'd regarded this as a positive quality, but now she considered it a character defect; a sort of cowardice.

'If that's the case,' Bob said now, coming to sit beside her and taking her hand, 'why were you so shocked to see him? How come you didn't know his son was engaged to Zannah?'

How to explain their rules? Not knowing such basic things about one another would seem crazy if she were to try to explain it. She said, 'Adrian's surname is different. We just . . . we never discussed our home lives.'

'Would have made you feel guilty, right? Okay, but if sleeping with him didn't mean anything when it happened, then surely it has to mean *less* than nothing after all this time, right?'

'It was the shock, that's all. I never thought I'd see him again and then there he is, and his son's going to marry Zannah. Adrian must be a stepson, I suppose. He's going to be . . . he's going to be family. I just . . . I couldn't take it in.'

'We don't have to see them much, I shouldn't have thought. I don't ever want to see him again, to tell you the truth. Not after what you've told me. They're down there in Guildford and we're up here. We'll just keep out of the way.'

‘But what about Zannah’s wedding? We’ll have to see them for that.’

‘Fuck the wedding!’ Bob stood up, red in the face with the fury he’d managed to suppress till that moment. ‘I don’t know what you want from me, Joss. You seem to think that I’m meant to get over this in a civilized manner and move swiftly on to thinking about Zannah. Well, I’m sorry. I refuse to worry about that now. Of course we’ll go through the motions. I’m not going to mess up Zannah’s day, but let’s just say it won’t be a barrel of laughs. Nothing strange about that. They say that many weddings end in a fight. Punch-up between the families.’

‘Stop it! This isn’t a time to be frivolous.’

‘I’m not being frivolous.’

Joss said, ‘I’m exhausted, Bob. I think I’m going up to bed, if you don’t mind. We can unpack tomorrow.’

‘Joss, sit down. You can’t go to bed now . . . I’m still . . .’ Bob ran his hands over his face, as though he were trying to wipe away the stress of the day. ‘What you’ve said . . . it’s knocked me out. I’ve always thought we had . . . I thought we were . . . well, I’ve never said as much, I suppose, but I’d always taken it for granted that we were . . . are . . . happy. Aren’t we happy, Joss? Haven’t things been okay?’

Joss thought for a long time before she answered him. Okay . . . yes, things had been that. How long had it been since they’d spoken of anything more serious than family matters? How long since Bob had been impulsive in any way? Taken her out on a whim, brought her flowers? That wasn’t quite fair. Their relationship hadn’t been a flowery one, even in the beginning, but in those days, he’d regale her for hours about this or that interesting aspect of his work, and she still read the articles he wrote even though she didn’t understand the fine detail. But they didn’t laugh as much as they used to. She’d assumed it was simply that they had been together so long that they each knew one another’s opinions backwards. Briefly, she remembered a meal at Fairford with Gray, and how they were so happy that anything seemed funny. She’d described a well-known poet as being *like a cross between a geography teacher and a vampire* and Gray had snatched up his knife and fork and made a rudimentary cross with his arms out in front of him at chest-height as he intoned, in a good imitation of every geography teacher Joss had met: *The main tributaries of the Nile, Dulcie . . . what are they? Pay*

attention, gel! It had been completely silly but it still made her smile to think of him with his eyes crossed, leaning sideways in his chair as he spoke. Bob was staring at her, waiting for her answer.

‘Of course we’re happy. I’ve explained what happened. I’m sorry if you’re hurt. Truly.’

‘Then you must promise me something.’

‘What?’

‘Promise me you won’t see this Ashton except on family occasions ever again. Can you do that?’

‘Yes. I don’t want to see him. That’s the last thing I want, honestly.’

‘And we’ll be okay?’

‘Yes, Bob,’ Joss said and allowed herself to be held. She let him kiss the top of her head then hurried out of the room and up the stairs to her study. She knew he wouldn’t follow her at once. His own study was in the basement and he’d check his computer before he came to bed and quite possibly become absorbed in reading something or other. He thought the crisis was over. He thought everything was at least on the way to being *shipshape and tickety-boo*, as he used to say to the girls when they were small. He didn’t like it when things were troublesome for too long and always moved straight on after a row or a crisis. She was safe for a while.

She closed the door and went to the filing-cabinet. She unlocked it, found the little phone and her hands trembled as she touched the keys. Three messages. She listened to each one over and over again, drinking in the voice, feeling warmth return to her heart.

‘Lydia, my darling ... I know what you’re thinking. I can explain everything. Call me. Whatever time it is. Call me.’

‘Are you there? Ring me, Lydia. How could I possibly know you were Zannah’s mother? Please, please phone me.’

The last message had come in only a few minutes ago.

‘Are you there? Please call me now. I’m alone. I must speak to you.’

Joss sent a text message: *Can’t speak now. Will phone you in the morning. Time?*

Almost instantly, the answer came back: *11.30. I love you.*

And I love you too, Joss thought, but what’s going to happen now? I’ve promised Bob I won’t see you. You lied to me. You’ve been lying to me since I met you. She hid the phone again and sat at her desk,

looking at the small tokens of his love all around her and seeing none of them. She was remembering a conversation from their first and last, their only night together.

‘You with someone else,’ Gray was staring at the ceiling. ‘I don’t think I could live with that. What’s going to happen to us?’ They’d made love for the second time and Joss felt as though her body was being pressed down against the sheets by something huge and overwhelming: a weight of love so consuming that she didn’t know how to breathe. Before they’d kissed, before they’d gone this far, she’d told him this was all there would be, ever. They couldn’t do this again. This was never going to happen again.

‘I can’t leave my husband,’ she’d said. ‘I can’t do it to the girls. To my granddaughter. This is not something I can do again. I shouldn’t be doing it now, but I can’t help it. D’you understand, Gray?’

‘I’m not asking you to leave your husband. I just want you to stay tonight. To be here now.’

‘I could go now. I can still leave.’

‘No, I want you, Lydia. What do *you* want?’

‘You. Oh Gray, I want you.’

At that moment, she would have stepped on hot coals to touch him. She couldn’t stop herself. She leaned towards him and they clung to one another, touching, breathing, panting, and Joss could feel herself plunging into sensations that she’d never been even close to imagining before.

Those were the conditions, she told herself. Everything that happened that night was something I wanted and I’ve been remembering it and reliving it and inhabiting it ever since. I was the one who laid down the terms. I was the one who said we must never meet again, and not because I didn’t love him. He knows how much. I’ve told him over and over again: in words, in poems, in thoughts, in everything but my presence. He’s had the best part of me. It’s only my body that’s here with Bob. I’ve been thinking of him, dreaming of him, wanting him every day and every night. He’s never asked me to leave Bob. Joss felt blind fury all over again. I thought he was being unselfish, not making me give up my life, when all the time it was him, his life, his career,

that he was worried about. We're as bad as one another: happy to keep our love in a sort of secret drawer. But he knew my circumstances and I didn't know his. Would it have made any difference to anything? It might. Perhaps if I'd known he was married I'd have felt guilty. Was he trying to spare me that? That's the kind interpretation.

Tomorrow, she'd go out for a long walk and phone him and let him know it was over over over. Really and truly. No phone calls. No emails. Nothing any more ever again. It was the only way she'd be able to deal with this new situation. There was a telephone kiosk about a mile from the house from which she made the calls she knew would take a long time. This one would be hard. Gray would try to persuade her . . . try to change her mind. She picked up the tiny silver phone and listened to his messages again, before deleting them carefully. By the time she left the study, there were tears in her eyes. She wiped them away and took a deep breath, preparing herself to face Bob, who was making his way up the stairs to their bedroom.