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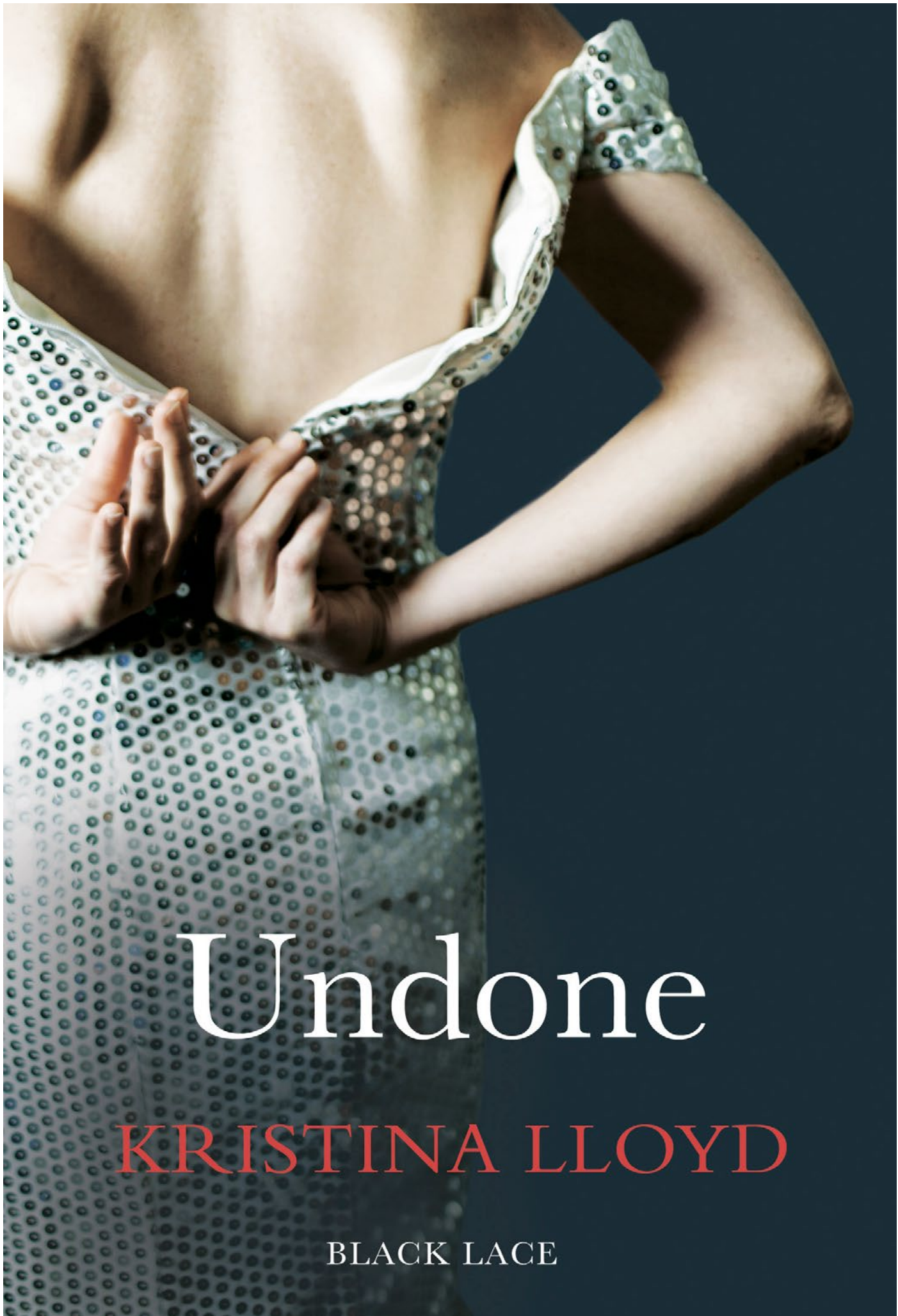
Written by Kristina Lloyd

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Undone

KRISTINA LLOYD

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For Ewan, for being generous with the measures.

Part 1

Monday 30th June

I can't recall my first thought that morning: that I was in a strange bedroom; that an unfamiliar man was naked beside me; or that a woman was screaming somewhere in the distance.

The scream filtered into a hung-over dream so I couldn't be sure if it was real or imagined.

'You hear that?' I asked him. My mouth was bone dry.

He said nothing, his slow, sleepy breath rattling in his throat. 'Hey.' I nudged him and he rolled on his side, the muscles in his back slipping and shifting as if his body were liquefying, man becoming river. He grunted as he turned, dragging the sheet so it twisted like a toga, flashing that distinctive tattoo.

His breath grew quiet. I tried to piece him together. Broad, bronzed shoulders. Scruffy dark hair. I looked at his back, as big and silent as a continent, his spine a groove swooping down to the furred cleft of his buttocks. What was his name? Hell, what had we done together? A solid

thrum between my thighs responded before cognitive memory could answer.

I flopped away from him, squinting. The room was cream and gold, its walls slanted, the curtains glowing with light as pale as honeydew melons. I licked my teeth. Outside birds trilled and chattered, and I couldn't hear even a murmur of cars. I must have imagined the scream, the noise an echo escaping from a dream. Dravendene Hall was too tranquil for drama. Even a bad dream seemed out of place.

Pleasure bubbled as snatches of the night before returned to me. Forty-one years old and my first three-some. Go, Lana Greenwood, go! Work that bucket list! I smiled and stretched, feeling fucked, messy, glorious and alive. I tried to ignore the dull sense of disquiet threatening to upset my happiness. A forgotten nightmare, that was all. Beneath the bed sheet, I rubbed my foot against his, just making contact and saying, 'Hi there, relative stranger.' His foot edged away, avoiding mine. Ah, I thought. One of those. Shuns affection. Well, I could handle that for a one-night stand.

That's when I realised a third person should have been in bed with us: Misha, the Russian guy. Oh boy, the things we'd done together. The things *they* had done. Images rushed in of bodies slamming, of sweat-damp hair, limbs entangling and mouths gaping. I'd watched them as if in a fog, my perception misted by thwarted desire. What was he called, this guy lying next to me? He had a freshly bust-up lip when I'd first met him. Damn. Embarrassing if I couldn't recall his name. Should I rummage through his wallet?

Sol, that was it. Sol Something-or-other. Dangerously attractive and charmingly cocky. An ex-New Yorker with a

dirty smile and an introductory handshake that had turned my knees to mush. It wasn't one of those concerted, hefty handshakes taught in business schools to suggest sincerity. It was a grip from a man who liked to tease but didn't know his own strength. There's not a lot I wouldn't do to bed someone like that. As I later demonstrated.

And Misha was a customer from The Blue Bar. Ack, I should not have fucked a customer and crossed that professional boundary. Jeez, but the guy was hung. How awkward was *that* going to be when he next stopped in for a drink? All I'd be able to think about was his ginormous schlong. Already I was itching to tell Katrina. I could picture her laughing as I relayed the highlights. 'I swear, Kat, his cock was so huge he nearly passed out when he got hard! You could practically see the colour draining from his face! Couldn't even form a sentence. No blood supply to his brain!'

I glanced around the room in search of water. I'd packed coconut water, good for rehydrating. Sensible me. The smooth beige carpet was littered with bondage gear, condoms, beer bottles and tissues. Well, maybe not so sensible. But, oh, what a night.

Misha's absence didn't concern me until the scream rang out again.

'We need help!' yelled a male voice from far away. A door banged.

My heart speeded up, nausea clutching. Don't ask why, but a gut instinct told me this was related to Misha. I stood and slipped on my dressing gown, a 1950s wrap in pistachio green silk and sprigged with dusky roses. Does it seem shallow of me to mention details of my clothing when a tragedy was unfolding? It's an impulse I can't resist. If I'm

to tell my story to these pages, I need to visualise myself and how I acted, otherwise I risk vanishing into the words, disappearing in the slippage between my outsides and insides, between the sound of language and the meaning.

I parted the curtains, fingertips trembling on gold brocade. Far below, beyond the tiny, diamond-paned window, the calm of striped green lawns and orderly flowerbeds rolled towards surrounding woodland. I picture the scene now and I'm a character in an Elizabeth Bowen novel, albeit without the youthful innocence.

We were high in the West Tower, having opted to use my room because I'd brought Clejuso handcuffs and a bottle of Belvedere Unfiltered to the party. The American had been impressed by the cuffs; the Russian, by the vodka. Personally, I'd been impressed by their eagerness for a post-Cold War ménage but then neither guy had turned out to be as straight as I'd imagined.

The silk belt to my dressing gown lay on the cluttered floor. I grabbed it, picking hurriedly at knots as I remembered how Sol had used the silk to tie my legs to the chair. I threaded the smooth length through the loops of my gown, fastening a limp bow as I swished from the room, leaving Sol asleep. I descended the steep spiral staircase to the second floor of the west wing to find doors opening along the corridor. A pyjama-clad woman with bird's-nest hair and grumpy, kohl-smudged eyes glared at me, as if I were to blame for the disturbance. 'What the fuck's going on?' she growled.

'Search me.' I strode quickly, holding my gown to my groin for decency's sake, hung a left, and then took the stairs down to the next level. I found myself on the balcony floor overlooking the oak-panelled entrance hall

with its chequerboard floor, tall Chinese urns and trophy stag heads. Since my arrival the day before, I'd grown better at navigating the higgledy-piggledy gothic monstrosity that was Dravendene Hall.

Below, a guy stood in the centre of the tiled hallway, arms wide, appealing up to the balcony.

'Swimming pool, anyone?' he called. 'Best way to the swimming pool? Didn't even know there was one.'

I trotted down the staircase like a poor man's Scarlett O'Hara, thinking the owners were crazy to allow random party-goers free rein in such a spectacularly grand manor house. Their insurance must be sky high. Half-dressed people flitted and flowed, some alert to the sense of urgency, others bleary-eyed and reluctant. A lanky guy in droopy blue boxers descended one step at a time while rolling a cigarette. A woman with tears streaking her face ran in the opposite direction, elbowing people aside as she stumbled up the stairs. 'He's dead,' she was sobbing. 'He's dead.'

People exchanged glances, some stopping in their tracks, others springing forwards. 'Who's dead?' 'What's happening?' 'Has anyone called an ambulance?' 'Oh, fuck, keep calm.'

Two guys were having an animated discussion in the entrance hall, one pointing ahead, the other to the right. In the chaos, someone decided it was easiest to reach the pool via the gardens so I followed while others ran deeper into the house. Outside, the grass underfoot was cool and moist, and the morning sunlight hurt my eyes. I'm too pale and blonde for summer, even a British summer.

The pool was at the rear of the pointy, redbrick hall, housed in glass like a Victorian conservatory. Gravel pinched my feet as we hurried along a path flanked with

regimented box hedge. Ahead, a huddle of people gathered on the poolside, some crouched low. A palm tree behind the conservatory glass obscured my view and it wasn't until we were at the sliding patio doors that I saw the splayed bare feet and hairy shins of a figure on the marble floor. Two guys knelt over him, one pumping his chest.

A burly guy with a phone to his ear gazed down at the men, his crimson face filmy with sweat. 'Anything?' he asked.

To enter the poolhouse was to slam into a wall of tropical humidity. An acrid scent of chlorine tainted the heat, and silver reflections shimmered on the rectangle of blue water. Alabaster nymphs gazed impassively from slender plinths, their nipples round enough to pluck. The potted palms were lush and tranquil, and a faint mechanised hum hovered around us. My back was slick with sweat, the dressing gown sticking to my skin. I was panting, the air so dense I felt as if I were trying to inhale fabric. My legs quivered, my head booming, my skull like a vice. This sudden shortage of breath, damn it. I half-feared I might collapse. Too much late-night sex and alcohol.

'No, nothing, mate. I think we should give up. There's no pulse.'

A man kneeling by the body sat back on his heels.

A woman's sob erupted as if from a trapped, primitive place.

People swung around to look at me.

The sound hung, a blood-curdling cry muffled and held by glasshouse echoes.

My hand was clamped to my mouth, my eyes fixed on his grey, bloated, froth-smearred face.

'Lana.' The voice was gentle. A woman moved towards

me. She seemed to glide on the periphery of my vision; then she clasped me in her arms, so strong and solid. 'Hush, babes.' I let her hold me, hiding in the comfort of her hair, wanting to unsee what I'd just seen. 'I think he must be a friend of Rose's,' she said. 'Do you know him?'

Far away, coming from another world, the anguished wail of sirens slid over the countryside.

I nodded into the woman's neck. Her hair smelled cold, like starlight and outer space. For a long time, I couldn't form the words. Then, croakily, 'Misha Morozov. A customer at The Blue Bar.'

'I'm sorry,' she said, rubbing my back. 'Sweetheart, I'm so sorry. But I don't think we can do anything else for him.'

I'm too raw. My head's jangling with sex and death. I wish I could turn back the clock.

I can't write any more today. I need to try and sleep.

Tuesday 1st July

I have decided this journal will have a therapeutic function. It will help me regain the sense of control I've lost in these last few days. If I don't get back on track, I may fall apart. I need to record events in detail in case I'm called in for questioning. I am liable to forget things when my mind is overburdened.

My writing will not be comparable to unfettered, adolescent self-expression. I will pay attention to my prose style. I will narrate both the surface and the depths. I will adhere to chronology as far as I can.

Last night, I woke from a fever dream of jackboots thumping down a corridor, black, glinting, vicious. They were coming to get me as I lay in my own bed, alone in the

dark. When I opened my eyes, I was desperately confused because I *was* lying in my own bed, alone in the dark. Fact and fantasy swam in a whirl. I strained to listen above the pounding of my heart. I was wet with sweat. At the juncture of my thighs I was wet too because I knew that when they found me my oppressors would be merciless.

All these men are Sol, and Sol is all these men.

I fear authority and I crave it.

I can't allow the truth to rise up like this. This diary will help me stay sane.

I've been trying to identify the point where I began losing it. The death disturbed me, of course, but that wasn't the start. I think it was later, in the woods, when Sol climaxed with a cry that haunts me even now.

When I was younger, I was a sucker for the romantic notion of not knowing where I ended and where the object of my affection began. Now, I want to know exactly where I end, thanks very much, and I'll erect barriers should anyone attempt to trespass. Sol threatens my boundaries but I can't yet pinpoint how, nor can I fathom why I've become so permeable and desperate.

The moment I met him seems a lifetime ago but, in real terms, it was a matter of days. For the first time this year, the sky was the rich, saturated blue of high summer. I'd driven to the party on my own, windows down, great music, winding country lanes, scarlet poppies blazing in the hedgerows. The breeze whipped at my hair, and I couldn't stop grinning. I felt on the brink of newness, as if this was destined to be a weekend of change.

I'd been in two minds about attending because at the last minute we were short-staffed at the bar. Perhaps Misha would be alive now if I'd decided not to go, but

madness beckons if I start thinking along those lines. When I'd paid my deposit, the weekend had looked perfect: the fortieth birthday party of a former work colleague from my days of working in a design practice in central London. A chance to breathe some country air, relax and hang out in the fabulously grand manor house they'd hired. There'd be al fresco dining, tennis, woodland walks, croquet, dancing and drinking. I'd meet some old faces and, more importantly, some new ones, which I still needed to do since the break-up of my marriage.

Technically speaking, it was a joint party: Zoe's fortieth and the thirty-fourth of a friend of hers, Rose, whom I'd never met. What else? My first holiday since opening the bar, if you can call a couple of days off a holiday. And our decree absolute had come through so a celebration seemed in order.

Damn. Already I'm guilt-tripping myself, trying to justify my presence at Dravendene Hall. Spot the workaholic.

On arrival, I'd unpacked my case in my adorable little turret room, and then joined a couple of ex-colleagues, Trish and Abbi, in the sprawling garden at the rear of the house. The trees were hung with inert balloons of colour, Chinese lanterns waiting to be enlivened by darkness. Two conical canvas tipis, connected at the centre and trimmed with bunting, offered shade from the sun but few people seemed to want it. There was no bar or waiting service because this wasn't a wedding or a high-society do. We were a bunch of people sharing a space for a couple of days and hoping to keep the costs relatively manageable.

After a short while, I went to fetch another bottle of chilled rosé from the utility room, as directed by Abbi.

'Fuck, I need to pace myself,' Trish had said from her deckchair, her cigarette hand rocking as she brought it to her mouth. You could tell it was already too late but nobody minded.

Guests were arriving in dribs and drabs while those already present were scattered around the grounds, doing their own thing prior to the evening celebrations. The weekend was a child-free zone and the atmosphere buzzed with a readiness to party. I passed a small raised lawn, edged by a stone balustrade and spiky, architectural planting. Silvery plumes of pampas grass fluttered against the blue sky. The breeze could barely be felt. Three men were playing giant-sized Jenga, hands on knees as they studied the precarious tower. A nearby field had been set aside for camping, and Zoe and Mike had driven off in search of a supermarket. There weren't as many familiar faces as I'd been anticipating. I experienced a brief tug of yearning for the old, comfortable days when I'd belonged to a couple, and never had to feel alone at social occasions. I pushed the thought aside, knowing I was better off now than then.

The stone utility room was cool and shadowy, an Aladdin's cave of alcohol. Sunlight filtered in through a small, grimy window, casting a meagre sheen on kegs, crates and exotic, multi-coloured bottles. I blinked as my eyes readjusted, goosebumps stippling my bare arms.

In the veiled light, a shirtless man stood before a tall American fridge, head bowed. He rested one hand on the matte silver door, while the other angled a pint glass at the ice dispenser. He wore canvas knee-lengths, slung low on his hips, and his dark, sweat-soaked hair was hooked behind his ears. He was powerfully muscular but not unnaturally chiselled, and a small roll of softness

edged his waist. Ice cubes clattered into the glass. The bars of his ribs pumped below wet spikes of hair in the pit of his raised arm. His torso glistened, a soft curve of light resting on one shoulder. Beads of sweat trickled down his chest. A couple of droplets fell, making dark spots on the flagstones.

I shivered. Laughter and the clink of glasses from outside grew faint, as if I were sinking under water, the world fading out of reach. He stood straight, glancing at me. For an instant, the light around him was magical, a diaphanous haze pricked with glittering motes. His chest hair was plastered to his body, and his lower lip was smeared with blood, a glossy violet bulge distorting its shape.

‘You see any cloths around here?’ His accent was American, a sexy, sonorous drawl, and a slight slur marred his words. He stepped into shadow and slid open a flaky, wooden door beneath an old Belfast sink. He bobbed down to peer in, holding the sink above for balance. Down his left side, from underarm to hip, was a tattoo unlike any I’d seen before. To be accurate, there were several tattoos but they formed a picture, or a panel, depicting a stemmed dandelion head gone to seed. The images were as delicately rendered as etchings under tissue paper in a botanical encyclopaedia. Single, fluffy orbs drifted from the spiky round flower, as if a breeze were blowing tattoos across his body. I half wanted to reach out and catch one so I could make a wish.

The man stood, glancing around the dimness. I grabbed a folded tea towel on the counter-top.

‘Here,’ I said. I caught a waft of fresh sweat as I handed him the cloth. The heat from his body pressed on my chilly skin. An image hovered in my mind of him shoving

me up against the rugged stone wall and destroying my nice, neat tea dress with his hard, ruthless hands.

It's fair to say, I hadn't seen much action for a while. Bitch-on-heat had become my default setting. I'd been hoping the weekend might offer some respite from my dry spell. If he were available, a guy like this would suit me fine for a fling.

'You OK?' I asked. 'What happened?'

'Got whacked in the face with a tennis racquet.' He spread out the chequered cloth on the wooden drainer by the sink and tipped ice into the centre. He cupped the tumbling cubes with one hand, muscles shifting in his shoulders as he moved, his breath puffing fast. 'My backhand, his forehand.' He twisted the cloth into a bundle and gingerly pressed the ice pack to his lip.

'Ouch,' I said. 'Can I do anything? Does it need stitches?'

He tugged open the fridge door with his left hand and snatched a large bottle of mineral water. 'Take the top off that, would you?' he said, proffering the plastic bottle.

I did as asked. 'Are your teeth OK?'

He nodded. 'He just caught me. I was lucky.' He transferred the ice pack to his left hand, taking the opened bottle with his right. 'Cheers.' He tipped back his head, his mouth open wide, and poured in a stream of water. His Adam's apple bobbed in his stubble-shadowed neck as he glugged, liquid bubbling from his mouth and spilling down his front. He stopped drinking, laughed and shook his head like a wet dog, showering me in droplets of sweat and water. 'Whoa!' he said, eyes popping.

'You want to sit down?' I said. 'I could try and find some antiseptic. You should probably—'

'You kidding me?' he said. 'It's break point!' And he bounded out of the room, ice pack in one hand, bottle in the other. He streaked past the window in a blur. I leaned forwards, hands on the drainer, watching him through the dirty, cobwebbed glass. He upended the bottle, emptying its contents over his head. Water coursed down the wedge of his back, pinging off his body as if a halo of diamonds were shattering around him.

Outside, a distant roar erupted amid a bang and rattle of wood. The Jenga tower had collapsed.

I watched him disappear from view. I was in control then, I'm sure of it. Lecherous? Interested? Oh, without a doubt. But I don't fall that easily. I'm like the Jenga tower. I need to be studied and carefully dismantled by a man with skill and patience; by a man smart enough to recognise my own smartness and complexity. This sexy guy with the broken lip, he was sporty and he looked like fun. He'd never be up to the task.

You'd think, wouldn't you, that people can't help but reveal themselves in bed? That they're made vulnerable by their nakedness and admission of desire. That when you tacitly agree to trust each other by sharing the space of sex, there's a truth in what you do. The barriers are down.

But it's not always the case. Sol gave away so little that night. He was an artful performer keeping his distance. Only later, after Misha died, when he fucked me on the forest floor, did I see Sol for who he was. Or, at least, I'd thought so at the time. Because, ironically, I'm starting to suspect I saw his true colours when he was lying. Fucking and lying. Fucking with such abandon I thought we might disintegrate; thought we might crumble into ancient earth and tremulous ferns, pulling each other

down into the disappearance of old bones and deep-diving tree roots.

I'm afraid Sol is too much like me. He longs for the edge but a fear this would destroy him curtails his compulsion to know that dark delirium. I don't know how close to ruin he allows himself to get but I know he is not merely fun. He's more than the sunny, sociable, game-playing Sol he makes himself out to be; so much more. And I'm glad, and I'm scared. He has a hiddenness I want to find, but I'm terrified I might regret it. I expect the feeling's mutual.

So he watches me. I watch him. And I do not know who will win.

Wednesday 2nd July

Time's ticking on. It's been three days now, and I still haven't recorded the events of day one at Dravendene Hall. I'm being too cautious with my words, too reflective in my thoughts. I've been swimming too much as well, upping my daily quota of lengths by two then four. Last night, after closing the bar, I fell into an exhausted sleep, assisted by a large brandy and soda. I wish I didn't dream.

It's nearly 2 a.m. now. I'm sitting in bed with my journal propped on my knees, ink-blue handwriting making veins on the page as if I'm bringing something to life. Monsters and magic. Dr Frankenstein, I presume. I've tilted the slats of the bedroom blinds so stripes of silver-white light from the lantern in the courtyard pattern the room. The noirish illumination is negligible but at this brandy-steeped hour, writing by the glow of my reading lamp, the reminder of the ordinary outside world brings a comforting stability.

I take comfort too from being analogue. I feel more truthful when writing longhand, forming shapes on the page unique to me, the words flowing from my fingers rather than appearing on a screen in the tap-tap uniformity of Calibri or Times. And a brandy and soda, for shame! I ought to be wearing a Vanity Fair bed jacket in peach chiffon and lace while sipping champagne from lead crystal. But I'm distilling my story, and the drink matches my mood: a sparkle of alertness with an undernote of hot, sweet darkness.

To get to the point: Sol called in at The Blue Bar this afternoon, and I am all undone.

After Misha's death, I wasn't sure I'd ever see Sol again. Wasn't sure I wanted to, either. But when he sauntered into the bar today, scruffy, dirty and hot, I wanted him so badly it hurt. He won't be good for me, I'm sure of it, yet I'm tormented by thoughts of him and of the things he might do to me. Obsession starts this way. I fear we are doomed. There is no going back.

'Let's be in touch soon,' he'd said when we were finally allowed to leave Dravendene Hall. That afternoon, black tarpaulin sheets had shrouded the glasshouse of the swimming pool. A barrier of tape stating POLICE LINE DO NOT CROSS encircled the building. Detectives and uniformed officers busied themselves indoors and out, asking questions, taking notes. The detectives looked so clean-living; pleasant, patient people in good shoes and crisp shirts, not the scotch-sozzled cynics of legend.

I hadn't contacted Sol since then. Back in Saltbourne, back at work, the weekend's events became a nightmarish limbo to which I was loath to return. So many questions remained unanswered: How did Misha die? Does he have

family? Who did he know at the party? What happens next? Are we under suspicion?

I had an urge to keep talking about it, to straighten out the chaos and make a coherent narrative in an attempt to get a handle on it all. But I knew that was dangerous, hence this journal. Damn, I'm going off track again.

To go back to the party. After meeting Sol in the utility room at Dravendene, I later saw him several times that day, always talking to someone, his aviator shades giving him silver-black, shellac eyes. He felt dangerous to look at because if he were mutually curious, I'd be none the wiser.

I was interested in talking to him but didn't get the chance until the evening. I'd napped, bathed and changed, and was feeling nicely buzzed. I was wearing a 1960s mod dress, cut just above the knees, in navy blue cotton with a white Peter Pan collar and large, white buttons down the front. On my feet were strappy, Lola Ramona wedges in red, white and black. As I said before, when I picture myself from the outside, the nightmare feels more manageable. The events become discrete, strung neatly and evenly across a timeline of the weekend, rather than swirling in a maelstrom of upset. If I order them by clothing, we have: Day time: tea dress. Evening: mini-dress. Night time: handcuffs.

I spotted him alone on the fringes of the party, beyond the hubbub of the garden, where glowing Chinese lanterns now hung from trees like strange pastel moons. He was leaning against an enormous horse chestnut tree, smoking, and gazing out across undulating countryside to a mauve-blue sky shot through with streaks of pink. Swifts swooped high above, their screams trailing. Long shadows slanted across the landscape.

Emboldened by a couple of glasses of sangria, I approached, heels a touch wonky on the grass. ‘Hey, how’s the lip?’ I called.

He turned, giving me a quick up–down assessment, and smiled tentatively. ‘Yeah, good thanks.’ He took a last drag on his cigarette, tapped it against the trunk, and then dropped the butt to the ground, swivelling his heel where the end fell among tree roots.

His bottom lip, although less swollen and raw, was still marked by a ruby-purple lump, sagging and splitting like an overripe fruit. The wound had a lascivious quality, as if the man were melting from an excess of sensuality; as if the private hollow of his mouth were bursting out in a shameless display of wet, pouting obscenity. I wanted to suck him there, to carefully place my lips on the tenderness and taste the point where he was too much for himself. His broken flesh and blood would tingle on my tongue in a concoction tasting of velvet and copper, and I’d drink him down.

‘Did you win your match?’ I asked.

He tucked a thumb in his belt loop, and crooked his knee against the wide tree trunk, all cool and laid-back like a beat-up cowboy. Outdoors, he seemed older than he had done earlier, high on endorphins in the utility room. His hair was thick, as dark as bitter chocolate, and his brown eyes were set in warm, crinkled rays. He smiled as if he found me amusing, his mouth lopsided from the injury. It was a sexy smile, arrogant, jeering and playfully calculating; a smile which suggested nothing would stop him from taking his pleasures as he preferred them.

‘Certainly did,’ he replied, as if it were never in doubt because he always wins. I cast my eyes up and down his

body, checking him out because two can play at that game. He wore jeans, a leather belt and a checked shirt unbuttoned over a tee.

‘You look as if you’re auditioning for the role of Marlboro Man,’ I said.

He laughed; then dabbed his lip. ‘Yeah? So do I get the gig?’ He checked his fingertips.

‘Well, I’d hire you.’ I smiled and stepped closer, offering him my hand. ‘Lana. Lana Greenwood.’

He wiped his fingertips on his jeans and shook my hand, his big, firm grip threatening to crush my fingers. ‘Sol Miller. Apologies. My lip bleeds when I smile.’

He held the greeting for a fraction too long, preventing me from withdrawing at the natural end-point of the handshake. I felt a tiny jolt in my shoulder, and my blood raced in nervous excitement. His palm was warm against mine and the bones in my hand felt as fragile as a bird’s. We locked eyes as the handshake extended into uncomfortable territory. A smile lifted on his lips, presumably in response to the sight of my discomposure. That smile made me weak in the knees.

Asshat, I thought, amused. He released my hand and I wondered if his blood were on my skin. ‘Nice to meet you, Sol.’

He smiled more broadly, watching me all the while from under heavy brows, his eyes as dark as old oak casks in a shadowy bodega. I held his gaze, determined to meet his flirtatious intimidation with a refusal to succumb.

I nailed him as the toppy type straight away. He had that playful superiority, that bad-boy swagger, and my Domdar’s pretty reliable these days. Admittedly, his Attitude (upper case) was a touch off-putting. My preference is for

men with quiet confidence; the ones who can be straightforwardly decent, kind, and aren't scared to convey their desire for you. Men who brandish their sexuality like a weapon aren't to be trusted in the realm of BDSM. I ran into to a couple after I split from Jonathan. Their arrogance excited me, but I've learned not to mess with guys who have something to prove. They're not dangerous, just disappointing. They peak too soon.

I figured that even if Sol weren't au fait with reef knots and tawses, he'd have an instinct for raw, rough sex. That would suit me perfectly for a one-off at a party. Again, I was convinced I was in control at that point. Our exchange by the tree was scarcely more than a brief flirtation, an opening gambit that might have come to nothing.

Except it did come to something, because later that night, I found myself sprawled on a bed of cushions in the double tipi, disco lights swirling as I chatted to my new acquaintances, Sol and Misha. The wooden beams of the tipis were wrapped with fairy lights, so strings of stars appeared to be scrawled across the dark, pointed skies of the canvas. People danced, clustered around the makeshift bar, chatted at tables or, like us, lazed around on cushions and rugs.

Earlier in the evening I'd recognised Misha as a customer from The Blue Bar. We'd expressed small-world surprise at bumping into each other at a place like this. He looked different. I was used to seeing him in his steel-rimmed glasses, reserved and unsmiling, a smartly dressed, self-contained man who rarely engaged in small talk. He had sandy hair, cropped around the sides but topped with short, soft curls, and there was an unfortunate echo of the nineties about him.

He wasn't wearing his glasses for the party, and I found the transparent vanity of that touching. Turned out he knew Rose, Zoe's co-host at the party. I was privately intrigued because I was starting to realise Rose had a number of openly kinky friends. They weren't strutting around in latex and leather but the clues were there if you knew what to look for: a few unusual piercings, interesting tattoos, a touch of geekishness, a polyamorous triple, a leather choker that could double for a collar.

Was Misha part of that scene? He always seemed kind of buttoned-up when he visited the bar, a creature of habit sitting there with his tablet and Long Island Iced Tea. He rarely stayed for more than an hour, only occasionally being joined by a companion. But then I wouldn't be the first to observe that some of the most ostensibly straight-laced people turn out to be the wildest perverts.

I knew him as Mikhail Morozov, the name on his credit card. But here at the party he was Misha, the name his friends call him, he'd said, except the two friends he was supposed to be meeting had failed to arrive. Like me, he didn't know many other people.

Talking to him and Sol on the cushions put me in an awkward position. Misha, with his smart blue jeans and crisp lilac shirt, made me feel I ought to behave nicely. I was the proprietor of The Blue Bar. I had professional responsibilities.

Sol, on the other hand, made me want to misbehave in ways I hardly dared contemplate. I kept imagining him naked in bed, energetic, hard and controlling. He'd be the sort who'd grab your hair or pin your arms to the pillow and whisper in your ear that you were his dirty little slut. And afterwards he'd come on your face without even

asking, and he wouldn't feel guilty because it never occurred to him his dominance was gendered and potentially problematic. And I figured I could cope with that blindness for one night if it meant I was then spared from having to assuage his liberal guilt for having treated me like a whore.

I was hoping we might slip away from Misha, or Misha might sense a spark between us and retreat. The problem was, Sol appeared far too interested in Misha. Had I misread his sexuality?

'Man, I'm sure I know you from somewhere,' Sol had said. But Sol's face was new to Misha, and neither man could suggest how Sol might know him.

I was considering leaving the two guys to their blossoming bromance, or whatever it was, when a young couple canoodling nearby started to ramp up their action. The DJ stuck on some sleazy, trippy beats, the sort of music that makes you feel as if a nightclub's melting into your veins and you could fuck until you died of bliss, intoxicated by a sly, dangerous eroticism. Misha was talking in that clipped way of his, and we all conspired in pretending not to notice the amorous couple. But our feigned unawareness soon became too embarrassing to sustain. The couple began grinding their hips together, squirming and caressing in an apparent attempt to have fully clothed sex in front of dozens of party-goers. Shifting light cast colours over their writhing bodies.

Sol raised his brows in wry acknowledgement. 'Get a room already, people,' he murmured.

Misha laughed, and so did I.

'Hey, we've all been there.' I tried to sound casual but the music was getting to me, making my hips syrupy, my

body loose. I watched sidelong as the woman rubbed her partner's crotch, his hand snaking beneath her halter-neck top. Jeez, she was bra-less. That was seriously hot. I imagined being in her place, feeling fingers land precisely where you wanted them, no clothes to disrupt their passage. And I imagined those grubby feelings of shame and excitement arising from being lewd in public, half wanting your audience to leer and urge you on; half wanting them to vanish and leave you be.

I'm reminded now that most of my fantasies centre on being both lusted after, and being scorned for 'sluttish' behaviour, even as I offer resistance. It's fucked-up, I know. But then I was raised in a fucked-up culture.

My fucked-up hunger swelled as the couple groaned into each other's mouths, smearing each other with drunken kisses. I wanted to look away but couldn't, nor, apparently, could my two companions. What a thrillingly sexy car crash this was. A languid pulse thickened low in my body as the woman flopped onto her back, spine arching, tits thrusting, an arm flung out in a display of self-abandonment.

I was desperately turned on, but not because I wanted her. No, I wanted to *be* her. I wanted to relinquish my pride, dignity and control, and have a man explore my body while other men watched. Worse than that, I wanted drunk, randy men encouraging my lover to keep at it; wanted a rowdy crowd on the verge of joining in and filling me with more cock than I could possibly take. A perpetual fantasy of mine, no more than that. Not a secret desire I longed to have fulfilled.

'It's cute,' said Misha. 'Very sweet.'

Sweet enough, I noticed, for Misha to have a raging hard-on. And, oh boy, that got my interest because I was

somewhat shocked to notice that my polite, squarely dressed Russian friend was evidently hung like a horse. He lay propped on his elbow, making no attempt to conceal his arousal. In his jeans, his cock was a visible bar, its erect angle fitting neatly into the creases of his crotch, as if having a boner were such a frequent occurrence the denim had faded and shaped itself to fit.

I couldn't let the moment pass. I didn't know where I was going with it but I nodded at Misha's groin and said, 'Well, someone's enjoying the spectacle.'

He laughed crisply. 'Actually, the most arousing part was watching you watching them.'

Guh. Busted. My face burned.

'What do you like about it?' Misha shifted on his hip. 'Watching? Or the thought of being watched?' His features hardened, and his grey eyes settled on me. His upper lip lifted in a tiny smirk, and his gaze dropped to my breasts before returning to my face. I thought I caught a flicker of nastiness there. I felt as if he'd just put me in a different category of woman, and so I put him in a different category of men, the one marked 'potential misogynist; approach with caution'.

'Being watched.' My voice wavered, far less confident than intended.

Misha smiled as if he'd just won a private bet.

'Well,' said Sol, in a how-interesting tone. He tipped the beer bottle to his lips; then, hand around the base, rested the bottle on the kilim rug, looking from Misha to me and back.

Nothing happened. No one spoke or moved. Colours span around us, sliding over frozen faces. We were Manet's painting, *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe*. I'd made myself

metaphorically naked for them, but no one seemed willing to pick up the baton. I guess none of us knew what to do. If you don't recognise the situation, how can you know the rules? I had no plan.

The prospect of a threesome was knocking around in my brain, sure, but it was a hazy, distant fantasy that had been lurking there for years. Me and two guys; two strong, muscular bodies working in harmony with my own dips and curves; me getting double of what I liked.

I used to discuss trying a *ménage* with Jonathan who declared he was willing to give it a whirl as a special treat for me. As I approached thirty-four, we went as far as emailing a guy on Craigslist who then sent a photo of himself wearing a white towelling bathrobe on a holiday balcony, an azure sea in the background. Jonathan got cold feet at that point, and offered to buy me a bottle of *l'Heure Bleue* for my birthday instead. I agreed, figuring perfume lasts longer than sex.

My only plan with Sol and Misha, if thinking two seconds ahead can constitute a plan, was to throw something out there and see what happened. Primarily, I wanted Sol – in me, on me, over me. But if he was going to play it cool, then the well-endowed Russian was worth investigating. I just had to hope I didn't embarrass him and lose a regular customer. But then you wouldn't call him a big spender, so no great loss.

Drawing a deep breath of courage, I said, 'So, what's a girl got to do to get laid around here?'

Sol looked at me steadily while drinking from the bottle. Misha smirked, glancing from me to Sol. Eyes still fixed on me, Sol set down his beer, smiling. A dusky purple light crossed his face, casting his eyes in deep shadow.

'You just gotta say "please",' he drawled.

I laughed. Damn, he was a bastard, the kind of guy I'd have gone nuts for in my younger days.

'Please,' I said briskly, before adding, on a surge of reckless daring, 'both of you.'

And it really was that simple. After a terrifying, uncertain pause when I feared I was about to be slut-shamed to high heaven, Sol addressed Misha and said, 'Well, I'm game.'

Misha shrugged. 'Sure, why not?'

They seemed so casual and at ease that I had to wonder if I hadn't mistakenly invited them to a hand of bridge, rather than a three-way. I looked from one man to the other. 'Heck,' I said, 'I wasn't expecting that.'

'Me neither but it's all good.' Sol pushed himself up from his relaxed sprawl, laced his fingers together and stretched out his arms as if warming up.

'Isn't it great to be modern?' I said, wondering how we move forwards from here. 'Um, I should maybe mention that ...' I leaned forwards, lowering my voice in an exaggerated play of secrecy, and beckoned them closer. They hunkered towards me, Sol grinning, Misha frowning. 'I like things on the kinky side,' I said. 'Nothing heavy, and if it's not your thing, that's fine. I just thought ...'

'I know no other way,' said Misha, sitting straight.

'Always happy to dabble,' said Sol.

'I'm a bisexual switch,' said Misha, his stern, matter-of-fact tone suggesting he was accustomed to presenting his sexuality to others. 'However, I prefer to bottom and I have strong masochistic tendencies, assuming the dynamic is correct.'

Sol smiled broadly, a touch nervous I thought.

‘Heteroflexible,’ he said, using a word I’d never heard spoken before. ‘Been, ah, exploring my dom side recently. It’s where I seem to be at.’

‘Submissive,’ I said. ‘Bondage and mild pain only. A few humiliation fantasies. Spanking. That kind of stuff. Nothing traumatic.’

Sol nodded thoughtfully as if absorbing the information and then pointed to his bust lip. ‘Listen, don’t take it personally, guys, but do you mind if we don’t kiss?’

I laughed. ‘Prostitute’s prerogative.’

He feigned offence. ‘You calling me a whore?’

In low voices, we discussed a few more practicalities, our negotiation of boundaries doubling as a vehicle for flirtation and verbal foreplay. Our agreed safeword was Cinderella. I wondered how close we’d get to using it. By the time we stood, my skin was flushed with anticipation, the wetness between my thighs spiked by a fierce, insistent pulse.

We swayed a companionable path to the manor house, sniggering and whispering like naughty schoolkids. The dark lawn was illuminated by Chinese lanterns, ropes of LED lights, and gaseous yellow flames dancing in fire bowls. The tipis rose against the black sky like two witches’ hats, poles crossing at their peaks, the canvas glowing in soft amber tones. The night felt magical. Everything seemed so easy, as if we were floating through life. I walked between the two men, my arms hooked in theirs, tottering on the grass in my impractically high sandals. I told them how, since separating from Jonathan, I’d built a small vintage and military-issue handcuff collection, primarily from picking up items online.

‘Tell me,’ said Sol. ‘Do you have *any* flaws?’

I laughed. 'You got a couple of spare days?'

'If you own gear like that,' said Sol, 'I can overlook anything. Hell, you don't even need to know how to clean and cook.'

'And your flaws are?' I asked. 'Apart from unabashed chauvinism?'

'You got a couple of spare *lives*?' he replied. 'No, let's not go there. So you've brought some of these fancy cuffs with you this weekend?'

'Certainly have. German Clejusos. Among the heaviest and thickest in the world.'

Sol whistled through his teeth. 'Well I never,' he murmured. 'And you say your divorce has just come through?'

We laughed as we crossed a small, lamp-lit car park, feet crunching on gravel, to enter a rear door in the west wing.

'Give me metal over leather any day of the week,' said Sol. 'I can't wait to see these beauties.'

'They're incredible,' I said. 'They weigh over three pounds.'

My interest in the cuffs is related to sex, of course, but the objects fascinate in their own right. You'd think there might not be much variation in the design of an object comprising two linked hoops but there is. A lot of factors need to be taken into account so they suit both the jailer and the jailed, the cop and the robber. The perfect handcuffs should restrain without injuring but be easy and efficient to use. They're wonderfully contradictory, often elegantly simple and suggestive of grim, thrilling stories. They capture my imagination and I frequently find it hard to resist a purchase. I'd brought along the Clejuso 15s because I adore the weight of them pulling on my wrists.

I'd also figured their USP – heaviest cuffs ever manufactured – might be a good talking point were I to meet someone who shared my kinky proclivities. I appeared to have struck gold with Sol.

Indoors, we dithered. 'Which way?' I asked.

'Man, this place is huge,' said Sol.

'Follow me,' said Misha, flicking a wall switch. Fake candles in sconces lit our path down an oak-panelled corridor and up a gloomy flight of stairs. We emerged on a floor with glinting crystal chandeliers, laughing when we realised the door we'd closed behind us was camouflaged in wainscoting and crimson flock to match the walls.

'I discovered this route earlier,' said Misha, checking his watch. 'Excuse me.'

For a brief, hopeful moment, I thought he was about to chicken out but instead he said, 'I need to return to my room and then I will join you in your room in due course.'

'OK, cool,' I replied. 'West tower, turret room. The highest one.'

He took the opposite direction to us, leaving Sol and I to walk together down a grand, red-carpeted corridor hung with gilt-framed paintings depicting chinless wonders from centuries past. I was pleased to be alone with Sol.

'Fuck, marry or kill?' he said, indicating a portrait of a chap in a tricorn hat.

'He's already dead,' I laughed.

'That's marriage for you,' he replied. 'How about him? Fuck, suck or push over a cliff?'

The mood between us was light and friendly. I thought how wonderful it was that we could all be so open and straightforward about wanting to have sex together. The

lack of shyness, shame or game-playing meant we'd carved out a space for pleasure. We are three people, I mused, who know how to enjoy ourselves.

We took the spiral staircase to my turret room, me first, Sol behind with three empty wine glasses in one hand.

'I hope you don't mind,' began Sol.

I yelped as he swiped my arse with a swift, upward strike.

'Just checking out the goods,' he continued.

He landed a couple more smacks on my flesh, all perfect, sharp blows, despite coming from his left hand. Every hit made me squeal.

Inside the room, I handed him the Clejusos, leaving the door to the room half open for Misha. Sol bounced each thick, steel cuff in his cupped palms, the connecting length of chain drooping between them.

'Phewee,' he said. 'A real work of art.'

The cuffs were beautifully curved, the thickest part shaped like a comma, the hinged section a relatively narrow, elegant band. In the hazy lamplight, the nickel-plating gleamed, the curvature catching a tiny, convex reflection of the bed that looked too small for three people.

'Slip of a creature like you,' said Sol. 'Hell, these are going to pop your arms from your sockets, no?'

'I'm stronger than I look,' I replied.

'Well, I'll take that as my warning.'

I stepped closer and placed a hand on his hip. 'So can I trust you with the key?' I asked.

He turned to me, his hip swaying towards mine, and said, 'I think we should wait for your friend, don't you?'

The implication that I was being disrespectful to Misha

embarrassed me, although I noted Sol's body language belied his words.

'Yeah, sure.' I stepped back, taking the cuffs from him. 'But he's not a friend. I don't know him well at all.'

'Soon will do, I guess,' replied Sol.

I crossed the room and set the cuffs down on the dressing table, half wishing it was just me and Sol for the night.

'Damn, I wish I could place him,' he murmured. 'His face is so familiar.'

I took the key from my purse and lay it alongside the cuffs, ready for use. Then I poured three Belvedere vodkas into the wine glasses.

'So, do you go to fetish nights?' asked Sol. He strode towards the low, diamond-paned window, bending to squint at the darkness outside. 'Swingers' parties, that kind of thing?'

Without asking, he opened one of the windows, fixing the metal arm to a notch. I'd kept the windows closed during the day, to prevent insects getting in the room. Flying things bother me. They're like loss of control in material form. Laughter and music floated in from the gardens on the far side of the house. The cooler, fresher air was welcome.

'Swinging? Not really my cup of tea,' I said, handing him his drink. 'Maybe I'll try a club one day. Generally speaking, I prefer more intimate scenarios.' I raised my glass. 'You know, like this one.'

We clinked rims, grinning.

'So you do this a lot?' he asked.

'I wouldn't say that, no,' I replied. 'Not as often as I'd like. I don't meet the right kind of people. It's not that easy.'