

Welcome to the Real World

Carole Matthews

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Extract

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Chapter One

‘I need more money.’ Tilting the glass in my hand, I pull yet another pint of beer.

‘Don’t we all, man.’ My dear friend Carl looks at me through the fog of his cigarette smoke, eyes barely slits. He’s propping up the bar opposite me and I smile across at him, mainly because the hubbub of noise in the pub makes it difficult to be heard and I want to save my voice.

Carl is a man out of his time – I’m sure he would have been much happier as a 1970s rock god. His battered denim jacket, shoulder-length hair and tendency to say, ‘Yeah, man,’ don’t sit comfortably with current ideas of personal styling. But Carl and I go back a long way. A long, long way.

‘No. I *really* need money,’ I say. ‘This time it’s bad.’

‘It always is,’ Carl remarks.

‘Joe’s swimming in a sea of unpaid bills. I have to do something.’ Joe is my older brother, but somehow I’ve become responsible for him. I don’t mind at all. He needs all the help he can get.

‘You work two jobs already, Fern.’

‘Tell me something I don’t know.’ The till does its digital equivalent of *ker-ching* again and, grinning insanely at the next punter, I reach for another glass.

‘How much more can you do?’

Win the lottery? Put on my shortest skirt, strike a pose outside King’s Cross station and hope for a bit of business? Get a third job that requires minimum effort, yet doles out maximum pay? I’ll fill you in quickly on what I like to call my ‘situation’.

Bro’ Joe lives on benefits and is constantly robbing Peter to pay Paul. Now Peter has been robbed so much he has nothing left. My brother isn’t, however, the media version of a person living on the dole – workshy, feckless or lazy. Joe can’t work because he has a sick son,

Nathan. My beloved nephew is a five-year-old blond-haired heart-breaker and has severe asthma – and when I say severe, I mean *severe*. He needs constant attention. Constant attention that his mother, the beautiful and brittle Carolyn, wasn't prepared to give him; she left my lovely brother and their only child when Nathan was barely a year old. And, call me a bitter old bat, but I don't think that could be considered as giving it a fair crack of the whip.

If anyone thinks it's easy to manage on measly government hand-outs, then think again. If anyone thinks it's easy being the single parent of a sickly child, then ditto. Joe had a promising career in a bank – okay, he wasn't setting the world alight. My brother was never destined to appear on *Newsnight* in a pinstripe suit giving his opinion on the world money market, but he was getting great appraisals, regular promotions, small pay rises – and a pension to die for. He gave it all up the moment Carolyn departed, to stay at home and care for Nathan. And, for that alone, he deserves all the support I can give him.

'You're on in a minute,' Ken the Landlord shouts over at me, giving a pointed glance at the clock.

As well as pulling pints behind the beer-stained bar of the King's Head public house, I am also 'the turn'. I do two half-hour sets every evening Monday through Saturday – Sunday is quiz night – singing middle-of-the-road pop songs to a terminally disinterested crowd. I finish serving the round of drinks and then nod my head towards Carl. 'Ready?'

Carl is my pianist. Again, I think he'd be happier as lead guitarist – which he also plays brilliantly – for Deep Purple or someone of that ilk, leaping around the stage, doing ten-minute solos, head-banging to his heart's content. But Carl has bills to pay too. He jumps down off his bar-stool and we head for the small, raised platform that is our stage. A once-spangly curtain is attached by a row of drawing pins to the wall behind us. Despite Carl's rebel, drop-out appearance, he is the most reliable person I've ever met. He's very low-key rock 'n' roll, really. Okay, he smokes the occasional joint and puts 'Jedi Knight' as his religion on Electoral Roll forms, but I don't think he's ever been moved to bite the head off a live chicken on stage or any such thing. And he's never smashed up a guitar as a display of artistic expression, because he's far too aware of how much they cost. He is also patience personified, spending every evening on that bar-stool waiting for our two brief periods of respite when we can do what we truly love doing.

‘We could do a couple of extra hours busking in the Tube,’ my friend suggests as we make our way to the stage. ‘That usually pulls in a few quid.’

I grab Carl’s hand and squeeze it.

He looks at me in surprise. ‘What’s that for?’

‘I love you,’ I say.

‘Cupboard love,’ he replies. ‘Would you still love me if I wasn’t the world’s best ivory tinkler?’

‘Yes.’

This is a confession now. Carl and I used to be an ‘item’. We never did the horizontal tango together – something for which I’m truly grateful. But we used to spend hours necking and I used to let him feel my top parts – occasionally even under my jumper. In my defence, however, this was when I was fifteen and we were at school together. And it was a much more innocent era.

Now that I’m thirty-two I have no boyfriend and no time for one. Not even Carl, who I think still holds a torch for me. Well, not just a torch, a bloody great flashlight, a beacon, whatever type of light it is they have on lighthouses. I feel sorry that I don’t love Carl in the way that he loves me, but I got him out of my system years ago and, basically, he’s still sporting the same jacket and hairdo that he wore then. Need I say more?

We take our places on the stage, Carl behind his keyboard, me at the temperamental microphone. I wish I had more presence, more *va-va-voom*, but I always feel so insignificant on stage – partly because I’m only fractionally taller than the microphone stand. There’s a slight hiatus in the hullabaloo of conversation and a smattering of disjointed clapping. Without preamble – no ‘one, two, one, two’ as I test the mike, no shout of ‘Good evening, London!’ – we launch into our performance. As this is a predominantly Irish pub, U2 hits feature heavily in our repertoire, as do those of The Corrs and Sinéad O’Connor. We usually also knock out a few 1960s favourites and some classic ballads at the end to keep the maudlin drunks happy.

I spill my heart and soul, sliding flawlessly from one song to another, and at the end I take my bow and, in return, receive some muted applause. Is this what I do it for? For a few meagre crumbs of appreciation and an equally few extra quid in my pay packet at the end of the week?

When I’m back at the bar and serving pints again, one of the customers

leans towards me and says with beery breath, 'You've got a great voice, darlin'. It's bloody wasted here.'

'Thanks.'

'You want to get on that *Fame Game* programme. You'd beat the pants off most of them.'

This isn't the first time I've been told that. Usually by men with beery breath and no knowledge whatsoever of the music industry.

'That's a great idea!' I don't point out to him that to take part in any of these talent-spotting fiascos, you need to be under the age of twenty-two and possess a belly flatter than your average pancake – neither of which applies to me.

My admirer lurches away clutching his drink.

I give Carl another pint of lager. 'That went well,' he says. 'I thought "With or Without You" was really heavy, man.'

'Yes.'

'I'll come round tomorrow and we can go through the running order. Maybe try out a few new songs.'

'Sure.' We analyse all our performances as if we've just come off the stage at Wembley Arena and, sometimes, it makes my heart break.

Once I was asked for my autograph at the end of the night by a young guy, but I'm not sure if he was taking the piss. All his friends laughed when he showed them the beer mat with my name scrawled on it in marker pen. It still made me walk on air for a week afterwards. I stifle a sigh. Don't think I don't have ambitions beyond being a badly paid barmaid-cum-pub singer. I too would like to be Joss Stone, Jamelia and Janet Jackson rolled into one. But, tell me, how on earth do I get my big break when all my days and nights are spent just trying to earn a crust?

Chapter Two

When you roll into bed at about one o'clock every morning, the next day comes around very quickly, I find. I force my eyes to open. Eventually the blurry mist settles and I think about getting up. Slipping my feet into my cow-patterned slippers, I try to pretend that my flat is not the skankiest place imaginable. Even Shrek would turn up his nose at living here – and that guy's at home in a swamp. My rising damp hit the ceiling years ago and, as is hugely beneficial for someone partly reliant on their voice for their earnings, I have developed a slight asthmatic cough due to the number of spores that live here with me. But it's cheap. I bet you couldn't guess that.

Shuffling into the bathroom, I stand in the bath while the warmish trickle of water from what I laughingly call my shower does its darnedest to revive me. My poor throat! Every morning, I feel as if I've swallowed a dozen razor blades. I put it down to the effects of passive smoking in the pub and spend the day drinking gallons of water to try to counteract it. Roll on the day that the blanket ban on smoking comes in. I rub the scrag end of a bar of soap over my weary body.

My sense of smell is the next thing to wake up. The flat is situated above an Indian restaurant – The Spice Emporium. Their advertising says 'as featured on BBC television', but what it fails to mention is that the only time it hit the TV screens was when it made the local news programme because of a salmonella outbreak, when thirty of its diners went down with food poisoning. The owner, Ali, obviously hopes that his customers have very short memories as well as strong stomachs. My main problem with The Spice Emporium is that the chef there has the frying pan on the go at about six in the morning. Everything I do during my waking hours at home is accompanied by the smell of cooking spices. My tummy constantly growls from the minute I'm awake as it's convinced that onion bhajees are *the* thing to have for breakfast – whereas I am not.

I stay here because Ali, also my landlord, is lovely. The flat may not

be a shrine to domestic elegance or even pass any basic health and safety regulations, but Ali takes a relaxed attitude when it comes to paying my rent. If I'm really strapped, he'll let me work a few shifts washing up in the restaurant until I've paid off my debt. That's the sort of landlord I need, not some ogre with a slobbering Rottweiler.

I'm still getting dressed when the doorbell rings and I know that it can only be Carl. He will have brought me something wonderful to eat because he knows that I never have enough money to buy food. I often wonder if I'd simply cease to exist if Carl ever abandoned me. My friend has a degree in Social Anthropology – whatever that is – from Oxford, no less. I'm not sure how useful that is for swindling the Department of Health and Social Security, but it means that Carl is able to live on benefits and work most of the week cash-in-hand, so he's relatively flush – particularly when compared to me. I pull on my jeans and rush to the door while dragging my jumper over my head.

'Peace,' he says as I open the door, and does the accompanying sign.

'You are *so* seventies,' I tell him as I eye his bag of goodies.

'Bagels,' he says. 'From the new deli down the road. I thought we'd road test it.'

'Groovy.'

'Now who's being seventies?'

'I was being ironic,' I say as I relieve him of his delicious-smelling package.

'How's Blonde Ambition this morning?'

'I'm fine – if you discount the fact that I'm tired, broke and my voice has been destroyed by passive inhalation of eight thousand Benson & Hedges. And you?'

Carl smiles. 'Groovy.'

In the kitchen, complete with its one cupboard and death-trap gas boiler, I dole a couple of spoonfuls of cheap instant coffee into our cups while the kettle takes an aeon to boil. Carl starts to spread the bagels with the cream cheese that he also brought from the deli. It pains me to see how much care and attention he puts into preparing my breakfast. Life would be so much easier if I could love Carl as he loves me.

'Don't forget to do a bit for Squeaky.'

Carl rolls his eyes heavenward.

'Apart from you,' I say, 'he's the only friend I have in the world.'

'He's a mouse who's eaten through your skirting board and the wire

of your toaster. I'm not sure I'm happy to share the same category as him.'

'He's my pet.' I don't share everyone else's view that Squeaky is a dirty, feral mouse who should be exterminated as soon as possible. He's fun and he's feisty and he doesn't cost much to feed. What I would really like is a cat – yes, I'm at that stage in my life – but I don't have the wherewithal to keep one. Despite being an excellent companion, it would simply be another drain on my meagre resources. Anyway, I console myself with the fact that it might not help my asthmatic cough or Nathan's.

Carl passes me a tiny bit of bagel spread with cheese which I lovingly place beside the mouse bolt-hole in my kitchen. Squeaky used to dash out, steal everything I put down for him and rush away with it into his lair. Now when he appears, he just sits in the kitchen and nibbles away happily. If he could chat, I'm sure he'd join in with the conversation, such as it is. The downside of this is that I have to clean up more mouse poo. The upside is that Squeaky has stopped chewing through my box of breakfast cereal. Or maybe he doesn't like this brand. It was horribly cheap and perhaps even mice have their limits.

Carl sits on the work surface, which makes me frown; nothing to do with hygiene, I just don't think it will hold his weight. 'I had an idea that might help your financial situation,' my friend tells me as he tucks into his breakfast.

'Rob a bank?'

'More legal,' he says. 'My sister's working at a temp agency at the moment. She could get you some regular work during the day.'

'Cool.' I'm up for anything. I've even been cutting ads out of the paper with a view to doing phone-sex. I know. I'm desperate. But I can pant and talk dirty if required.

'Can you type?'

'No.'

'Okay. We won't tell her that.' Carl rubs his chin thoughtfully. 'What other skills do you have?'

'None.'

'We'll miss that bit out too.' He pulls out his mobile phone. 'Shall I call her?'

Before I have a chance to answer, Carl says, 'Hey, Julia. Yo. Bro.' And then they talk to each other for a bit in this gibberish sibling language

that only they understand. 'I'm trying to help out Fern,' he continues when he reverts to English. 'Do you have any great jobs on your books that pay shitloads of cash?'

I can hear a faint muttering from the other end.

Carl turns to me. 'Do you know anything about opera?'

I shake my head. 'No.'

'Yes,' Carl says into his phone. 'She's a big, big fan.'

'I am not!'

'Shut up,' he tells me, hand protecting his sister's sensibilities again. 'Do you want to work or not?'

'I want to work.'

'We'll rent some DVDs of operas,' he says.

'Neither of us has a DVD player,' I remind him.

'Pen. Pen,' Carl orders. I duly pass him one and he scribbles down an address. 'I owe you,' he says to his sister. 'Ciao, baby.' Then he hangs up and turns to me. 'You have an interview this afternoon.'

'Wow.'

'Personal assistant to some opera bod.'

I take the piece of paper from him. Looks like I'm going to be headed for an apartment in Docklands later today. 'I'll never get it,' I say. 'I can't do anything.'

'You're a very resourceful woman.'

'I am.'

'And you need the money.'

'I do.'

'So go for it.'

'I will.'

'Now,' Carl instructs, 'eat those bagels, then you've got some serious singing to do.'

Squeaky comes out to join us for breakfast, turning his tiny piece of bagel and cream cheese delicately as he nibbles. Carl has long since lost the urge to scream every time my pet appears, but inches casually away from him.

'I want to put a few new songs in the act,' my friend tells me between chews.

'For the ever-demanding audience at the King's Head?'

'We won't always be playing pub venues,' Carl assures me.

'Oh. I keep forgetting the booking at Carnegie Hall,' I say.

'Sarcasm is the lowest form of wit, Fern.'

Laughing, we take our coffee through to the lounge and I kiss Carl on the cheek. 'Thanks,' I say. 'You're a pal.'

'Does this qualify me for a sympathy shag?'

'No.' I slip the piece of paper with the address on it into the pocket of my jeans. 'But I promise I'll buy the bagels from my first pay cheque.'

I try not to think how tight my finances are and how much I need this extra money. Personal assistant to an opera singer? That's got to be well-paid, hasn't it? Sounds as if it might be fun too. I can't imagine that it would involve an awful lot of graft. I am a resourceful woman. I am a desperate woman. Joe needs my help, I mustn't forget that. If I don't want to be washing up at The Spice Emporium, I have to get this job. How hard can it be?

Chapter Three

Evan David paced through the apartment, his feet tapping out an impatient rhythm on the bleached oak floor. He stared out of the double-height glass windows and over the slate-grey thread of the Thames.

‘I fixed up the interviews for this afternoon.’

Massaging his temples, Evan turned towards his agent, Rupert Dawson. ‘If Erin can’t be here then I’ll manage without an assistant.’

‘You can’t manage without an assistant, darling. Have you looked at your schedule yet?’

Evan held out his hands. ‘If I’m so busy, Rupe, then I don’t have time to interview for a new assistant.’

‘We need someone to help out temporarily. Until Erin is back on her feet.’

‘How long does it take to recover from chicken pox?’

Rupert shrugged. ‘I have no idea. But I don’t think she’ll make it over here from the States.’ A worried frown crossed his face. ‘Have you come out in any funny spots?’

‘No.’

‘Itching?’

Itching to kill his agent but nothing more. ‘No. No itching.’

‘How’s the voice?’

‘The voice is fine.’

Rupert let out a relieved sigh. ‘You’re lucky. *We’re* lucky.’

Evan was opening at the Albert Hall with the British National Opera in the next week or so as Pinkerton, the lead male role in Puccini’s *Madame Butterfly*. Not exactly a taxing role for someone of his status. But it wouldn’t do for the Principal Artist – *II Divo*, The Divine Performer, The Voice – to miss his first performance. Tickets had sold out over a year ago. And the one thing Evan never did was let his public down.

‘Have we sent Erin flowers to her San Francisco sickbed?’ he asked. ‘Your new assistant will.’

Evan hid a smile. He’d been with Rupert a long time, since he first started out in this business. His agent knew how to play him. And he had to face it, Rupert was the closest person he had to a friend these days. Evan stretched. There was tension in his neck. That would never do – it could strain his voice. Good job he had a massage booked for later in the day. And who would take care of all the small details and the administration for him if he didn’t have an assistant?

He stroked his fingers over his throat distractedly. There was no doubt that the constant touring was starting to take its toll. For a youngish man, supposedly in his prime, there were days when his weary bones were very reluctant to leave his bed. He’d been too many years on the road; it was time he put roots down in one city for a while. As soon as this trip was over and he was back in San Francisco, he wasn’t moving for months, he’d decided. He’d had Rupert clear the diary – which had brought tears in the shape of dollar signs to his agent’s eyes. Evan needed a break though, whatever the cost. There had been too many opera houses, too many rented apartments, too many hours spent on a jet – even if it was his own private Lear.

He looked around at the apartment. This place was fabulous – at the top of a high-rise block with amazing views across the capital city. It was sleek, modern and spacious, all painted white with glass staircases and balconies off every room. It was also a far cry from his home on the West Coast, which was a turn-of-the-century former Archbishop’s home filled with antiques and exotic carpets, surrounded by sprawling grounds. But this place served his purpose. There was no way he could become attached to living here; it was simply somewhere that required little maintenance and offered no distractions from his work. That was the way he liked it. Erin had found it for him – as she always did – and it suited him just fine. She knew that the less there was of other people in a place, the less he was likely to catch any of their leftover germs. Nursing his voice on a strenuous tour like this was all-important.

Rupert edged further towards the desk as if by doing that it would encourage Evan to do so too. The agent was well over fifty now, more than ten years older than Evan. His skin was tanned like leather and he sported the bouffant hairdo preferred by game-show hosts and shopping channel presenters. He smoked back-to-back cigarillos when Evan

wasn't around, wore sharp suits and a perpetually pained expression. It was clear, even to the casual observer, that there was a strong affinity between the two men. His agent had come into Evan's life when he was a callow youth and they had grown older together, if not necessarily wiser.

Rupert glanced at his watch. 'The first one is due here soon.'

'We need to be quick, Anton is coming over for a run-through.' Anton was Evan's voice coach and French tutor. If losing Erin was like having his right arm amputated, then Anton was the left. Evan tried out a few scales, filling the apartment with his rich voice.

'We have some great candidates,' Rupert said. 'All opera buffs.'

'Marvellous.'

The buzzer sounded and Rupert hurried to answer it. 'The first one's here,' he told Evan. 'Try to be nice.'

'I'll be divine.' He blew Rupert a kiss.

'You're a very intimidating person.'

'I'm a pussy cat,' Evan insisted.

'Don't scare them off. Please. We just need someone who can put up with you for a few short weeks.'

'What's this?' Evan picked up a piece of paper.

'Her resumé.'

'University degree . . . Love of opera . . . Personable and flexible . . . I want her to file a few papers and answer the phone, Rupert. I don't want to marry the damn woman.'

'No one in their right mind would have you.'

Rupert scuttled over to the door. Evan sat down behind the desk, humming to himself, perfectly manicured fingers joined in a contemplative steeple. His agent ushered in the first victim.

She edged nervously into the room, taking in her surroundings with wide-eyed awe. Evan followed her gaze.

'Wow,' she gasped. 'This is some place.'

Evan stood up and politely extended his hand. 'Welcome,' he boomed.

The woman jumped. Then tentatively took his hand. Her palm was clammy. Evan wanted to wipe his fingers on his trousers.

Rupert flashed him a warning glance. 'Sit down, sit down,' he said, putting on his most winning smile while pulling out a chair.

The woman sat down. There was an awkward silence.

'I'm Evan David,' Evan began.

She nodded. 'I've seen you on the telly.'

Heavens preserve us, Evan thought. This one was as nervy as Bambi. She looked like some sort of Boho hippy chick. Her embroidered jeans were a stark contrast to the tailored business suits Erin favored. She had a mess of wild blonde hair and a suede handbag with fringes. Fringes? Evan shook his head – it was a step too ethnic for him. Normally when people met him they praised him for his Cavaradossi in *Tosca* or his Alfredo in *La Traviata*. And she'd 'seen him on the telly'. He tried not to sigh. So this was one of Rupert's opera buffs? There was no way he could do this all afternoon.

'And you are?' he prompted.

'Fern.' She licked her lips. 'Fern Kendal.'

'Do you have chicken pox?'

The woman looked puzzled. 'No.'

'No itching?'

'No.'

'Good. When can you start?'

Fern Kendal looked at Rupert for some sort of explanation. The agent's face was suitably blank too, although he looked like he might be about to fall off his chair.

'Anytime,' she said with forced brightness. 'Today. Now.'

She had all her limbs, most of her faculties and no communicable diseases. As far as Evan was concerned, she'd do just fine. He stood up and shook her hand again, having forgotten that it was unpleasantly clammy. 'You've got the job.'

'I have?' Her eyes widened further, if that were possible. 'Thank you. Thanks. That's great. You won't regret this.'

Evan smiled tightly. He suspected that he might. Rupert looked to be in a state of stunned acceptance. 'Good. I'll leave you to it.' He headed towards the music room before adding, 'I guess your first task will be to tell all the other applicants that they didn't get the position.'

Chapter Four

Well, you've really done it this time, Fern! I slump back into the huge cream leather chair and close my eyes. I have spent the last hour or more telling ten disgruntled and very well-dressed wannabe personal assistants that the role has already been filled. I didn't dare to mention that it had been filled by me, as most of them looked at me as if I was a bit of doggy doo. And *all* of them looked as if they would have been a darn sight better at the job than I'm destined to be.

I can feel my lip wobbling. I want tea and I want chocolate. Both in large quantities. I want Carl to talk to me and tell me that I actually have a hope in hell of doing this damn job. My skills will certainly have to involve better clothing. I wish I'd put a suit on. I wish I *had* a suit to put on. There have been very few occasions in my life that have called for suit-wearing and I realise that my existence has been very casual up to now. I wonder if I'll get a clothing allowance? In fact, I wonder what my pay is and what hours I'll be expected to work and what I'll have to do while I'm doing it.

After my interview, such as it was, the great Evan David and the other weird-looking guy with the big hair had simply grinned at me and left. They're now closeted in the next room with the door firmly shut. I've taken two dozen telephone messages from people who all insist the matter is of *utmost* urgency – not just normal urgency – but I haven't dared to disturb them.

Glancing around me, I try to gather my scattered wits. This place is amazing. It's like something you see in . . . in . . . well, I've never seen anything like it before. It's certainly a far cry from my own mouse-infested hovel (apologies to Squeaky). My entire flat would fit into this one room and still have space left over for a football pitch.

I can hear a few soaring notes drifting from the other room. Did I really say to the great Evan David that I'd seen him on the telly? Yes, I believe I did. I want to bang my head on the desk. What a lamebrain.

I try to think what my duties might involve. There's nothing on the desk except a phone, a diary, a notebook and a laptop, so I guess that should give me a clue. My eyes are drawn to the direction of the singing. He sounds as if he's only warming up, but his voice is amazing. And I have to say that in the flesh, so to speak, Evan David is a lot more attractive than he looks on the television. I've never really taken much notice of him before, but that's mainly because I turn opera off the minute it comes on. I'm beginning to wish I'd paid more attention to it now. I'm an artist too, I should cultivate a broader view of world music, not just diss opera as stuff for posh gits.

The apartment buzzer sounds and I go over to answer it.

'It's Anton,' the disembodied voice says.

Anton is Mr David's voice coach. I learned that much from the diary, so I let him in. While he's coming up in the lift, I knock on the closed door. Evan David opens it.

'Your voice coach is here.'

'Thank you,' he says. 'I'll be out in a few minutes.'

When he arrives, Anton turns out to be slight with shoulder-length curly hair, and he wears a red velvet scarf.

Evan David breezes out a moment later and they hug each other warmly, batting French greetings between them. Anton takes off his scarf and goes over to the piano which is at the other side of the room, set in a bay by one of the huge windows and angled to catch the best light, I would guess.

Mr David strides towards me and my knees set up an involuntary knocking. He brings me a list which he slaps down on the desk. 'Journalists,' he says. 'Can you fix up interviews for the end of the week? And send a bouquet to my permanent assistant, Erin. She has chicken pox.'

I nod.

He tries a smile, which doesn't seem to come easy. 'Settling in?'

I nod again.

'You might have taken your coat off.'

'I feel rather under-dressed,' I explain.

'You're fine.'

Everything he's wearing probably came from Armani or Versace or somewhere like that. What he paid for his watch would probably feed my entire family for five years. He has dark, cropped hair and deep grey eyes. His features are sharp and stern.

'I have an appointment tonight.' I'm not about to tell him that I work in a pub. 'Is it okay if I leave soon?'

'Yes,' he says.

'What time do you want me in the morning?'

Mr David shrugs. 'Not early. Eight o'clock.'

'Eight o'clock.' That will give me nearly five hours' sleep. Fab. 'Fine. Fine.'

He leaves me and goes over to the piano. There's such a presence to him that when he moves away, he leaves a vacuum in his wake. That's my excuse for being a quivering wreck, anyway.

Anton already has some music set up on the stand. Without preamble, he starts to play and Evan launches into the most beautiful song I've ever heard. All the hairs on the back of my neck stand up and the power of his voice almost takes my breath away. If I had any idea what this song might be then I'd tell you, but I haven't a clue. I try to drag my brain back to the list of journalists and the appointments that I'm supposed to be making, but it's impossible. His voice commands attention. All my senses have sharpened. My ears are pinned back, my scalp is tingling and even my nipples are standing to attention. I feel as if I've been slammed back into my seat and paralysed by pleasure.

And I have to go. I have to tear myself away from this onslaught of sensation. I have to pick up my handbag and make my feet walk out in the middle of this to leave and pull pints and do my measly set with scraggy Carl at the King's Head. And I can't imagine that my audience will be quite so enraptured.

Chapter Five

I sit reeling on the Tube, still humming that song to myself – which is enough to create a large space around you in London. All things considered, it has been quite a successful afternoon. And then, in my blissed-out haze, I make the mistake of calling into my parents' flat on the way to the pub for five minutes to tell them about my great new job.

When I open the door, they're in the middle of World War Three. In the kitchen, my mum is flicking Dad on the head with the tea towel in a vicious manner. Not an easy feat as she is a good deal shorter than him, even in heels. Two bulging suitcases stand in the hall.

'Hey. Hey!' I call out. 'What's happening here?'

Mum snaps the tea towel at Dad again. She looks as if she's about to start foaming at the mouth. 'Your father's leaving me.'

'What? Leaving? What for?'

'I'm not leaving,' my dad insists, sheltering from the blows under the umbrella of his hands. 'Your mother's throwing me out.'

I turn to Mum. 'Throwing him out?'

'I've had it,' she snaps, both verbally and with her dish-drying weapon. 'I've had it with the years of drinking, gambling and womanising.'

My eyes pop out on stalks. Drinking and gambling, yes. But womanising? This is news to me. I know that my old man likes to look, but I don't think he's ever touched.

'He's a no-good, fit for nothing old git,' my mum elucidates.

'But he's been like that for the thirty-odd years that I've been around,' I remind my mother. 'Why are you throwing him out now?'

'I want to be my own person.' Oh no. My mother had been taking advice from *Richard & Judy* again.

'Think about this,' I say, trying to introduce a note of calm into the storm. 'You've been married for forty-odd years. You wouldn't survive without each other.'

'I'd like to give it a try,' Mum mutters darkly.

'You'll laugh about this in the morning.'

'The only reason I'll be laughing in the morning is if I turn over and find *he's* not here.' She jabs a finger in Dad's chest, and he puts on a mortally wounded face.

'Fern's right,' Dad says. 'You'd be lost without me.'

'Ha!' Mum trills. 'I've had to manage this family all of my life. Exactly what couldn't I do without you?'

Dad pauses. For way, way too long. We all do. There is a look of triumph on my mum's face.

'I came to tell you that I've got a great new job,' I say.

'Wonderful.' My mother heads towards the cases. Dad and I exchange a glance.

'Amy, don't,' he begs. 'You know you don't mean it.'

Mum has the cases in her hands. They're well past their best, stickers for Spain, Portugal and Ibiza all tattered and torn.

'I'll change,' Dad tries.

Even I've heard this speech too many times before to be convinced.

'Amy, please.' Dad looks stricken.

Mum's heart must have turned to stone since, as small as she is, she heaves the cases to the door and throws them out into the concrete corridor that overlooks the rest of the flats. 'Get out,' she says.

Now *I'm* panicking. 'Where's he going to go?'

'Back to that whooore!'

'What whooore? Whore.'

Dad shakes his head. 'There's no whore, Amy. There never has been.'

My five-foot two-inch mother manhandles my six-foot father out of the hall and after his bags.

'I want to stay and sort this out,' I say. 'But I'm going to be late for work.'

Mum folds her arms across her chest. 'As far as I'm concerned, it's sorted out.'

'I'm coming round tomorrow.' Then I wonder how, when my days as well as my nights are now no longer my own.

I follow Dad out of the door and Mum slams it behind me. Dad is leaning on the brick balcony, puffing furiously on a cigarette.

'It's bad for you,' I tell him.

'That woman will be the death of me first,' he retorts.

'Would you like to tell me what this is all about?'

'I didn't come home last night,' he admits.

I give him an Oh-Dad look.

'But I wasn't with another woman. I definitely wasn't with another woman.'

'So where were you?'

'Playing cards at Mickey's. I was on a winning streak,' he says. 'How could I walk out?'

'It looks like your winning streak has ended. I suggest you get in there and tell Mum the truth.'

'How can I? She'd only throw me out for that too. I'd promised her that I wouldn't play poker any more. Best to give her some time to cool off.'

'Well,' I say, eyeing my dad's baggage, 'what now?'

'I'll be no trouble.' Dad picks up his cases.

So my dad is moving in with me. Fantastic.

'I wouldn't dream of you giving up your bed for your poor old dad,' he says magnanimously. 'I'll have the sofa.'

I take one of the cases from him and sigh. 'Too right you will.'