

You loved your last book...but what  
are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Lovereading will help you find new  
books to keep you inspired and entertained.

---

**Opening Extract from...**

# **Her Perfect Life**

Written by Sam Hepburn

Published by Harper

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Lovereading.  
Please print off and read at your leisure.

---

her  
perfect  
life

SAM HEPBURN

HARPER



*Harper*

An imprint of HarperCollins *Publishers*  
1 London Bridge Street  
London SE1 9GF

[www.harpercollins.co.uk](http://www.harpercollins.co.uk)

Published by HarperCollins *Publishers* 2017

1

Copyright © Sam Hepburn 2017

Sam Hepburn asserts the moral right to  
be identified as the author of this work

A catalogue record for this book  
is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-00-820958-2

This novel is entirely a work of fiction.  
The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are  
the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to  
actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is  
entirely coincidental.

Typeset in Sabon by Palimpsest Book Production Ltd,  
Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be  
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted,  
in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical,  
photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior  
permission of the publishers.



**MIX**  
Paper from  
responsible sources  
**FSC C007454**

FSC™ is a non-profit international organisation established to promote  
the responsible management of the world's forests. Products carrying the  
FSC label are independently certified to assure consumers that they come  
from forests that are managed to meet the social, economic and  
ecological needs of present and future generations,  
and other controlled sources.

Find out more about HarperCollins and the environment at  
[www.harpercollins.co.uk/green](http://www.harpercollins.co.uk/green)

# 1

Hard heels clack across the floor above Juliet's head. One way across the sitting room to the window. Then back the other – clackety bloody clack – to the door. Juliet slides her legs off the sofa, blinking groggily into the gloom as she gazes from the pale flicker of the television to the timer on the cooker – 02.13.

She stretches to ease the crick in her neck and feels the first throb of a hangover behind her eyes. She checks the bottle on the floor beside her. It's empty. She searches the fridge and the cupboards, wincing at every stab of sound from upstairs – the judder of water into a kettle, the yank of a drawer and the endless clack of those bloody heels. She grabs hold of the broom, about to thump the handle on the ceiling. Then she laughs – not much of a laugh – and lets the broom drop. It's been a bad day but not bad enough to turn her into the mad old woman in the downstairs flat. At the back of the cupboard under the sink she finds a half-bottle of whisky. She doesn't usually drink spirits, just on nights like tonight, when it all gets too much. She pours half a glassful, fills it up with orange squash and takes it back to the sofa, lighting a cigarette as she goes. She reaches

for the remote and flicks through the channels. An impossibly shaped blonde in silver lamé spins a roulette wheel – ‘be lucky, lucky, luckeee . . .’ – a cheese-ball preacher begs her to find a place in her heart for Jesus, a lizard darts its tongue to catch a fly and – fuck – there she is. Our perfect pocket-sized Gracie Dwyer. Clean, clean, clean in her perfect kitchen. She’s leaning ever so slightly towards the camera, a *come-on-we-can-do-this together* smile on her lips while her nimble little fingers beat flour into a pan of yellow gloop on a spotless stone worktop. ‘The trick to perfect choux pastry,’ she is saying, ‘is to keep beating until every fleck of white has gone from the mixture.’

Juliet tries for the off button but her clumsy fingers hit the pause. Gracie freezes on screen. She stares at the face. Always if you look long enough at a frozen frame you can find something – some imperfection: a spot, a patch of caked makeup at the hairline, a drag in the skin at the throat. If not that, then something gormless and off-guard in the eyes or in the halted movement of the mouth. Something.

But there’s nothing. Nothing at all. Gracie Dwyer is perpetually perfect. Even frozen.

This time Juliet finds the off button. She stubs out her cigarette, lurching a little as she totters to her bedroom.

## 2

Gracie keeps count. She can't help it. She's doing it now. While the passengers around her sip their drinks and flick through the in-flight entertainment she's skimming the dates in her diary. It's been nearly five months – one hundred and forty-three days to be exact – since she's received an anonymous package, a taunting message or a silent phone call. She's hurrying on through the pages, adding to the 'to-dos' on her list and scoring through the tasks she's completed when a jolt of excitement puckers her cheeks into a smile, her first real smile for days. She's going home. No more dawn risings to go over her filming notes. No more missed calls from Tom. No more juggling shooting schedules and time zones to Skype Elsie at bedtime, only to wave at her and tell her silly jokes, when all she wants is to fill her lungs with the after-bath smell of her skin. She snaps the elastic around the diary, lays down her pen and gazes at the syrupy oval of sky framed by the cabin window, almost breathless at the thought of that small damp body pressed against hers.

But there is guilt there too, at how good it had felt to be in New York. To walk from her mid-town hotel to the TV studios, join a queue for coffee or test out a lipstick

untroubled by the glances of strangers or the scuff of a footfall catching up with her own. If the Americans buy her show is she crazy to think that at least in the States life could go back to the way it was before the threats began? When she enjoyed being recognised in the street, and jokey requests from passers-by to sign crisp packets, plaster casts and body parts made her laugh and reach for a Sharpie?

She folds forward rubbing her arms. Two weeks in New York have softened her, weakened her guard, but she feels it now, the wariness seeping back into her bones, stiffening her spine, vertebra by vertebra. How quickly it comes, she thinks, and a part of her accepts its return, welcomes it even; the part that still clings to the childhood belief that she can pay with pain to keep the precious things safe.

She glances up, drawn by the hiccupping wails of the baby across the aisle. He's a square-faced little boy in a tiny checked shirt and denim dungarees, writhing in his mother's arms and batting away the bottle she dabs at his mouth, just like Elsie did, all the way home from St Lucia that first summer she and Tom took her on holiday. Gracie remembers their helpless attempts to comfort her, the irritation of the other passengers and her own mounting fear that her mothering would never be good enough. The woman thrusts the baby and the bottle at her husband and stands up, smoothing her milk-stained T-shirt and wrinkled skirt. Gracie darts her a sympathetic smile. The woman is pregnant again, two, three months maybe; barely enough to show, but enough to draw her hands to the curve of her belly. The sight of those cupped, protective fingers loosens other memories. Gracie's thoughts skid and slide away to seek calm among her plans for the weekend: the park with Elsie, bed with Tom.

Her heart beats hard as she returns the glazed goodbyes of the cabin crew and passes from the warmth of the plane into the cool of the covered walkway. Not long now. Tom

will be standing in the arrivals hall, holding Elsie's hand and pointing at the flashing 'landed' sign beside her flight number.

The baggage hall is busy, even for a Friday night. Fretful children traipse after ratty parents and hollow-eyed tourists grip their trollies and twist around looking lost. Gracie stands beside the carousel, head down, pretending to rummage in her handbag. The moment her suitcases bump into sight she sweeps them onto her trolley and runs.

'Gracie! Gracie Dwyer! Would you mind?'

*Damn!* Heads crane. She feels them. Taking a breath she stops and turns. A middle-aged woman is fluttering towards her in a pale blue mac, phone held high, while her tall, balding husband stands by, clenching apologetic hands. 'I love your show,' the woman says, breathy with delight. She tilts the handset and presses her powdered cheek to Gracie's as she clicks. 'Your lemon and walnut tart is the only way I can get my son to come home.'

'There'll be lots more puddings in the new series, so make sure you catch it.' Gracie's smile is warm.

The woman glows and says coyly, 'You know, you're even prettier in the flesh than on TV.'

'That's very sweet of you, but after six hours in the air I feel like a total wreck.'

With another smile Gracie breaks away and hurries through 'Nothing to Declare'.

The glass doors slide back. Her eyes flit across the waiting faces. A swell of joy as she spots them behind the barrier, jammed between a collection of bored drivers bearing name cards; Tom's dark head, bent to check something on his phone, and Elsie, her gorgeous girl, reaching out shouting, 'Mummy, Mummy!'

Gracie runs faster, letting her trolley roll away as she scoops Elsie into her arms and presses her nose into her hair. She lifts her face to Tom's, eager for the greedy pressure



of his lips. He's bending down, snatching Brown Bear from the floor, returning him to Elsie's outstretched hand and his kiss, when it comes, is almost lost in their exchange of eye-rolling relief at disaster averted.

Tom picks up her bags. She follows him to the car park, hand in hand with Elsie who jumps and skips, bursting with stories about school and sleepovers and other people's dogs. When the fuss with luggage and seat belts is over Tom sits and holds the wheel for a moment before he turns the ignition. She sees a tiny patch of stubble he's missed with the razor, six or seven coarse dark hairs standing upright and defiant on the curve of his jaw.

'You OK?' she murmurs.

'Yeah, fine.'

'You seem . . . tired.'

'Oh, you know.' He tilts the mirror and backs out of the space. 'So, how did it go?'

'The execs seemed happy enough. But in the end it's all down to the focus groups.'

'When will you hear?'

'Could be weeks, could be months. But if they *do* go for it why don't you bring Elsie over for the last week of the shoot? We could stay on for a few days, have a holiday.'

'Depends what I've got on.' He shoves the ticket into the machine. 'Things at work are a bit . . . up in the air.'

The car gives a little jerk as he accelerates up the ramp and out into the grey Heathrow dusk, blustery gusts of rain buffeting the car. She lays her hand on his shoulder. 'Pain about Bristow's.'

He rams the gearstick and pulls out into the traffic. 'If they want crap they've gone to the right place to get it.'

She twists round to catch Elsie's sleepy story about the *real* witch's cat she saw when she went trick or treating. 'He had a little pointy hat *and everything*.' Gracie looks

back, seeking Tom's smile. The wet road holds all his attention. The raindrops on the windows glitter blue and green and red, brightening the darkness as he pulls off the M40 onto the rain-slicked streets of Hammersmith. The wipers thump and swipe across the windscreen. She murmurs softly, 'Was there anything . . . in the post?'

He shakes his head without looking at her. 'God, no.'

Gracie waits for him to acknowledge her relief, slide his hand through her hair and tell her how glad he is to have her home. But he's flicking on the news – Syria, Iraq, the economy. She tries not to mind. Losing the Bristow's tender will have hit him hard. All that work. All that build up. All that disappointment. Best to say nothing. They'll talk about it later. When they are alone and she can comfort him properly. A flicker of warmth curls between her thighs.

As Deptford gives way to Greenwich she stares out at the ghostly domes of the old admiralty buildings, the winking blur of pubs and cafés, the narrowing streets and the stretches of river glimpsed between blocks of newly built flats. He pulls off the road onto a cinder track that winds past shadowy building sites caged by wire fences, lit here and there by the jaundiced flare of security lights. The tyres splash and bump through puddles of oily water until they find tarmac again. Tom clicks the fob, the security gates slide open and the pale glow of their house of glass rises through the darkness.

Gracie swings her legs out of the car. Blinking into the rain she turns to gaze across the vast black shimmer of the river to the glitter of lights on the Isle of Dogs. There is a taint in the air, a reek of rot pouring in from the sewers of the city and seeping up through the silt. A squat river barge chugs downstream, its bow lights casting a gauzy glow across the water. As the slide of the electric gates cuts off the view she turns back to the Wharf House. Even after three years

she still has moments like this when she can't quite believe that this minimalist expanse of glass and sunken spaces is her home. It took years to complete and won Tom a prize: a moment of glory and a shard of bronze sprouting through a block of granite. She remembers the first time he brought her to see the site; how she'd picked her way across the pipes and coils of cable lying idly in the mud, and nodded and smiled as he'd turned his back to the wind to steady the flapping plans, wishing she could lift her eyes to the skeleton of ribs and struts and see what he could see.

'Look, Mummy, look what I made!' Elsie is hopping from foot to foot, pointing to the 'Welcome home' banner strung across the door.

'Wow, darling! That's amazing!'

Tom lugs her bags across the hall and dumps them down while Elsie hovers close, pulling at the catches. 'What did you get me, Mummy?'

'Oh, no!' Gracie claps her hand to her mouth. 'I forgot to buy presents.'

Elsie howls with laughter and swings back on Gracie's free hand, pivoting on one foot. 'No you didn't!'

Gracie unzips one of the suitcases and pulls out a pair of pink sequined trainers. 'Ta – daa!' She smiles at the joy on Elsie's face, delves again and brings out a grey cashmere beanie hat for Tom that took her a stupid amount of time to choose. He pulls it on and wears it as they put Elsie to bed. They stretch out, one either side of her, while she hugs the trainers to her chest and Gracie opens *The Worst Witch*, picking up the story where she left off the night she left for New York. After a couple of pages Tom kisses his daughter and slips away, murmuring about supper. Hungry for one of his blackened, bloody steaks and some good red wine, Gracie smiles and glances up to watch him go.

She reads on until Elsie's eyes flutter shut and her breath

grows deep and steady, then she sits for a moment, drinking her in; the dark curls coiling across the pillow, the golden skin, the snubby little nose and chin – softened versions of Tom’s – before she kisses her forehead and runs down to the kitchen.

The absence hits her.

No clinking plates. No hissing pans.

So it’s a takeaway then. Their favourite Thai, or the new Burmese she’s been dying to try. Tom fills a glass and passes it to her. She sets it down beside the discarded beanie hat and moves closer, hips swaying, arms held high to slip around his neck. He stiffens, sweaty and grey, his pupils fixed, unwilling to focus even as he looks at her.

‘Tom?’

He pulls away and picks up a paper tub, still icy from the freezer. She moves forward, her eyes seeking the label on the lid. A little laugh erupts from her throat. *Laugh with me, Tom. Tell me you love my fish pie. Tell me you didn’t want to waste time cooking on my first night back.*

He clicks open the microwave and in it goes. Her home-coming supper.

‘I’ll make a salad.’ She bends into the fridge, little detonations of panic exploding down her spine.

Behind her he’s opening drawers, rattling cutlery, making noises that float in the silence. Thoughts stream across her mind like a band of breaking news: robberies, accidents, death, disaster. But how bad can it be? Elsie is tucked up in bed and the two of them are here, safe, together. Refusing to acknowledge the darker possibilities unfurling in her brain she tears at leaves, makes a dressing, picks up the servers.

The microwave pings.

‘It’ll need a few minutes in the oven to get crispy,’ she says.

He doesn’t move. She gives it a beat and says quietly, ‘Are you going to tell me what’s wrong?’

He stands looking at the floor, gesturing helplessly with his hands. ‘You have to believe me, Gracie. I never meant it to happen.’

She pushes at the rising dread. ‘Just tell me. Whatever it is we’ll deal with it.’

He drops into one of the narrow steel-backed chairs he designed himself, his head down, his fingers pressing into his scalp; long, sensitive, blunt-nailed fingers that wear the slim platinum band that matches hers. She reaches for the moment when she slipped it over his knuckle, the pride and nervousness she’d felt as everyone they cared about looked on. *Please, God, let it be a problem with money or work. Something that can be borne, or fixed, or forgotten.*

‘I swear I didn’t plan it. I hardly know her.’

‘Her?’ The word spurts like vomit through her teeth. She knows then that this is beyond fixing or forgetting.

‘We’d just lost the tender. I was drunk. We all were.’

She pictures the women she meets at ACP functions: attractive, smartly dressed women who smile at her and remember her name when she struggles to remember theirs, an eternity passing before she manages to whisper, ‘Who?’

‘One of the interns.’ Tom clenches his fists. ‘Oh God, I’m so sorry. I was in a bad way. You know how much I had riding on that job.’

All that fear, Gracie thinks. All that pain. It wasn’t enough to keep the precious things safe.

‘So you thought, oh, I know, I’ll fuck a twenty year old. That’ll cheer me up.’

‘No!’ His head hangs on his chest. ‘I lost it. I wanted to pass out, forget everything. Then someone called me a cab and suddenly there she was, telling me she’d always wanted to see the house.’

She backs away, her head shaking slowly. ‘Not here, Tom. Please don’t tell me you slept with her here.’

His hunched silence rips something inside her and all the quiet confidence she has built up over the years of her marriage comes spilling through the tear. She slithers down the wall, crushed by the realisation, stark and sudden, that the barrier between having everything and having nothing is as flimsy as a rejected blueprint.

‘Where was Elsie?’

‘Issy’s sleepover.’

That pinpoints the night. Gracie sees herself finishing up at the studios and rushing off to eat sushi with the crew. Sipping sake, discussing the next day’s running order, catching a cab back to her hotel room. Sleeping alone. She raises her head. ‘Is she beautiful?’

‘What?’

‘I said, is she beautiful?’

‘No! God, no.’ He says it vehemently, as if somehow this will exonerate him. ‘It wasn’t about that.’

She looks around her at her home, her life, her husband. All she sees is a tumble of rubble. ‘So what *was* it about, Tom?’

‘I don’t know.’ He presses his palms against the bevelled edge of the table and sinks his head towards the green of the glass. ‘I felt empty, angry. I couldn’t face being on my own.’

‘Don’t you dare put this on me. Don’t you dare!’

‘I’m not . . .’ He throws back his head and drags in air. ‘When I sobered up I couldn’t believe what I’d done. I told her it was a mistake and she went crazy. She . . . threatened me. She said she’d tell you and the board if I didn’t let her work on one of my projects.’

‘So did you?’

He swallows. ‘The Copenhagen clinic. But I won’t have to see her. I put her with the team working on the atrium and I’ve handed that side of things over to Geoff.’

As if this is penance enough, he kneels down and reaches for her. Her hands fly out, pushing him away, startling them both with her strength. ‘You’d never have done this to Louise!’

He jolts at the accusation, a shock response as if he’s been struck. She can see he’s steeled himself for fury, tears, distress. But not for this. She doesn’t care. He searches for words to deny it but the effort breaks him down into sobs. ‘It’s not about Louise.’

‘I’ve never been enough for you.’ She shunts away from him, pushing her heels against the slate floor. ‘I was always second best.’

He crawls towards her, appalled, dumbfounded. ‘No! You’re you and Louise . . . was Louise.’

She turns her head away, trying to hide her tears, but her fingers clutch her top, clawing the thin fabric in an effort to gain control. ‘And what about this bloody intern?’

‘She’s nothing.’

‘So you were willing to risk everything we have for some scheming little nothing?’

‘Christ, Gracie, what do you want me to say? I was drunk . . . I feel like shit . . .’

‘So that’s it? You got laid and she got a plus point on her CV?’

He drops his head and scrapes his hand down his face. ‘It wasn’t just about getting on a project. She’d got it into her head that she and I had . . . some kind of future . . . and now she’s lashing out.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘She’s threatening to make a formal complaint.’ He closes his eyes. ‘To tell the board and the press a pack of lies about me offering her work, pretending I was going to leave you . . . getting her drunk and fuck knows what else.’

Gracie waits until he looks at her. She stares into his

eyes. Dark brown eyes, that shift and dither. There's a screeching in her head, a feeling of weightlessness.

'That's what this confession is about, isn't it? Damage limitation!'

'No!'

She throws back her head. 'If you'd managed to buy her silence, you'd never have told me.'

'Gracie—'

She glares at him, daring him to lie.

'I'll do anything to make it up to you.'

At least he hasn't denied his cowardice. But the angle of his head and the tilt of his shoulders trigger a creep of suspicion. 'How many others, Tom?'

'Christ!' He turns away, furious. 'How can you even ask?'

In that moment she sees a stranger. A lean-faced, dark-haired stranger in a black T-shirt and expensive jeans who has no idea that he has broken something he can't mend; something precious that was hers and Elsie's, as well as his. Can't he see that this drunken fuck with a pushy intern nearly half his age has made a rupture in their lives – clean, complete and total – with everything that has gone before?

'What's her name?'

'Does it matter?'

'Yes.'

'Alicia.'

'Alicia what?'

'Sandelson.'

She struggles to her feet. He moves towards her.

'Don't come near me!'

He lifts his hands and watches her leave.



# 3

That night Tom sleeps in the spare room and Gracie lies awake, listening to the drum of the rain and picturing Alicia touching her things, lying between her sheets, pushing her face into her pillow and she wonders how she will survive. Yet when she tries to imagine a life other than this one she has built with Tom all she sees is a vast emptiness devoid of joy or comfort or hope. This is the way she had felt in the bleak, lonely months before she met him, the way she'd thought she would never have to feel again. She reaches for her mobile then lets it drop. Daphne is in Milan, probably in bed with her latest lover, and even if she picked up what would Gracie say? What's happening inside her is too frightening, too visceral to explain, even to her closest friend.

She slips out of bed and tiptoes downstairs, past the photographs that hang on the open brickwork. Stark looming images, shot by Louise, charting the first stages of the creation of the house. Gracie thought she knew them, every line and shadow; the demolition of the old wharf, the bulldozers arriving in a scarred expanse of moss-grown debris, spindly saplings thrust into the wind, the writhing tree root washed up by the tide, dead but for one determined

shoot of green. But tonight, in the dim light of the lamp left on for Elsie, they seem alive, taunting her with renewed power and vigour; her own face, puffy with crying, a wavery distraction in the glass. Her eyes fasten on the photo of the tree root. Taken the day Louise found the plot of land, the shot has been reprinted on a thousand posters and postcards, variously interpreted as an image of hope, regeneration and a dogged refusal to die. The *Observer* magazine used it in their memorial tribute to Louise's work, along with the most haunting of the worn faces and desolate landscapes she'd taken for them in Bosnia, Albania and Darfur. Gracie's legs buckle. She reaches for the wall, imagining Alicia pausing here on her way to the bedroom, halted by this picture. Did Tom stand behind her, holding her shoulders, kissing her neck as he'd once kissed Gracie's when she'd stopped, drawn by this same photograph, in the hallway of his flat in Holloway?

She pulls away and stumbles down to the kitchen. She feels the cool slate beneath her feet, sees the pearly shadows of the raindrops speckling the white of the walls and the square of sky above the light well, all realised exactly as Louise had envisaged them, the DNA of her vision imprinted not just in the design and structure of this house but in the subtle ageing of the wood, the ever changing reflections in the angled glass and the long slow weathering of the stone.

Gracie sits in the dark for nearly an hour before she drags herself back to bed. She closes her eyes, too tired to fight it now. Cogs uncouple in her head, dismantling her defences, and she sleeps. For a while she hovers in a restless dark. And then it begins. The dreadful pitch into a ruined landscape where she runs and runs from someone she can't see until the way is blocked by an iron gate fastened by a padlock and chain. Forced on by a brush of breath on her

neck she swerves away, stumbling through the doors of a blackened warehouse and spiralling down a stone staircase until she senses a flutter of movement in the shadows and trips and falls like dreamers do, to wake with a buck of panic, struggling to scream. She reaches for Tom. Her bed is empty. He is not there to turn in his sleep, pull her to him and murmur that she is safe.

She rises and moves around the house, tormented by reminders of the contentment she has lost – a snapshot of the three of them stuck on the fridge, their joint names on a school permission form, their shirts and socks entangled in the dryer, all cruelly untouched by the savage unravelling of her grief. She takes down the snapshot and gazes at the faces – hers, Tom’s and Elsie’s – trying to envision a future untainted by the fear of losing everything she loves.

Over the next few days Tom gives her time, something he’s been careless about for a while. He talks animatedly about the layout of her next cookery book and her plans to open a second branch of her café bakery, sending her details of properties he’s found on the internet. She feels his helplessness – the tightened lips and weary exhalations signalling his irritation. He wants things back the way they were, yet he has no idea how to make it happen. She is the one who always smooths out the problems, the one who mends the broken things. But she can’t mend this. Right now she can’t even think straight. Using the search for new premises as an excuse to detach herself from the rhythms and demands of her own life, she spends hour after hour driving through the streets of London, losing herself in the everyday comings and goings of others. Somehow, catching the swish of a curtain or the slam of a front door, slowing her car in an unfamiliar side road to accommodate someone else’s drop-off or pick-up or hurried trip to the corner shop, helps

to soothe the turmoil in her head and dilute the fear and anger corroding every cell of her being.

In the evenings she and Tom avoid all mention of Alicia and her threats, although once when Tom thinks she's downstairs, she hears him on the phone.

'It's the powerlessness, Geoff, not knowing if the little bitch is bluffing . . . Christ, I don't know how much longer I can take it . . .'

There he is, the father of her child, contrite and attentive as they arrive at the launch of her new cookbook, smiling as she mentions him in the speech she wrote before she went to New York and hasn't had the heart to change. She even reads out the line where she thanks him for just being there because she couldn't do any of the things she does without his love and support. His smile doesn't falter when every face in the room swings round to see the husband of 'adorable queen of the kitchen', Gracie Dwyer; a hundred pairs of eyes taking in his appealing long-limbed slouch, the rumpled hair, the open-necked shirt gleaming white against skin the colour of perfect toast. She can almost hear the sighs of approval. Afterwards she bears it stiffly as they pose for the photographers – the beautiful couple with the happy wholesome life – he with one hand pulling her close, the other holding up a copy of her book. *This is the shot they'll use*, she thinks as the lights flash. *If the intern goes to the papers, this is the picture they'll plaster all over the tabloids.*

In the taxi home she sits forward, hanging onto the strap to stop anything of her body brushing Tom's, but there's hope in his eyes as they walk into the house, as if the pretence of tonight has become reality. She stops the hand he lifts to caress her cheek, moves it aside and hurries to the kitchen to fill the kettle. 'Tea?'

'No thanks.' Tom pours himself a whisky and sprawls in

a chair a little drunk, grunting as he picks up the papers on the table. He takes a moment to register that they're property brochures: pubs, restaurants, shops. He flips through them. 'Christ, have you seen the rents on these places?'

'You can throw them away. I've found somewhere.'

He looks up, hurt. 'You never said.'

She stirs the teapot, staring into the steam.

'Are you going to show me?'

She doesn't respond.

'Come on, Gracie.'

She opens her handbag. Hesitates for a moment then hands him a folded sheet. He shakes open the details of a seventies pub in Battersea – stained red brick, peeling green paintwork and tinted glass. 'You're kidding. It's ugly, overpriced and way too big.'

'I need space.'

'Not this much.'

Gracie eyes him uneasily. 'It's going to be more than a café bakery. I'm going to have a cook shop, serve a bistro menu in the evenings and run cookery workshops upstairs. Kelvin's developing a spin-off series built around the courses.'

'When did you come up with all this?' That hurt face again.

'I've been doing a lot of thinking since I've been back from the States.'

'And what? You weren't even going to consult me?' He flings the brochure across the table. 'This is what I do, Gracie! What I know about!' He swallows and softens his voice. 'You need a building with character, something distinctive that will reflect *you* as well as your food, like the amazing old chapel this new French client wants me to convert into a restaurant. Why don't you come and have a look at it, get some inspiration?'

Her eyes dart away from him.

‘Don’t do this, Gracie. Don’t shut me out.’

A silence grows between them, barely dented by her agonised whisper. ‘How can I make any plans that depend on you?’

‘Fuck!’ He mouths the word, and claws back his hair. ‘So what are you saying? That I’m not part of your future?’

‘I don’t know, Tom. Sometimes I look at you and I catch myself seeing the man I love, then I realise he doesn’t exist.’

‘What can I do? Just tell me what I can do.’

‘Why are you asking *me*? I didn’t make this mess.’ She puts down her mug and moves to the door. ‘I’m going to bed.’

‘Gracie, please—’ He lurches after her.

She turns on the landing. ‘Shh. You’ll wake Elsie.’

He lowers his voice. ‘The new café is something we can build together. You and me.’

‘You destroyed what we built together, Tom. Have you even thought what it will do to Elsie when that girl’s tacky revelations are splashed all over the papers? She’s five years old for God’s sake! And what about me? I can cope with the sniggering and the pity but every single penny I put into paying off the crippling mortgage on this house depends on the way people see me – happy, wholesome Gracie. How’s that going to work when they find out my husband can’t keep his dick in his pants?’ She closes the bedroom door and leans against the wall, biting back her tears as his footsteps fade away down the landing.