

This Charming Man

Marian Keyes

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Extract

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'Everyone remembers where they were the day they heard that Paddy de Courcy was getting married. I was one of the first to know, what with working in a newspaper when word came in from David Thornberry, political correspondent (and tallest man in Dublin) that de Courcy was calling it a day. I was surprised. I mean, we all were. But I was extra surprised and that was even before I heard who the lucky woman was. But I couldn't act upset. Not that anybody would have noticed. I could fall down dead in the street and people would still ask me to drive them to the station. That's what life is like when you're the healthy one of a pair of twins. Anyway, Jacinta Kinsella (boss) needed a quick piece on the engagement so I had to put my personal feelings to one side and be a professional.'

Grace Gildee

'It would have been nice if you had asked me first.'

Alicia Thornton

*'I was on the net, checking e-bid for owl handbag (by Stella McCartney, not just any 'oul' handbag) for a client to wear to a wildlife charity thing when I saw the headline. **De Courcy to wed.** Thought it was a hoax. The media are always making stuff up and faking cellulite on girls who don't have it and taking it off girls who do. When I discovered that it was true, I went into shock. Actually thought I was having heart attack. Would have called an ambulance but couldn't remember 999. Kept thinking 666. Number of the beast.'*

Fionnola 'Lola' Daly

'Don't you dare be happy, you bastard. That's what I thought when I heard. Don't you dare be happy.'

Marnie Hunter

De Courcy to Wed

Women throughout the land will be donning black armbands with the news that Ireland's most eligible politician, Paddy 'Quicksilver' de Courcy, is to hang up his gloves and settle down. Over the last decade, de Courcy, a popular figure in the VIP rooms of Dublin's hot night-spots, and often said to physically resemble JohnJohn Kennedy, has been linked with a number of glamorous women, including the model-turned-actress Zara Kaletsky and Everest mountaineer Selma Teeley, but, until now, showed no signs of making a permanent commitment.

Not much is known of the woman who has won his notoriously wayward heart, one Alicia Thornton, but she's certainly no model or mountaineer - the only climbing she seems interested in, is social. Ms Thornton (35), allegedly a widow, has been working for a well-known property agency but plans to give up her job once married, in order to 'devote herself' to her husband's burgeoning political career. As the wife of the famously ambitious 'Quicksilver', she'll have her work cut out for her.

De Courcy (37) is the deputy leader of NewIreland, the party founded three years ago by Dee Rossini and other TDs disaffected with the culture of corruption and croneyism prevailing in Ireland's main political parties. Contrary to popular opinion, de Courcy is not one of NewIreland's founding members, but joined eight months after the party's inception, when it became clear that it was a viable prospect.

Lola

Day Zero. Monday, 25 August 14.25

The worst day of my life. When the first wave of shock released me from its fiendish grip, I couldn't help but notice that Paddy hadn't called me. Ominous. I was his girlfriend, the media was going wild that he was getting married to another woman, and he hadn't called me. Bad sign.

Called his private mobile. Not his ordinary private one, but the private private one that only I and his personal trainer have. It rang four times, then went to message, then I knew it was true.

End of world.

Called his office, called his home, kept ringing his mobile, left fifty-one messages for him – counted.

18.01

Phone rang – it was him!

He said, 'You've seen the evening papers?'

'Online,' I said. 'I never read the papers.' (Not relevant, but people say the oddest things when in shock.)

'Sorry you had to find out in such a brutal way. Wanted to tell you myself but some journalist –'

'What? So it's true?' I cried.

'I'm sorry, Lola. I didn't think you'd take us so seriously. We were just a bit of fun.'

'Fun?' Fun?

'Yes, only a few months.'

'Few?! Sixteen of them. Sixteen months, Paddy. That's a long time. Are you really marrying this woman?'

'Yes.'

'Why? Do you love her?'

'Of course. Wouldn't be marrying her if I didn't.'

'But I thought you loved me.'

In a sad voice, he said, 'Never made you any promises, Lola. But you are a great, great girl. One in a million. Be good to yourself.'

'Wait, don't go! I have to see you, Paddy, please, just for five minutes.' (No dignity, but couldn't help myself. Was badly distraught.)

'Try not to think badly of me,' he said. 'I'll always think fondly of you and our time together. And remember . . .'

'Yes?' I gasped, desperate to hear something to take edge off the terrible, unbearable pain.

'Don't talk to the press.'

18.05 to midnight

Rang everyone. Including him. Lost count of number of times, but many. Can be certain of that. Double, possibly triple figures.

Phone was also red-hot with incoming calls. Bridie, Treese and Jem – genuine friends – offered much comfort even though they didn't like Paddy. (Never admitted it to me, but I knew.) Also many fake friends – rubbernecker! – ringing to gloat. General gist: 'Is it true that Paddy de Courcy is getting married and not to you? Poor you. Is terrible. Is really, really terrible for you. Is so humiliating. Is so MORTifying. Is so SHAMEing! Is so –'

Kept my dignity. Said, 'Thank you for kind wishes. Must go now.'

Bridie came to see me in person. 'You were never cut out to be a politician's wife,' she said. 'Your clothes are too cool and you have purple highlights.'

'Molichino, please!' I cried. 'Purple makes me sound like a . . . a teenager.'

'He was too controlling,' she said. 'We never got to see you. Especially in the last few months.'

'We were in love! You know what it's like to be in love.'

Bridie had got married in past year, but Bridie unsentimental. 'Love, yes, very nice, but no need to live in each other's pockets. You were always cancelling on us.'

'Paddy's time is precious! He's a busy man! I had to take what I could get!'

'Also,' Bridie said, 'you never read the papers, you know nothing of current affairs.'

'I could have learnt,' I said. 'I could have changed!'

Tuesday, 26 August

Feel the whole country is looking at me, pointing and laughing. Had boasted to all friends and many clients about Paddy and now they know he is marrying someone else.

My equilibrium destroyed. On a photo-shoot in the Wicklow Hills for Harvey Nichols Christmas catalogue, I ironed oyster-coloured silk bias-cut Chloé evening dress (you know the one I mean?) at too high a heat and burnt it! Scorch mark in the shape of the iron on the crotch of iconic dress worth 2,035 euro (retail). Destroyed. Dress was intended to be the pivot of the shoot. Was lucky they didn't charge me (i.e. bill me, not have me arrested, but could be either, actually, now that I think about it).

Nkechi insisted on taking control – she is an excellent assistant, so excellent that everyone thinks she is my boss – because my hands were trembling, my concentration was in ribbons and I kept having to go to portaloo to vomit.

And worse. Bowels like jelly. Will spare you the details.

20.30–0.34

Bridie and Treese visited me at home and physically restrained me from driving round to Paddy's apartment and demanding audience with him.

3.00

I woke up and thought, Now, will go! Then notice Treese was in bed beside me. Worse, was awake and prepared to wrestle.

Wednesday, 27 August 11.05

Constant loop in my head: He is marrying another woman, He is marrying another woman, He is marrying another woman. Then every few hours I think, What?! What do you mean, he is *marrying another woman*? As if discovering it for the first time, and SIMPLY CANNOT BELIEVE IT. Then am compelled to ring him, to try to change his mind, but he never picks up.

Then the loop starts again, then the surprise, then I have to ring him, then I get no answer – again and again and again.

Saw picture of this so-called Alicia Thornton. (In the newsagent

buying a Crunchie when I saw it on the front page of the *Independent*.) Snapper had caught her coming out of her Ballsbridge offices. Hard to be certain but looked like she was wearing Louise Kennedy. Said it all. Safe. Elegant but safe.

Realized I recognized Alicia Thornton – she had been photographed four times with Paddy in glossy society pages over last few months. Caption had always read, ‘Paddy de Courcy and companion’. When photo number three appeared, I had felt emboldened enough to question him about her. He accused me of not trusting him and said she was a family friend. I believed him. But what family? He has no family!

12.11

Call from Bridie. ‘We are going out tonight.’

‘No!’ I cried. ‘Cannot face world!’

‘Yes, you can! Hold your head up high!’

Bridie is very bossy. Known as Sergeant-Major to her nearest and dearest.

‘Bridie, I’m in shreds. Shaking and everything. Cannot go anywhere. I’m begging you.’

She said, ‘Is for your good. We will take care of you.’

‘Can you not come over to my flat?’

‘No.’

Big long pause. Pointless putting up a fight. Bridie is the strongest-willed person I’ve ever met.

I sighed. Said, ‘Who is going?’

‘The four of us. You, me, Treese, Jem –’

‘Even Jem? He got a pass from Claudia?’

Claudia is Jem’s fiancée. Very possessive of him, even though she’s good-looking and thin.

‘Yes, he got pass from Claudia,’ Bridie said. ‘I fixed her.’

Bridie and Claudia shared much mutual antipathy.

Jem was great friends with me, Bridie and Treese, but oddly he wasn’t gay. Not even metrosexual. (Once he actually bought a pair of jeans in Marks & Spencer. Saw nothing wrong with it, until I gently pointed out the error of his ways.) We lived on the same road when teenagers, him and me. Bonded at cold bus stops, on rainy mornings,

in duffel coats, on our way to college. Him to be brainy engineer, me to get diploma in fashion. (Just for the record, my duffel coat was electric-blue vinyl.)

20.35

Café Albatross

Shaky legs. Nearly fell down the stairs into the restaurant. Stumbled on the bottom three steps and almost made my entrance skidding across the floor on my knees like Chuck Berry. Worse, didn't care. Couldn't possibly be more of a laughing stock than I currently am. Bridie and Treese were waiting.

Bridie – like always – was working a most peculiar look. Her straight blondey-red hair was gathered into a low granny-style bun and she was sporting an astonishing green jumper – shrunken, lopsided and embroidered with tiny jockeys. The oddest taste, she always had – right from her first day at school, aged four, when she insisted on wearing tights the colour of dried blood. But she couldn't care less.

Treese, a fund-raiser for a big charity, was much more chic. Flaxen hair in screen-goddess-of-forties waves and wearing an impressive dress-and-jacket combo. (From Whistles but on Treese you might mistake it for Prada.) You would think if you worked for a charity you could come to work in beige cords and a hoodie but you'd be wrong. Treese's is a big charity working in the developing world (not third world, cannot say that any more, not PC). Sometimes she has to meet government ministers and ask for money, sometimes she even has to go to the Hague and ask EU for cash.

I asked, 'Where's Jem?'

Was sure he had cancelled because it was a very rare occasion when all four of us managed to get together, even when the arrangement was made several weeks in advance, never mind a mere matter of hours, as in this case. (Had to admit that in recent months I'd been the worst offender.)

'Here he is now!' Bridie said.

Jem, rushing, briefcase, raincoat, pleasant roundy face.

Wine ordered. Drink flowed. Tongues loosened. As I said, I'd always suspected that my friends didn't like Paddy. But now that he had publicly shamed me, they could speak freely.

‘Never trusted him,’ Jem said. ‘He was too charming.’

‘Too charming?’ I said. ‘How can you say he was *too charming*? Charming is a wonderful thing. Like ice-cream. No such thing as too much!’

‘There is,’ Jem said. ‘You can eat a litre carton of Chunky Monkey, then a litre carton of Cherry Garcia, then get sick.’

‘Not me,’ I said. ‘Anyway I remember that night and it was the doobie, not the ice-cream, that made you sick.’

‘He was too good-looking,’ Bridie said.

Again I expressed incredulity. ‘Too good-looking? How can such a thing be? It’s impossible. Goes against laws of physics. Or laws of something. Laws of land, maybe.’

And had I been insulted? ‘Are you saying he was too good-looking for me?’

‘No!’ they exclaim. ‘Not!’

‘You are as cute as a button,’ Jem said. ‘Button! Easily as good-looking as him!’

‘Better!’ Treese said.

‘Yes, better!’ Bridie said. ‘Just different. He’s too obvious. You look at him and think, There is a tall, dark, handsome man. Too perfect! But with you, you think, There is a very pretty, medium-height, girlish woman with a well-cut bob, lovely brown colour with bits of purple –’

‘Molichino, please!’

‘– and a very neat figure considering you’re a non-smoker. A twinkle in your eye – both eyes, in point of fact – and a small symmetrical nose.’ (Bridie was convinced her nose pointed to the left. Was envious of all those with noses poking out of their fizzes with straight-ahead precision.) ‘The more you look at you, Lola, the more attractive you get. The more you look at Paddy de Courcy, the less attractive he gets. Have I left anything out?’ she asked Treese and Jem.

‘Her smile lights up her face,’ Jem said.

‘Yes,’ Bridie said. ‘Your smile lights up your face. Not like him.’

‘Paddy de Courcy’s a fake smiler. Like the Joker in *Batman*,’ Jem said.

‘Yes! Like the Joker in *Batman*!’

I protested, ‘He’s not like the Joker in *Batman*!’

‘Yes, he IS like the Joker in *Batman*.’ Bridie was adamant.

21.55

Bridie's mobile rang. She looked at the number and said, 'Must take this call.'

She got up to leave, but we indicated, Stay! Stay!

We wanted to hear. It was her boss (important banker). Sounded like he wanted to go to Milan and for Bridie to organize flights and a hotel. Bridie got a big diary out of bag. (Very nice bag. Mulberry. Why a nice bag but peculiar clothes? Makes no sense.)

'No,' she said to the boss. 'You cannot go to Milan. Is your wife's birthday tomorrow. No, not booking flights for you. Yes, refusing. You will thank me for this. Am keeping you out of the divorce courts.'

She listened a bit more, then gave very scornful laugh. 'Sack me? Don't be so silly!' Then she hung up. 'Right,' she said. 'Where were we?'

'Bridie.' Treese sounded anxious. 'It's not right to refuse to book flights to Milan for your boss. It might be important.'

'Not!' Bridie dismissed it with a flourish of her hand. 'I know all that goes on. Situation in Milan doesn't require his presence. I suspect he has his eye on an Italian lady. Will not facilitate his philandering.'

22.43

Desserts. I ordered Banoffee pie. Bananas tasted slimy, like wet leaves in November. I threw down my spoon and spat the bananas into my napkin. Bridie tried my pie. Said it wasn't slimy. Nothing like wet leaves in November. Treese tried it. Said it wasn't slimy. Jem tried it. Said it wasn't slimy. He finished it. As compensation, he offered me his cold chocolate slab. But it tasted like chocolate-flavoured lard. Bridie tried it. Said it didn't taste like chocolate-flavoured lard. Chocolate, yes, but lard, no. Treese concurred. So did Jem.

Bridie offered me her apple tart, but the pastry tasted of damp cardboard and the apple pieces like dead things. Others did not concur.

Treese didn't offer me her dessert because she had no dessert to offer – once upon a time, she'd been a tubster and now tried to stay away from sugar. It was okay to eat other people's desserts but not to order one for herself.

Her overeating was mostly under control now but she could still have bad days. Example, if stressed at work because she'd been turned down by the EU for a grant for latrines in Addis Ababa, she could eat up to twenty Mars Bars in one go. (Could possibly manage more but the woman in the shop beside her office won't sell them to her. She says to Treese, 'You've had enough, love.' Like a kindly publican. She says, 'You worked hard to lose all that weight, Treese, love, you don't want be a porker again. Think of that nice husband of yours. He didn't know you when you were stout, did he?')

I decided to give up on desserts and ordered a glass of port instead.

'What's it taste of?' Bridie asked. 'Rotting ankle boots? Maggots' eyeballs?'

'Alcohol,' I said. 'It tastes of alcohol.'

After the port, had an amaretto. After the amaretto had a Cointreau.

23.30

I braced myself to be forced to attend a nightclub, so I could 'hold my head up high' there also.

But no! No mention of nightclub. Talk of taxis and work in the morning. Everyone returning to their loved ones – Bridie got married last year, Treese got married this year, Jem was living with possessive Claudia. Why go out for steak when you've hamburger at home?

Jem dropped me home in a taxi and insisted that any time I wanted to hang out with him and Claudia, I was welcome. He is lovely, Jem. A kind, kind person.

But lying, of course. Claudia doesn't like me. Not as much as she doesn't like Bridie, but still.

(Quick aside. You know how they told me Paddy was far too good-looking for me? Well, the same could be said for Claudia and Jem. Claudia is 'leggy' – marvellous word, so sixties – tanned, blonde and has breast enlargements. She is the only person I know who's actually had them done. To be fair, they aren't grotesquely large but, nonetheless, you can't miss them. Also I suspect her of hair extensions – one week I met her and she had shoulder-length hair,

the following week it was twenty inches longer. But perhaps she had simply been taking lots of selenium.

She looks like a model. In fact, she used to be a model. Sort of. She sat on car bonnets in bikinis. She also tried to be a singer – auditioned for *You're A Star* (reality TV talent thing.) She also tried to be a dancer. (On another reality TV show.) She also tried to be an actress. (Spent small fortune on headshots, but was told to piss off for being crap.) Also a rumour circulated that she had been sighted in a queue for *Big Brother* auditions but she denies that.

But am not judging. Good lord, I only came by my own career by trial and error, failing at everything else, etc. Fair play to Claudia for her have-a-go spirit.

The only reason I don't like Claudia is because she is not pleasant. She barely bothers to speak to me, Treese and especially Bridie. Her body language always says, Can't ABIDE being with you dullards. Would prefer to be in a nightclub snorting cocaine off a newsreader's thigh.

She behaves as though we would all steal Jem from under her nose, given half a chance. But she has nothing to worry about. None of us has designs on Jem. We all got off with him when we were teenagers. His face was not as round and trustworthy back then. Had slight rakish edge.

If you want my honest opinion, sometimes I worry that Claudia doesn't even like Jem. Feel she treats him like an idiotic, repeat-offender dog, who would chew good shoes and tear open goosedown pillows if he wasn't watched with a basilisk eye.

Jem is a lovely, lovely person. He deserves a lovely, lovely girlfriend.

Final piece of information. Jem is very well paid. Am not implying anything. Just making an observation.)

23.48

Let myself into my tiny flat. I looked around at a life that amounted to nothing and thought, I am all alone. And will be for the rest of my days.

Not self-pity. Simply facing facts.

3.56

I woke up with a terrible fright. I'd been having a bad dream – Paddy was getting married to someone else. Then I realized it wasn't a bad dream but true! Immediately I had to throw on clothes and get into the car and drive over to his flat. I couldn't bear one more minute without him. I would talk to him and clear it all up. It would all be okay.

I drove like maniac, skidding and screeching on the dark roads. Put my red Mini through its paces. (Was very proud of my car, even though it clashed with my hair colour.)

I keyed in gate code – massive relief when it worked; I'd had a horrible thought that he might have changed it – and skittered to a halt outside his block, half on the kerb, almost diagonal to the road. Not the best bit of parking I'd ever done. I was clambering out of the car before the engine was even turned off, then ran to door and rang bell. No answer. Rang bell. No answer. Rang bell. No answer. Rang bell. No answer. Rang bell. No answer. Rang bell. No answer.

No! He had to be there! Because if he wasn't I would lose my mind!

RangbellNoanswerRangbellNoanswerRangbellNoanswer
RangbellNoanswer RangbellNoanswer. Faster this time.

Still no answer.

Maybe he was staying in her place? The thought was like a punch in the stomach. And I was bent over, vomiting into the grass verge. Port. Amaretto. Cointreau. Disgusting.

Admitted defeat. Went home.

Thursday August 28th 9.00

Phone rang. Very friendly female voice said, 'Lola, hi!'

Cautiously I said, 'Hi.'

Because it could be a client. I have to pretend I always know who they are and must never say, 'Who's that?' They like to think they are the only one. (Don't we all?)

'Lola, hi!' the female voice goes on, very friendly. 'My name is Grace. Grace Gildee. I wonder if we could have a chat.'

'Certainly,' I said. (Because thought it was woman looking to be styled.)

'About a good friend of mine,' she said. 'Believe you know him too. Paddy de Courcy?'

'Yes,' I replied, wondering what this was all about. Suddenly I got it! Oh no! 'Are you . . . a journalist?'

'Yes!' she said, like it was all okay. 'I'd love to have a chat about your relationship with Paddy.'

But Paddy had said, No talking to the press.

'Obviously we will compensate you well,' the woman says. 'Believe you've lost a couple of clients recently. Money might come in handy.'

What? Had I lost a couple of clients? News to me.

She said, 'It'll be your chance to give your side of the story. I know you feel badly betrayed by him.'

'No, I . . .'

I was afraid. Really quite afraid. Didn't want a story about Paddy and me in the paper. I shouldn't even have admitted I knew him.

'I don't want to talk about it!'

She said, 'But you *did* have a relationship with Paddy?'

'No, I, er . . . No comment.'

Never thought I'd have a conversation where I said the words, No comment.

'I'll take that as a yes,' the Grace woman said. She laughed.

'Don't!' I said. 'Don't take it as a yes. I must go now.'

'If you change your mind,' she said, 'give me a shout. Grace Gildee. Features writer for the *Spokesman*. We'd do a lovely job.'

9.23

Call from Marcia Fitzgibbons, captain of industry and important client. 'Lola,' she said, 'I heard you were jonesing at the Harvey Nichols shoot.'

'Jonesing?' I said, high-pitched.

'Having withdrawals,' she said.

'What are you talking about?'

'I heard you were a shaking mess,' she said. 'Sweating, vomiting, unable to do a simple task like press a dress without destroying it.'

'No, no,' I insisted. 'Marcia, I mean Ms Fitzgibbons, I wasn't jonesing. All that is wrong is that my heart is broken. Paddy de Courcy is my boyfriend but he's getting married to someone else.'

'So you keep telling people, I hear. But Paddy de Courcy your boyfriend? Don't be ridiculous! You have purple hair!'

'Molichino,' I cry. 'Molichino!'

'Cannot work with you any longer,' she said. 'I have strict zero-tolerance policy on druggies. You are an excellent stylist but rules are rules.'

That is why she is a captain of industry, I suppose.

Further attempts to defend myself proved futile, as she hung up on me. Time, after all, is money.

9.26

Missed my mammy very much. Could really have done with her now. I remembered when she was dying – although I didn't really know that was what was happening, no one said as such, I just thought she needed lots of bed-rest. In the afternoons when I came home from school, I'd get into bed beside her, still in my uniform, and we'd hold hands and watch *EastEnders* repeats. I'd love to do that now, to get into bed beside her and hold hands and go to sleep for ever.

Or if only I had a big extended family who would cosset me and surround me and say, 'Well, we love you. Even if you do know nothing about current affairs.'

But I was all alone in the world. Lola, the little orphan girl. Which was a terrible thing to say, as Dad was still alive. I could have gone and visited him in Birmingham. But I knew that would be unendurable. It would be like after Mum died and we were living side by side in a silent house, neither of us with half a clue how to operate a washing machine or roast a chicken and both of us on anti-depressants.

Even though I knew it was a pointless exercise, I rang him.

'Hello, Dad, my boyfriend is marrying another woman.'

'The blackguard!'

Then he gave big, long, heavy sigh and said, 'I just want you to be happy, Lola. If only you could be happy, I would be happy.'

I was sorry I'd rung. I'd upset him, he takes everything so hard. And just listening to him, so obviously *depressed* . . . I mean, I suffered from depression too but didn't go on about it.

Also he was a liar. He wouldn't be happy if I was happy. The only thing that would make him happy would be if Mum came back.

'So how's Birmingham?'

At least I got on with my life after Mum died. At least I didn't move to Birmingham, not even Birmingham proper, which has good shops, including Harvey Nichols, but a Birmingham suburb, where nothing ever happened. He was in such a hurry to move. The minute I turned twenty-one, he was off like a shot, saying his older brother needed him; but I suspected he moved because we found it so hard being with each other. (In fairness, I must admit I was considering moving to New York myself but he saved me the bother.)

'Birmingham's grand,' he said.

'Right.'

Big, long pause.

'Well, I'll be off so,' I said. 'I love you, Dad.'

'Good girl,' he said. 'That's right.'

'And you love me too, Dad.'

18.01

I go against every one of my instincts and watch the news, hoping to see coverage from the Dail and possibly catch a glimpse of Paddy. Have to sit through terrible, terrible stuff about seventeen Nigerian men being deported even though they have Irish children; and European nations dumping their rubbish mountains in third world countries (and yes, they said third world', not 'developing world').

Kept waiting for Dail report, for pictures of fat, red-faced, corrupt-looking men standing in a room with a blue carpet, shouting Rawlrawl-rawl! at each other. But it never came.

Too late I remembered it was the summer holidays and they wouldn't be back in session (or whatever they call it) until two weeks before Christmas. When they would have to break for Christmas. Lazies.

Before I turned the telly off, my attention was caught by an item about the Cavan to Dublin road being closed because a lorry carrying six thousand hens had overturned and all the hens had got loose. The screen was full of hens. I wondered if my grief was inducing hallucinations. Hens are funny things to hallucinate about, though. I looked away, squeezed my eyes tightly shut, then opened them and looked at the telly again and the screen was still full of hens.

Marauding gangs making for the open road, a great swathe of them disappearing over a hill to freedom, locals stealing them, carrying them away by their legs, a man with a microphone trying to talk to the camera but up to his knees in moving sea of rust-coloured feathers.

18.55

I can't stop ringing Paddy. It's like OCD. Like washing hands constantly. Or eating cashew nuts. Once I start, I can't stop.

He never answered and he never rang back. Was aware I was debasing myself but couldn't stop. I longed for him. Yearned for him.

If I could just speak to him! Maybe I wouldn't get him to change his mind, but I could get answers to questions. Like, why did he make me feel so special? Why was he so possessive of me? When there was another woman all along.

There was a horrible niggling feeling that this was my own fault. How could I have believed that a man as handsome and charismatic as Paddy would take a person like me seriously?

I felt so very, very stupid. And the thing was, I wasn't stupid. Shallow, yes, but not stupid. There was a big difference. Just because I loved clothes and fashion didn't mean I was a thicko. May not have known who the president of Bolivia was but I had emotional intelligence. Or at least, had thought I had. I always gave great advice on other people's lives. (Only on request. Not uninvited. That would be rude.) But clearly I'd had no right to. Cobblers' children, etc., etc.

Friday, 29 August

The worst week of my life continues with no respite.

At a photo-shoot for author Petra McGillis, I'd staggered along to the studio with three massive suitcases of clothes I'd called in according to Petra's specifications, but when I opened them up she said, outraged, 'I said no colours! I said neutrals, camels, toffees, that sort of thing!' She turned on a woman whom I later discovered was her editor and said, 'Gwendoline, what are you trying to turn me into? Pistachio green? I am NOT a pistachio-green author!'

The poor editor insisted she was not trying to turn the author into anything, certainly not a pistachio-green person. She said that

Petra had talked to the stylist (me) and told her her requirements and that no one had interfered.

Petra insisted, 'But I said, "No colours!" I was quite specific. I never wear colours! I am a serious writer.'

Suddenly everyone was looking at me – the photographer, the make-up artist, the art director, the caterer, a postman delivering a parcel. It's her fault, they all accused me with their eyes. That stylist. She thinks Petra McGillis is a pistachio-green person.

And they were right to accuse me. No way could I blame Nkechi. It was me who had taken the call, and when Petra had said, 'No colours!' my scrambled brain must have heard, 'I love colours!'

It had never happened to me before. I was usually so good at channelling the clients' requirements that they tried to steal the garments from the shoot and got me into trouble with press office.

'I'll wear my own bloody clothes,' Petra said, tightly and tetchily.

Resourceful Nkechi made many calls, seeking an emergency care package of neutral-coloured garments, but none was available.

At least she tried, all the accusing faces said silently. That Nkechi is mere assistant but she showed more gumption than the stylist herself.

I should have left there and then, as I was no use to anyone. But for the rest of shoot (three hours), I stood by, smiling gamely, trying to bring the twitch in my lip under control. Now and then, I'd nip forward to adjust Petra's collar, to pretend I had a reason for existing, but it was a disaster, a horrible, horrible disaster.

I'd spent a long time building up my career. Was it all to be destroyed in a matter of days, because of Paddy de Courcy?

Hard to care, though. All I was interested in was how to get him back. Or failing that, how to endure the rest of my life without him. Yes, I sounded like overblown Gothic-type person, but really, if you'd met him . . . In person he was so much more good-looking and charismatic than on telly. He made you feel like you were the only person in the world, and he smelt so nice that after I first met him I bought his aftershave (Baldessini) and although he brought an extra-special additional de Courcy ingredient to the mix, one whiff was enough to make me feel tunnel-visiony, like I was about to faint.

15.15

Another call from this Grace Gildee journalist. Pushy. How did she get my number in the first place? And how did she know Marcia Fitzgibbons was going to sack me? In fact, I thought about asking her who else was going to sack me, but desisted.

After a certain amount of pussy-footing (on my part) she offered five grand for my story. A lot of money. Styling was an uncertain business. You could have twelve jobs one week and none at all for the rest of month. But I was not tempted.

However – I was not complete fool, despite feeling like one – I rang Paddy and left a message. ‘A journalist called Grace Gildee offered me lots of money to talk about our relationship. What should I do?’

He rang back so fast I had barely hung up.

‘Don’t even think about it,’ he said. ‘I’m a public figure. I’ve a career.’

Always about him and his career.

‘I’ve a career too, you know,’ I reminded him. ‘And it’s going down the Swanee due to my broken heart.’

‘Don’t let it,’ he said, in a kindly manner. ‘I’m not worth it.’

‘She offered me five grand.’

‘Lola.’ His voice was persuasive. ‘Don’t sell your soul for money, you’re not that kind of girl. You and I, we had good times together. Let’s preserve the memory. And you know that if you’re ever stuck for a few quid, I’ll help out.’

I didn’t know what to say. Although he was behaving like a supportive friend, was he, in fact, offering to pay me to keep shtum?

‘There’s plenty I could tell Grace Gildee,’ I said bravely.

A different voice from him this time. Low, cold. ‘Like fucking what?’

Less confidently I said. ‘...The ... things you bought me. The games we played ...’

‘Let’s make one thing clear, Lola.’ Arctic tones. ‘You talk to no one, especially not her.’ Then he said, ‘Must go. I’m in the middle of something. Take care of yourself.’

Gone!

20.30

A night in with Bridie and Treese in Treese's big house in Howth. Treese's new husband Vincent was away. I was secretly glad. I never feel welcome when he's there. Always feel he's thinking, What are these strangers doing in my house?

He never joins in. He'll come into the room and nod hello, but only because he wants to ask Treese where his dry-cleaning is; then he goes off to do something more important than spend time with his wife's friends.

He calls Treese by her proper name, Teresa, like it wasn't our friend he married but a different woman altogether.

He is quite elderly. Thirteen years older than Treese. On his second marriage. His first wife and three young children are stashed somewhere. He is a big cheese in the Irish rugby organization. In fact, used to play for Ireland and he knows everything about everything. No room for discussion with Vincent. He says one sentence and the entire conversation shuts down.

He has a rugby-player physique – muscles, wideness, thighs so enormous he has to walk in a strange side-to-side, just-got-off-a-horse motion. Many women – indeed Treese obviously does; she married him, after all – might find this comely. But not me. He is too butty and . . . wide. He eats phenomenal quantities and weighs about forty stone, but – I want to be fair – he isn't fat. Just . . . compacted. Very dense, like he's spent time living in a black hole. His neck is the circumference of a rain barrel and he has a stunningly enormous head. Also big hair. Gak.

21.15

Food was delicious. Treese had done a course in classical French cuisine so she could cook the type of food Vincent's rugby cronies expected. I ate two mouthfuls, then my stomach contracted into a tiny walnut and I had the taste of sick in my mouth.

Bridie was wearing her peculiar green jumper again. Even though I was obsessed with myself and my pain, I couldn't stop looking at it. As before, it was lopsided, shrunken and embroidered with jockeys. What was that all about?

I wondered if I should say something? But she liked it. She must. Otherwise why would she wear it? So why burst her bubble?

23.59

Many bottles wine later, although not ones from the bottom shelf, as they are Vincent's special ones and he would be annoyed if we drank them.

'Stay the night,' Treese said to me.

Treese had four spare rooms.

'You have a dream life,' Bridie said. 'Rich husband, fabulous house, lovely clothes . . .'

'And the first wife always asking for money! And bratty step-children giving me the evils. And terrible worry . . .'

'About what?'

'That my eating disorder will kick in again and I'll balloon to eighteen stone and have to be cut out of the house and taken away on a flatbed truck and Vincent won't love me any more.'

'Of course he will love you! No matter what!'

But, in a secret little chamber in my heart, where I thought my darkest thoughts, I wasn't so sure. Vincent did not jettison his first wife and children in order to shack up with Jabba the Hutt.

0.27

Tucked up in Number One Spare Room. Softest pillow I'd ever laid my head on; magnificent, carved, antique French bed; brocade chairs with bandy legs; mirrors of Murano glass; weighty, lined curtains in luxurious fabric; and the sort of wallpaper you only get in hotels.

'Look, Treese,' I said. 'The carpet is the exact same colour as your hair! It's beautiful, beautiful, everything's beautiful . . .'

I was quite drunk, in retrospect.

'Sleep tight,' Treese said. 'Don't let bugs bite and don't wake at four thirty-six a.m. and decide to sneak out and drive over to Paddy's flat to throw stones at his windows and shout abuse about Alicia Thornton.'

4.36

I awake. I decide to sneak out and drive over to Paddy's flat to throw stones at his windows and shout abuse about Alicia Thornton ('Alicia Thornton's mother blows the parish priest!' 'Alicia Thornton doesn't wash her lady-bits!' 'Alicia Thornton's father is cruel to the family Labrador!'). But when I opened Treese's front door, alarm siren started screeching, searchlights snapped on, and there was the distant sound of dogs barking. Was half expecting a helicopter to appear overhead when Treese came floating down the stairs in a silky, shell-pink negligee (nightdress) and matching peignoir (dressing gown), searchlights glinting silver on her shiny pale coiffeur (hair).

Calmly she chastised me. 'You promised you wouldn't. Now you are snared. Return to bed!'

Red-faced.

Treese reset alarm, then glided back up the stairs.

Saturday, 30 August 12.10

At home

Bridie rang. After an enquiry about my well-being, a strange little silence ensued. Expectant almost.

Then she asked, 'Did you like green jumper I was wearing Wednesday night and last night?'

I could hardly reply, No, it was the strangest thing I've seen in a long, long time.

I said, 'Lovely!' Then, 'Er . . . new?'

'Yes.' Bridie sounded almost shy. Then she blurted out, like someone with a big, thrilling secret, 'Moschino!'

Moschino!

I had thought perhaps she had purchased it at a sale-of-work at her local lunatic asylum! Good job I didn't say so.

Although I wouldn't. Not my way. Mum always told me that if I couldn't say something nice, to say nothing at all.

'Where did you buy it, Bridie?' I was wondering how, with my encyclopaedic knowledge of clothing, I'd never before come across this item.

'On eBay.'

Cripes! Perhaps fake!

'It cost me a fortune, Lola. But worth it. Worth it, yes?'

'Oh yes, yes, worth it! Jockeys very . . . um . . . fashion-forward.'

'I noticed you looking at it, Lola.'

Oh yes, I was looking all right.

Sunday, 31 August

Articles about Paddy in all the newspapers. I bought several. (Was surprised by how cheap newspapers are compared to magazines. Good value. Funny the things you notice even when your life has fallen apart.) But the articles said nothing really. Just that he was a hunky ride, the poster boy for Irish politics.

There was no mention of me in any article. I should have felt relieved – at least Paddy wouldn't be annoyed – but instead I felt bereft, like I didn't exist.

Monday, 1 September 10.07

A call from *Irish Tatler* cancelling a job next week. The message was clear: no one likes a stylist who destroys the collections. Word gets round.

10.22

Mobile rang. Thought I recognized number, wasn't sure, then realized it was that Grace Gildee journalist woman again. Hounding me! I didn't pick up, but listened to the message. She was pushing for a face-to-face meeting and offering more money. Seven grand. She laughed and accused me of playing hardball. But I wasn't playing any kind of ball! Just wanted to be left in peace!

Tuesday, 2 September

Worst blow to date. Alicia Thornton was on the front cover of *VIP*, with the headline, 'How I won Quicksilver's heart'.

The nice man in the newsagent's gave me a glass of water and let me sit on his stool for a little while, until the dizziness passed.

Twelve pages of photos. Paddy was wearing make-up in them. Silicon-based foundation, with silicon-based primer, so that he looked plastic, like a Ken-doll.

I didn't know who had styled the shoot, but they'd had a very definite brief. Alicia (tall, thin, blonde bob, quite horsey-looking, but

not in nice way, not like Sarah Jessica Parker, more like Celine Dion. Neigh!) in a cream tweed Chanel dress and jacket. Paddy in a statesman-like suit (Zegna? Ford? Couldn't be sure) sitting at a mahogany desk, holding a silver pen like he was about to sign an important treaty, Alicia standing behind him, her hand on his shoulder, in a supportive-wife pose. Then, Paddy and Alicia in evening wear. Paddy in black tie and Alicia in a long, red, off-the-shoulder MaxMara. Red not her colour. Also a small glimpse of stubble under her right arm.

Worst of all, Paddy and Alicia in matching chambray jeans, polo-shirts with collars turned up, cable-knit jumpers slung around their necks and HOLDING TENNIS RACKETS! Like a cheap mail-order catalogue.

These photos managed, despite Paddy being the most handsome man alive, to make him look like a male model down on his luck.

The interview said they had known each other since they were teenagers, but had been seeing each other romantically, 'in a low-key' fashion, for the past seven months. Past seven months! I had been seeing him 'in a low-key' fashion for the past sixteen months! And no wonder he said we should be 'low-key'. He said life (mine) would be a living hell if I appeared at his side at official shindigs and red-carpet events. The press would torment me and I'd be obliged to wear a full face of make-up at all times, even when asleep, to avoid photos captioned with, 'Paddy's girl is spotty minger'. (During the summer there had been two mentions of me in gossip columns but Paddy's press office said I was helping him with clothing, and everyone seemed to believe that.) I had honestly thought he was thinking of my best interests. Instead he was keeping Alicia, his 'soul friend' (that's what he said in the interview), from finding out about me. How thick am I?

Later Tuesday

VIP photo-shoot was the final blow. I spent the day analysing the photos and brooding. What had this Alicia Thornton got that I hadn't? I was flicking through the pages, studying the pictures of him and her, searching for clues. Again and again. Trying to believe this was real. But I ended up staring at them too much so that it didn't look

like him any more, the way if you stare at your own face in the mirror for too long, it goes weird, almost scary, and doesn't look like you any more.

Even later Tuesday

Angry. Thinking dark, bitter thoughts. Full of bad, burny feeling. Breathless. Suddenly I dashed *VIP* magazine to the floor and thought, I deserve answers!

Drove to Paddy's apartment and rang bell. Rang it and rang it and rang it and rang it and rang it. Nothing happened but I decide, To hell with it, I'll stay! I'll wait until he comes back. Even if I have to wait a number of days. A couple of weeks, even. He'll have to come home eventually.

Bad, burny feeling made me strong and I felt I could wait for ever. If necessary.

I made plans. I rang Bridie and asked her to bring a sleeping bag and sandwiches. Also a flask of soup. 'But not minestrone,' I said. 'Nothing with lumps.'

'What?' she asked, incredulous. 'You are camped outside de Courcy's flat?'

'Must you dramatize everything?' I said. 'I'm just waiting for him to come home. But it may take a few days. So, like I said, a sleeping bag, sandwiches and soup. And remember: nothing with lumps.'

She was squawking about being worried about me and I had to hang up. Short of patience.

Time passed. Bad, burny feelings keeping me focused. I was unaware of discomfort, cold and need for loo. Like a Buddhist monk.

Intermittently I rang Paddy's bell, as much for something to do as anything else. Then I realized bad, burny feelings must have abated slightly as I was finding this quite boring. I rang Bridie again. Asked, 'Could you also bring the new *InStyle*, a Sudoku book and my biography of Diana Vreeland.'

'No!' she said. 'Lola, please! Please come away from there. You have lost your reason.'

'On the contrary,' I said. 'I've never been so sane in my life!'

'Lola, you are *stalking* him. He's a public figure, you could get into trouble! You could -'

Had to hang up again. I didn't savour being rude but I had no choice.

Entertained myself by ringing Paddy's doorbell a few more times, then my mobile rang. It was Bridie! She was at the gate! She couldn't get in because she didn't know the code!

'Have you a sleeping bag?' I asked her. 'And soup in a flask?'

'No.'

'Is Barry with you?' (Barry was her husband.)

'Yes, Barry's here beside me. You like Barry, don't you?'

Yes, but I had visions of her and Barry manhandling me into their car and driving me away. Not having it.

'Lola, please let us in.'

'No,' I said. 'Sorry.'

Then I switched my mobile off.

I continued to ring Paddy's bell, not expecting any result, when, all of sudden, the outline of a man appeared behind the textured glass door.

It was him! It was him! He'd been there all along! I was relieved, excited – then darker thoughts occurred: Why didn't he come down before now? Why must he further humiliate me?

But it wasn't him at all! Instead it was Spanish John, his driver. Knew him well because he sometimes collected and delivered me to Paddy. Although he had never been less than cordial to me, was quite frightened of him. A big, bulky type, who looked as if he could snap your neck in two as if it were a chicken wing in barbeque sauce.

'Spanish John,' I beseeched, 'I need to see Paddy. Let me in, I'm begging you.'

He shook head and rumbled, 'Go home, Lola.'

'Is she up there with him?' I asked.

Spanish John was a master of discretion (and not Spanish). All he said was, 'Come on, Lola, I'll drop you home.'

'She is up there!'

Gently, almost kindly, he steered me away from the door and towards Paddy's Saab.

'It's okay,' I said huffily. 'I've my own car, I can drive myself.'

'Good luck, Lola,' he said. With finality.

Such finality emboldened me to ask the question which I'd always wanted to know the answer to.

'By the way,' I said, 'I've always wondered. Why do they call you Spanish John when you're not Spanish?'

For a moment I thought he would step forward and do a very painful karate chop on me, then he seemed to relent. 'Just look at me.' He pointed to his red hair, white fizzog and many freckles. 'Did you ever see anyone who looks less Spanish?'

'Ah.' I understood. 'Irony?'

'Or possibly sarcasm. Never sure of distinction.'

Tuesday night, later still

That was it, had been turned away from Paddy's door, like a smelly beggar.

Sanity returned like a bucket of cold water thrown in my face and I was scandalized by my behaviour. I'd been like a mentally ill person. *Deranged*. Stalking Paddy. Yes, Bridie was right. *Stalking him*.

And I was appalled at the way I'd treated Bridie. Asking for a flask of soup. Where would Bridie get soup? Then refusing to tell her the gate code and hanging up on her. Bridie was a concerned friend!

I saw how mad I'd been, and the worst thing of all – while in the grip of my lunacy, I'd been convinced that I was perfectly sane.

The final blow. Couldn't go on like this, not eating, not sleeping, making a shambles of work, treating friends like servants and driving around the city without due care and attention . . .

I drove to Bridie's house. She was in her pyjamas and glad to see me.

I apologized profusely for the sleeping-bag business, then the gate-code business.

'Accepted,' Bridie said. 'Accepted. So what's up?'

'I've made a decision,' I said. 'Have decided to pack up my life and move to the end of the earth. To a place with no reminders of Paddy. You have a globe, haven't you?'

'Er, yes . . .'

(From studying geography when she was at school. She never throws anything away.)

On Bridie's globe the end of the earth (from Ireland) was New

Zealand. Fine. That would do. I believed they had lovely scenery. I could go on a *Lord of the Rings* tour.

But Bridie was the voice of reason. 'New Zealand is costly to get to,' she said. 'Also very far away.'

'But that is the very point,' I said. 'I have to get far away from here, so I don't see Alicia's picture every time I go to buy a bar of chocolate, or hear about Paddy on evening news, not that I watch evening news – God, it's so depressing, apart from that thing about the hens, did you see it?'

'What about Uncle Tom's cabin?' Barry suggested. Barry was also in his pyjamas.

Uncle Tom's cabin was a holiday home that Bridie's uncle Tom had in County Clare. Had been there for Treese's hen weekend. Broke many things. (Not me personally, just between the lot of us.)

'That's remote,' Barry said.

'It doesn't even have telly!' Bridie agreed. 'But if you go mental all on your own, you can be home in three hours, since they've opened the Kildare bypass.'

(The Kildare bypass is the best thing to ever happen to Bridie's extended family, as many of them live in Dublin but love Uncle Tom's cabin. It knocks forty-five minutes off the drive, Bridie's dad says. But what do I care? I am thirty-one and, if I don't kill myself, am likely to live another forty years. I can spend all that time sitting in a traffic jam outside Kildare and it will make no difference to anything.)

'Thank you for kindly offer,' I said. 'But I can't stay in Uncle Tom's cabin for ever. Some of your family might want to use it.'

'They won't, it's the end of the summer. Look,' she said. 'Your heart is broken and you feel like you'll never get over it. But you will and then you'll be sorry you moved to New Zealand and threw away your business here. Why not go to Clare for a couple of weeks to recuperate? Get Nkechi to keep things ticking over at work. How's your schedule at the moment? Busy?'

'No.' Not just because jobs kept being cancelled, but because of the time of year. I'd finished all the autumn/winter wardrobes for private clients – busy, rich women, who had no time to shop but needed to look stylish, businesslike, pulled-together. The next demanding time would be the Christmas party season, which kicked

off the minute Hallowe'en was out of the way. There was no need to start on it for a couple of weeks. I mean, there was always work which could be done. I could be taking buyers from Brown Thomas and Costume and other good shops to lunch so they would earmark their best dresses for me and not for other stylists. Cut-throat business, styling. Really vicious. Only so many good clothes to go around and the competition is fierce. People don't realize. They think it's all great girly fun, wafting around with expensive frocks, making everyone look fabulous. Far from it.

Bridie said, 'And when you come back, if things are as bad as ever, then you can go to New Zealand.'

'I know when I am being humoured, Bridie. The laugh will be on other side of your fizzog when I am living in a nice little house in Rotorua. However, I will accept your kindly offer.'

Even later still

Driving home

Suddenly realized that Bridie's pyjamas were not in fact pyjamas but strange 'leisure' pants for lounging in at home. Mail-order. Would swear to it. Under normal circumstances the shock would have swerved me off the road and straight into a pole. Even as things were, I was pretty disturbed. Next she'll be wearing them out in public. She needed to be taken in hand. Barry should have a word but, now that I remembered, he was also wearing a pair. He was her enabler. She would never get help as long as he was encouraging her.

Wednesday, 3 September 10.00

Went to my 'office' (Martine's Patisserie). I would have worked from home but my home was too small. That was the price you paid for living in the city centre. (Another price was drunken men having grunty wrestling matches outside your bedroom window at 4 a.m.)

I ordered hot chocolate and an apricot Danish. Normally I loved apricot Danishes so much, I had to ration myself. I could eat ten in a row, no bother. But today the jammy glaze looked revolting and the apricot stared up at me like a baleful eye. Had to push it away. I took a sip of my hot chocolate and immediately wanted to vomit.

Bell tinged. The arrival of Nkechi. Everyone looked. Plenty to look

at. Nigerian, excellent posture, braids hanging all the way down her back, very long legs, then a really quite large bottom perched on top of them. But Nkechi never tried to hide her bottom. She was proud of it. Fascinating to me. Irish girls' lives were a constant quest for bottom-disguising or bottom-reducing clothing tactics. We can learn much from other cultures.

Nkechi, although young (twenty-three), is a genius. Like the time Rosalind Croft (wife of dodgy rich bloke Maxwell Croft) was going to a benefit dinner at the Mansion House. The neckline on her dress was so fashion-forward that none of the jewellery was working with it. We tried everything. A nightmare! Mrs Croft was about to ring up and cancel, when Nkechi said, 'I have it!' And whipped off her scarf, her own scarf (that she bought in a charity shop for 3 euro), draped it around Mrs Croft's neck and saved the day.

'Nkechi,' I said. 'I am going to take a couple of weeks off and go down to Uncle Tom's cabin.'

Nkechi familiar with same. She was there for Treese's hen night. Now that I thought of it, she broke the toaster, trying to fit in an entire bagel. Quite spectacular carnage. Black smoke started spewing from the side of toaster, followed by a big whoosh of flame. Also she broke a ceramic dolphin which had been in Bridie's family for thirty-eight years. She'd been dancing drunkenly and did a big high kick which sent the dolphin flying, like a rugby ball over the bar, into a wall, where it smashed into smithereens. But it was a hen night, these things happen. At least no one ended up in hospital. Not like at Bridie's hen night.

I said, 'I know it sounds dramatic, packing up my life, but really, Nkechi, the state of me. I can't work, can't sleep, my digestive system's in flitters.'

She said, 'I think it's good idea. Take yourself out of circulation for while, before you damage our reputation even further.'

An awkward little silence ensued.

Just one slight quibble about Nkechi – she's an excellent stylist, really really excellent, but slightly lacking in TLC. Part of a stylist's job is to prevent the client going out looking like a total tit. It's our job to protect them from the gossip columnists' harsh comments. If the client has a wrinkly décolletage, we steer them away from plunging

necklines. If they have knees like a bloodhound's jowls, we suggest floor-length gowns. But subtly. Kindly.

However, Nkechi wasn't always as diplomatic as I would have preferred. For example, the time she was dressing SarahJane Hutchinson. Poor woman. Her husband had left her for a young Filipino boy. Public humiliation. This was the first charity event she was attending as a deserted wife so it was important that she looked and felt good. She tried on a very pretty strapless Matthew Williamson, but it was obvious it wasn't working. Everything going south. I was just about to tactfully suggest a Roland Mouret (gave much more support, had built-in but hidden corset) when Nkechi exclaimed, 'You can't go out with those bingo wings! You need sleeves, girlfriend!'

I said, 'Nkechi, I would appreciate it if you could take over the reins for the short time I'll be away.'

'Sure,' she says. 'Take over. Will do.'

I tried to swallow away my anxiety. Everything was under control. Nkechi would do it well.

Possibly too well.

I didn't like the way she said, 'Take over.'

'Nkechi,' I say, 'you are a genius. You will go on to be a brilliant stylist, possibly the greatest of us all. But for the moment, just keep things ticking over. Please do not do a putsch on me while I'm gone. Please do not set up on your own. Please do not poach my richest clients. Be my friend. Remember: your name means "loyal" in Yoruba.'

10.47

Trailing dispiritedly home to pack when I see someone waiting outside my building. A woman. Tall, jeans, boots, hoodie, short spiky blonde hair. Leaning against railings, smoking. Two men passed her and said something. Her response was carried to me on the air. *Go fuck yourselves.*

Who was she? What fresh hell? Then I knew! It was that journalist, Grace Gildee! I was being door-stepped, like . . . like a drug baron or . . . or . . . a paedophile!

I paused in my tracks. Where should I go? Flee, flee! But flee where? I had a perfect right to go to my flat. After all, I lived there.

Too late! She'd seen me!

'Lola?' Smiling, smiling, speedily stubbing out her cigarette with a nifty swivel of her ankle.

'Hi!'

Extending her hand. 'Grace Gildee. Lovely to meet you.'

Her warm, smooth hand was in mine before I could stop it.

'No,' I said, jerking my hand away. 'Leave me alone. I'm not talking to you.'

'Why?' she asked.

I ignored her and fumbled in my bag for my keys. Fully intended not to make eye contact but, against my will, found myself looking straight into her face.

Up close, I could see she wasn't wearing make-up. Unusual. But she had no need to. Very attractive in a tomboy sort of way. Hazel-coloured eyes and a scatter of freckles across nose. The kind of woman who could run out of shampoo and have no problem washing hair with washing-up liquid. Good in an emergency, I suspected.

'Lola,' she says, 'you can trust me.'

'You can trust me!' I exclaimed. 'You're a cliché!'

Nonetheless, something about her. Persuasive.

In a soft voice, she said, 'You really can trust me. I'm not like other journalists. I know what he's like.'

I stopped twirling my hand around the hidden depths of my bag, seeking my keys. I was mesmerized. Like being hypnotized by a snake.

'I've known him half his life,' she said.

All of sudden, I wanted to put my head on the shoulder of her hoodie and sob and let her stroke my hair.

But that was what she would have wanted. That's what they all do, journalists. Pretend they're your friends. Like the time SarahJane Hutchinson was interviewed at the Children at Risk Ball. The journalist woman was all lovely, asking where SarahJane got her gorgeous dress. And her delicious jewellery. And who did her hair? *Trust me, trust me, trust me.* Then the headline was:

Mutton Dressed As Pig

What forty-something, recently deserted wife has lost the run of herself? Running around town dressed in her

teenage daughter's clothes. A bid to recapture lost youth? Or a bid to recapture lost husband? Forget it, babes. Either way, it ain't working.

My hand closed over my keys. Thank God. I had to get into my flat. I had to get away from this Grace Gildee.