

Choral Society

Prue Leith

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Extract

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Chapter One

The women behind the counter were filling orders and shouting to customers over the lunchtime din.

‘Two chicken pesto?’

‘Hold the mayo?’

‘To go, or eat in?’

‘Want mustard with that?’

‘Any beverage?’

‘Still or sparkling?’

‘You paying separately?’

Only in this city, thought Lucy. Their speed and skill were marvellous. At her end of the counter, three women, Korean maybe, were rolling dough into long rectangles, slamming baking trays into ovens and pulling out cooked loaves which they flipped onto boards. One hand held the bread flat with a padded glove while the other, with a few quick saws, split them horizontally. Down the line, more women, those doing the shouting and serving, used latex-gloved hands to turn the still steaming bread into sandwiches. From the refrigerated wells in the counter they deftly extracted prepped ingredients (cheeses, grilled veg, rocket, tomatoes, salamis, chicken, ham, beef, you name it) to cover the bread in a thick even layer.

Their hands flashed and their arms weaved across each other’s as they reached for ingredients, drizzled sauces, flicked spices, scooped salsas, spread pastes, sprinkled bacon bits or pine-nuts.

On with the crusty top, a firm but careful push to consolidate the mass into a sandwich, then into the paper wrapper and over the counter to the customer.

The smell of hot bread and coffee, the crowded, noisy, none-too-pristine sandwich shop, the Manhattan lunch-hour ritual, produced in Lucy a wash of pleasure. I love this city, she thought. This is real food, cheap, fresh, and available on almost every block.

But her pleasure was almost immediately followed by a familiar backwash of grief. That's widowhood, thought Lucy, it permeates everything, gets into your life like fog through the cracks. For over thirty years she'd telephoned her husband from all over the world and he'd shared her pleasure (or disappointment or fury) from an Islington armchair and, later, from a Cotswold bed.

David had hated 'abroad', but he enjoyed her delight in travel, food, friends. He liked her to do what she liked to do, and he wanted blow-by-blow bulletins. If she didn't telephone him at seven p.m. every day, he'd fret.

Lucy looked at her watch. It would be just seven p.m. in London now. David had been dead for nearly six months, but some inner clock still told her, wherever she was, when it was time for that phone-call. Thirty odd years of pre-supper drinks or drinks-time telephone calls could not, it seemed, be expunged.

Yet it should be liberating, she thought, that I can now go anywhere I like without worrying about anyone, without checking in, without reporting back. I could disappear for days, maybe weeks, and no one would object – or indeed notice. That's good, isn't it? It's freedom, independence, self-sufficiency . . .

Or will be one day. Meanwhile, she thought wryly, there's no comfort like food. She turned her attention to her sandwich.

The layer of mozzarella and avocado on the base crust was receiving a libation of olive oil and a scattering of black pepper. It set her mouth watering. Why, she asked herself, am I eternally hungry?

Her mind then made a well-trodden journey. That sandwich was probably seven hundred calories on its own. She should be in the

salad line, not the sandwich one. Indeed, she should be skipping lunch altogether since this evening, and every evening this week, she'd be eating in a new, fashionable restaurant and telling herself it was her bounden duty, as food critic for London's *HOT Restaurant* magazine, to sample every dish she possibly could. She'd have to lose a stone when she got back to London.

Lucy had these interior conversations with herself all the time, especially about what she wasn't going to eat or drink. Monday I'll go on a diet; I'll skip lunch today; tonight I won't drink at all. But she knew she wouldn't keep these promises, any more than she'd keep the ones about taking up swimming or joining a gym.

Her sandwich in a bag, Lucy started up Fifth Avenue, intending to walk all the way to 58th Street, but somehow her arm stuck itself out at the sight of a yellow cab and five minutes later she was at her hotel. Before she went in, she picked up a double espresso at the deli opposite. In the lobby of the hotel, she installed herself in a corner by the window, and ate her sandwich and drank her coffee, alternately reading the *New York Times* and watching the world go by. It was very pleasant, and the sandwich was everything it should be, except, as always in the US, it was super-sized. But of course she ate the lot. It would have been wicked to waste it after all.

She liked the Winchester and always stayed there if she could. The hotel had certainly seen better times – there was no room service, the shower-head needed fixing and the curtains did not quite meet. But her room was large and airy with high ceilings and a big firm bed.

And the staff all knew her. They'd been there for ever: the cheerful doorman, the woman pulling and inserting plugs on the ancient switchboard, the trio of old men who took turns manning the hundred-year-old lift, swinging the lever to stop the car precisely at floor level with one hand, clattering the metal gate open with the other. And she liked the chute into which, at any level, you could drop your mail and it would fall through the floors to the mail-box in the lobby. Lucy never wrote letters or postcards –

email had done away with that – but it pleased her that the mail-chute still worked.

In spite of the double espresso, the combination of full stomach, jetlag, and the sight of her bed, made a siesta irresistible. I'll just have half an hour shut-eye, she thought.

She woke three hours later, refreshed and eager to get to her desk, which she was glad to see was a decent one. What modern hotel would provide a proper desk that did not have to double as a dressing-table? She wished she could write about the faded grandeur of the Winchester and its like – very few left now – or Cosi's honest sandwiches. But the *HOT Restaurant* brief did not include unfashionable hotels or old-style sandwich chains. Lucy felt a small shadow of despair, a fleeting awareness of being out of her time.

Once she could sit in this room, or one very like it, and write a well-researched article about the influence of MFK Fisher on modern food writers, or the vestiges of 18th-century kitchen English (like skillet or scallion) still current in American speech. But today's editors wanted punchy pieces about scandals and food scares, or gossip about trendy people and fashionable food.

She shook her head, irritated with herself for brooding, and pressed the key. The screen flickered and steadied. She read:

Lucy Barnes. New York Restaurants for *HOT Restaurant*, May issue. 1200 words

One of the appealing aspects of New York is its unabashed love affair with itself, its pride and confidence in its brashness, its bigness, its New Yorkness. Whether in the famous art deco skyscrapers, the 80s' bling of the Trump Tower or today's elegant new MoMA, New York architecture has always been uplifting, sometimes breathtaking.

So I confidently expected the new Time Warner Centre with its 'vertical retail' to be a breathtaking success, gleaming with money well spent, echoing to the tap-tap of well-heeled

women on marble floors. It is not. It is positively depressing: for all the expensive expanses of atrium and lobbies, the comfortable sofas, enigmatic art installations and whole floor of restaurants, I cannot fathom why anyone goes there. The ground floor is uninspired, the shops unexciting and the restaurant floor gloomy. It is also extremely expensive.

Even with an exchange rate of two dollars to the pound, Barbarella is as over-priced as it is over-hyped. A narrow windowless room with a few closely packed tables and a preposterous bar of giant dimensions. A glass of water costs \$10 and the cheapest wine . . .

Boring, thought Lucy, but it will have to do. She worked on, tapping the keys fast, eyes on the screen. She finished the piece, and checked her word count. Years of journalism had given her the ability to produce the right number of words as if by instinct. She was only forty words over, but she edited fast, losing those that were unnecessary. Editing down was a job she liked, knowing that her copy would be the better for it. She was running a final spell check when a window popped up:

‘You have mail. Two new messages.’

One was from Sandra, her editor on the daily *Globe*, the other from her daughter, Grace.

She opened this one first:

Mum, what are you doing in NewYork? Don't you ever stop working? When will you be back? Archie and I wanted to come down this weekend. It's half term and we've got tickets for Stratford.

Lucy raised an eyebrow, and mentally added ‘and you could babysit the children while we are at the theatre, do our laundry and cook Sunday lunch.’

She tapped her reply: *Back Friday morning. See you for supper then.*
XX Mum

Still, she was glad they were coming. It would be good to see her daughter and even her ultra-conservative son-in-law Archie. But mostly she looked forward to having the grandchildren around, adding noise and activity to a near-empty house now more used to silence. And having people to cook for.

Lucy read her daughter's email again and found she slightly resented the demanding tone. She loved Grace of course, but she could be taxing. Since David's death, Grace had taken to dishing out advice with a subtext about retiring gracefully. Get a decent haircut; buy better clothes; spend time with your grandchildren; join a choir.

Lucy opened the email from Sandra and was surprised at its length. Her boss's editing skills had honed her writing to terse essentials. Her communications seldom exceeded 50 words.

Dear Lucy,

You aren't going to like this and there is no way I can wrap it up, but I'm afraid we will not be renewing your contract next month.

This is not personal. You are a great cookery writer and you've done wonderful copy for the Globe over the last twelve years. But you will know that we are keen to attract a younger readership and the research done by Focus has identified that the younger reader, though very into food, is more interested in the 'celebrity/dining-out/what's hot' scene than in real cooking. If they do cook, they want to do it quickly, with fashionable ingredients ready prepared — hardly your sort of thing, you will agree. (Your famous piece on osso bucco, 900 words if I remember right, is a memorable piece of writing, but when confronted with it as part of the research, the target audience failed to get it at all.)

I'm sorry I didn't manage to catch you before you left for NYC. But the decision was only made the day you left. I'd have liked to have at least bought you one more good lunch.

Of course we will publish the two pieces we have in the pipeline, but April 8th will be the last.

I'm so sorry Lucy. If you can bear it, let's have lunch anyway.

Sandra

P.S. You should know I have engaged Orlando Black as our new food columnist. The page is to have a complete revamp, plus colour.

Lucy read the email without moving a muscle. Part of her mind told her it could not be true, that they wouldn't, they couldn't. The *Globe* was one of the few daily papers that had not gone down market, that still published serious stuff. And Sandra *loved* her writing. In a memory flash of a second, Lucy remembered a whole hour's conversation, held not a month ago, when they'd been plotting a series of pieces on sweet yeasted doughs: gugelhopf; savarin; brioche, rum baba, pannetone. She'd have followed Carême from the kitchens of Talleyrand to the Russian court, and the migration of pastry cooks from Florence to Paris in the wake of Catherine de Medici. It was to be a little bit of history and some perfect, infallible recipes with all the butter, cream, rum and brandy that such lavish times demanded. An antidote to today's diet-mania. Sandra had even agreed to illustrate the piece with Carême's own drawings.

Sandra could not be sacking her. Her reputation as a writer rested significantly on the *Globe* job. If she lost her column she'd no longer be in the top tier of journalists – she'd be a mere freelance with a monthly column in *HOT Restaurant*, a minor magazine read principally by chefs.

When she got to the P.S., disbelief gave way to rage. Her mouth and eyes opened wide and she felt the sudden heat of pumping blood. She jumped up from the chair, crying out, 'Orlando Black! Orlando bloody Black! It's ridiculous!'

Orlando Black! He was a minnow. A silly, pretty, telly-made know-nothing, whose gastronomic celebrity was founded on his making a passable Spanish omelette on some reality show. They could not do it. How *could* they do it?

Orlando Black was a fake. Even his name was made up. And could he write? Unlikely in the extreme. Certainly he could not speak the Queen's English. 'Wow, brilliant' was about the limit of his verbal expression.

Lucy rubbed her hands over her face and again thought this could not be happening. Weaned on Elizabeth David and André Simon, she was in an honourable line of serious authors from both sides of the Atlantic: Jane Grigson, James Beard, Julia Child, Matthew Fort.

To replace her with a non-writer was bad enough, but Orlando Black was not even a restaurant chef. If they'd sacked her for Jamie Oliver or Gordon Ramsay maybe she'd have understood. Celebrity is a powerful seller of newspapers, and at least they could cook. But to replace her with an androgynous show-host of vacuous intellect and zero talent . . .

Lucy stood at the window, seeing nothing. She still had her hands on her hot cheeks, but now her fingers were wet with tears. Her mind ranted on: was her knowledge, and yes, scholarship, to count for nothing? She belonged to that top echelon of food writers who read widely, who knew the social importance of food, who could cook themselves. Who published good, well-researched and well-tested cookery books that people read and *used*.

She started to weep in earnest, and went to the bathroom to bury her face in the bath towel. She carried it to the bedroom and sat on the edge of the bed, rocking and sobbing in uneven gulps.

Lucy realised she was crying as much for her dead husband as for the loss of her job. She wanted David. She needed him, damn it, needed to shout down the phone. She wanted his steadying voice, his balance, his ability to make her laugh when she was crying.

Oh, how *could* the *Globe* replace her with a pipsqueak who rose to fame because he dyed his hair orange, wore ridiculous chef's pants in green checks and pranced about saying 'Cool'?

She stared at the carpet, tears running down her cheeks.

Ten minutes later she straightened up and said aloud, 'Bloody hell, this is ridiculous.' She rubbed her face with the towel, flung it in the general direction of the bathroom and strode back to her desk. She emailed her copy to *HOT Restaurant*, pulled on her coat and stamped out of the hotel.

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She took a taxi downtown to Rivington Street and was greeted by a blast of good smells and convivial noise at 'inoteca. Good, she thought, comforting Italian food is what I need. I'll have ribollita, that wonderful Tuscan soup with bread in it, followed by pasta. Or maybe risotto. Anyhow, something made of solid carbohydrate.

Chapter Two

Rebecca stared at the jumble of clothes on her bed, her fingers raking her hair. Why am I stressing about what to wear, she thought, it's not as if the place is going to be stuffed full of gorgeous men.

She pulled on the turquoise T-shirt for the second time, now over her sea-green panelled skirt, which, long and flowing, hugged her hips but flared below her knee. It made her feel jaunty, yet elegant.

She rummaged in her belt drawer and extracted the string-and-shell affair she'd borrowed last week from her daughter's bedroom. She felt a twinge of guilt. Angelica minded if her mother took things from her drawers. Of course she does, thought Rebecca, no young woman wants her mother rummaging through her things – think what she might find! But what Angelica did not understand is that *this* mother would never be shocked: not by purple condoms or tart's underwear, rude love letters or sex toys from Ann Summers. She supposed a packet of cocaine would disturb her, or a briefcase full of stolen money or casino chips, or half a jack of whisky under the pillow. But there was no chance of finding any of these things in Angelica's room. Angelica was the most sensible of daughters, with no apparent hint of rebellion in her soul. So presumably she just didn't want her mother in her room, period.

Rebecca acknowledged this fact and did not resent it, but she did not understand it. She never minded who borrowed things

from her. She loved to lend her friends her clothes, her jewellery, or anything. She liked nothing better than Angelica borrowing from her, which she did less than she used to. It was funny, but when Angelica returned stuff to her, Rebecca always felt a little shaft of rejection. She would have liked her daughter to keep whatever it was, or at least to want to keep it. She always offered, and Angelica always refused.

When Angelica was little Rebecca would let her play with her jewels (the good stuff as well as the beads and junk), use her expensive make-up as face paint, ruin her Emma Hope shoes by traipsing round the garden in them. She'd never minded other people driving her car, sleeping in her bed, borrowing their flat if they were away. It drove Bill, her ex, mad. He used to say she'd lend a perfect stranger her toothbrush.

Rebecca slid the belt through her fingers. It was a mix of turquoise and orange macramé with two-inch discs of mother-of-pearl. I must put it back before she comes home for the summer, she thought, knowing the chances were she'd forget. She fastened it low over her hips and turned to the mirror, an expectant smile on her face.

But the smile faded. It would not do: she looked ready for lunch under a beach umbrella, not a singing group down the seamy end of Notting Hill. She took the belt off and dropped it on the bed, followed by the skirt and top.

She considered her lilac tunic, made of slightly knobbly alpaca. It was months since she'd bought it but she hadn't worn it yet. She felt the fabric, cool and heavy to the touch. It would hang well and look great with jeans. But she didn't feel like jeans.

Don't dither, she told herself, and put on the navy trouser suit with the pink shirt. Nothing wrong with good classic clothes, and you don't get more classic than YSL. Turning this way and that in front of the mirror, she smiled gamely.

Oh God, she thought, shrugging off the jacket, I look like a secretary. Dull, dull, dull.

She went back to the black dress she'd started with, muttering, That's it, no more faffing about. Get *on* with it. Just go.

Rebecca scooped up the pile of clothes and took them back to the walk-in cupboard. She dumped them on top of the laundry bin, promising herself she'd sort them out when she got back. She could have left them on the bed of course, but she had a rule, never confessed to anyone but firmly held since adolescence: at least leave the bedroom looking good. You never know.

One more look in the mirror, and this time Rebecca's smile was real. The thin jersey dress had little cap sleeves and a scoop neck which showed off her tan – fake, but who was to know? – and the combination of black and the cut of the skirt turned her from a size twelve into a ten.

Hurriedly, she reached for her handbag, the navy Prada bucket, but it was quite wrong with the black.

By the time she'd transferred everything to the cream Gucci with all the pockets and buckles, and found the black and cream wooden beads from Carole Bamford, Rebecca was definitely, definitely late.

She hurried along the street, striding as wide as her narrow skirt allowed, feeling good now. She was pleased that she could still put that swing into her gait that made her look more forty than fifty (OK fifty-four), at least from behind. Rebecca was proud of her legs, especially when they were tanned, which somehow disguised any hint of cellulite. And she knew she had a great bum. I should hope so too, she thought: all that puffing and heaving at Pilates must do something.

This end of Westbourne Grove always struck Rebecca as another country, or countries. The bookshops were Arabic, the butchers halal, the newsagents Pakistani; the restaurants were Thai, Indian, Chinese, Lebanese, Greek. You didn't hear English spoken for the first couple of blocks, not until you got halfway down, to the organic food shops. From there on to the Portobello Road, almost everyone in the designer shoe shops, fancy beauty therapists and chic cafés

was white and loaded. Most were female: yummy mummies in their natural habitat.

God, she thought, with a stab of longing, I wish I was rich.

Rebecca lived at the Paddington end of Westbourne Grove, but the Notting Hill end was where she knew she belonged. Getting her legs waxed in Elemental cost her £80 but the reverential attention they paid her calves and knees as she floated off with the whale music made it worth the money. Sometimes she felt guilty, knowing she could pay £17 at her end of the Grove, where Bella did a perfectly good job in her basement room under the mobile phone shop. But the cramped cubicles, peeling ceilings and the therapist's nylon tabard were too upsetting. There, she felt her toes curl in protest as she put her shoes back on, fearful of touching the horrible lino.

But tonight she was not spending money on what Bill called fripperies. No one could disapprove of educative evening classes. According to the Sing Your Heart Out website, she was going to 'experience the endorphin rush of deep breathing combined with the emotional satisfaction of singing with others in harmony'. Well, good, she thought, I like singing a lot, but what I want is to meet new people, preferably male. Unlikely, I know, but I have to make the effort.

As she swung down Ledbury Road she tried not to be distracted by the designer clothes so artfully displayed in the shop windows. She kept her mind on the task in hand: to find a new man. She'd been on the hunt now for quite a few years. She wanted a permanent chap. Of course she would never admit it to anyone: she was terrific at pretending the single life was just fine and dandy, allowing her to play the field, have fun, stay young. But lovers were getting harder to find, and she wasn't made for celibacy – too withering and lonely. It hadn't been so bad when Angelica was at primary school and took a lot of her time, but the last ten years since Angelica had gone to boarding school had been hard.

Her married friends were no help; they'd written her off as far

as men went. If they asked her to dinner these days they never invited a man for Rebecca, but stuck her next to Gran or between a couple of gay blokes or at best, twinned her with some old boy whose wife was in hospital.

They probably thought she was beyond desire, too old to even think about love, or sex. Or maybe they thought she couldn't sustain a relationship? OK, she had to admit her record so far wasn't great, but she'd been really unlucky. Her first marriage, to Kieran, had been a mistake from the start. They'd both been too young, and at least they'd sensibly given up on it as soon as they realised the relationship was going nowhere, and before they had children. Lots of people make a disastrous first marriage. She didn't think it really counted.

And she'd stuck with Bill for thirteen long years, hadn't she? Even though he drank like a fish?

And then, she thought, a little lick of anger echoing a long-ago fire, I'd have made the thing with André work if he'd had the guts to leave his wife. She'd wasted six years of her life waiting for him to do the deed, but of course he never did. Men are such hopeless wimps.

And then the divine Israeli, Joseph, had turned out to be a world-class con-man. Any woman would have fallen for him. They'd married within three weeks of meeting and Rebecca had gloried in the recklessness of it, the romance of a whirlwind courtship and flying off to Tel Aviv where he'd showered her with gold necklaces and lovely clothes, and returned with armloads of presents for Angelica. He'd been wonderful with Angelica. She'd really believed he would be the perfect father. Now her jaw tightened at the memory of her bank account emptied and the trail of debts she'd had to honour.

None of those disasters were my fault, she told herself. Some women are just unlucky with men and I'm one of them. But, hey, that doesn't mean I'll always be unlucky. Somewhere, sometime I might meet the perfect man. Maybe tonight, who knows?

Chapter Three

Joanna sometimes took visiting colleagues from the States down the Portobello on a Saturday. They found its mixture of real antiques, tat and rip-off merchants quaint. But otherwise she seldom ventured this far north, and certainly not at night. And never, until now, alone.

So she was suspicious, and a little scared, of the young black men in hoodies and puffa jackets slouching in the hall doorway. She hesitated on the bottom step, forcing herself to smile at them and say good evening. One lad, who looked more fearsome than the rest with a black bandana round his head and wraparound dark glasses, replied, 'Good evenin' to you, lady' and opened the door for her. Relieved, and a little ashamed of herself, she smiled her thanks and walked in.

Joanna was early. Anxious about the singing session, she'd determined to check the lie of the land in advance. She hated not being on top of things.

The internal door to the main hall was open, and she went in. The room (tall Gothic windows, wooden stage at one end, plastic stacking chairs, neon lighting hanging a long way down from the high arched ceiling) had the sad look of community halls the world over.

She lifted one of the grey chairs off the stack and staked her claim with her suit jacket over the back and her briefcase under. Then, thinking that the jacket was too expensive to lose, she put

it on again. Irritated with herself, she thought, do you really think your fellow singers are going to nick your jacket? But she kept it on.

It was not like her to be so nervous, but she knew without a shadow of doubt that she was about to make a fool of herself. She would be the one unable to make a sound, any sound, come out of her mouth.

Joanna was not used to failure and in an effort to bolster her confidence she ran through a quick list of her upside: head girl at school, a First at Oxford, still a club-standard tennis player for all that her legs, now screened from view under white trousers, were fifty something. Pretty stylish on the ski-slopes, she was also a good public speaker who could acquit herself creditably on television. For pity's sake, she lectured the timid non-singer inside her, I've managed hundreds of people, bought and sold businesses, made large amounts of money – still do. I'm a grown up, confident woman: I've even been given a gong by the Queen, for God's sake. I should be able to handle my downside. So, I can't sing. Big deal. Lots of people can't sing. But the difference is, I'm dealing with it.

But that cringing twelve-year-old was still there. The girl who, fresh from junior school and with all the self-confidence she'd imbibed with the constant praise of teachers and proud parents, had wanted to be in the senior school choir. As soon as she'd seen them processing into church in their red tunics and white surplices she'd wanted to be one of them.

It wasn't just the choir-boy costumes. The choristers wore special school blazers that set them apart as better than the other students. And they had a common room with a piano and a radiogram in it, and they had a permanent 'town pass' because they were trusted to walk to the cathedral without a detour to the shops.

No doubt about it, the choir was the key to status, privilege and a red velvet collar on your standard-issue grey flannel jacket. The school orchestra won prizes and several ex-students were successful

musicians, but it was the choir that was the pride of the school – events in the cathedral were always packed out and they had even made recordings which were on sale in the high street music store.

The head of music (and choir master), Mr Randall, was a legend in the Melbourne music world and everyone was in awe of him. But when Joanna and a bunch of other hopefuls from the new year's intake at the Peter and Paul Academy of Melbourne appeared for their choir audition, she'd never spoken to him, nor he to her.

Now he did so. Squinting myopically at his notebook, he had barked,

'Joanna Carey, you first.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Speak up, girl. If you cannot project your voice so I can hear you talk, how do you think you are going to be able to sing?'

'Sorry, sir,' Joanna had mumbled.

Mr Randall rolled his eyes to heaven in a gesture that even the child Joanna recognised as theatrical, *God give me patience*. 'Joanna, what have I just said?' he asked.

'You said to speak up, I think, sir.'

'You think? You think?'

She felt the hot blush rising up her neck and cheeks as Mr Randall ordered her to stand next to him at the piano. Then he addressed the rest of the class.

'Right, we will start with Joanna. The rest of you can sit down and listen.'

As the class settled on the floor, Joanna felt herself, tall and awkward, being abandoned to her fate. Now the only one standing, she felt peeled of the protection of her peers, exposed to the terrifying Mr Randall. Oh, why had she ever thought of being in the choir?

Mr Randall now ignored her as he instructed the rest of them.

'What you are listening for are two things: is she in tune? And if she is, then do you like the sound she makes? Being in tune is

good, but there are plenty of singers who hit the note but sound unpleasant, if not atrocious, and they will not be in my choir.'

He made her stand up straight, feet slightly apart, head up, hands by her sides. And then he hit Middle C a couple of times and told her, 'I will play a note, and you will sing it, loud and clear. OK?'

She nodded, really frightened now.

He played Middle C again, and sang Aaaaa, long and strong. 'Right, your turn.'

Joanna took a deep breath, her chin up, determined to do her best, and sang the note. She managed a steady sound and held it for as long, she hoped, as Mr Randall had done. Then she dared look at Mr Randall's face, hoping for encouragement. But he just frowned, and struck D. Joanna followed the piano, singing the notes with increasing confidence. He then played a short phrase, the first three notes of 'Three Blind Mice', and she sang that too.

The group sat silent, conscious of their own ordeal to come.

Eventually, Mr Randall turned to the class. 'So, was she in tune or not?'

Waiting for a steer from the master, no one dared venture an opinion. Impatient, he snapped, 'You have ears, haven't you? Well, was she in tune or not?'

Finally a gangly lad with glasses said, 'I think she was flat on the high notes, sir.'

'Well said, young man. Too right she was. Flat as a pancake. And did you like the sound she made? Was it pleasing to your ear?'

Again, he got no answer.

'Heavens above, has the cat got all your tongues? It's a simple question. Did you like it? Did you like the sound? Do you like notes sung flat?'

Heads reluctantly shook, and Joanna burst into tears, her face aflame.

Mr Randall turned to her.

'Oh, for goodness sake, girl, what are you crying for? Yes, we have established you cannot sing and you won't be in the choir,

but it's not the end of the world. You can presumably play hockey, or join the cookery club or something. So off you go now.'

And that had been that. No jacket with a red collar, no making that wonderful, all encompassing, magical sound with a band of friends. No belonging to the choir. At first she had tried to tell herself she didn't want to be in the choir anyway with such a horrible teacher, but she knew that the music students would go through fire for him. If you were in the choir, you became one of his protected pets and he was nice to you; no one ever wanted to leave the choir.

Now, forty years later, here she was in this little community hall, determined to overcome the legacy of Mr Randall.

She pretended an interest in the pile of exercise mats and plastic steps for aerobics classes in one corner. Joanna used to enjoy step classes at her gym and was good at the routines. She liked the competitive nature of them. But now, at fifty-five, her knees were getting a bit dodgy and aerobics made them worse. So she swam a lot and used the gym machines with care.

She wandered over to the upright piano, rather battered but a Steinway, and looked through the music sheets lying on top of it: *Singing for Beginners*; *Songs from the Musicals*; Schubert; Mozart.

A pile of sheet music for 'Cry Me a River' gave her the nasty thought that they might be expected to read music. She could not do that either. Maybe I should just quit now, she thought, I don't have to do this. I could just grab my briefcase and go. Walk away.

But suddenly there were footsteps and voices in the hall and four or five people came in and it was too late to leave. One man (tall, black, forty-five-ish, maybe Jamaican) was wheeling a bicycle.

'Hi lady, you here for the singing?' he said. He balanced the bike with one hand, and stretched the other towards Joanna with a big beamy smile. 'I'm Nelson. I teach this class.' He waved to include the others. 'Fraid I can't introduce nobody to nobody. But when everyone's here we'll go round the room and get the formalities done. Meanwhile, welcome.'

By the time Nelson had propped his bike against the wall, and cheerfully explained that he'd had his last two bikes stolen from the street outside, another ten or so people had drifted in and they got down to business.

'We'll start,' Nelson said, 'with something simple to break the ice.'

It was a vaguely familiar gospel tune that Joanna realised anyone would get in five seconds, and she knew she could sing it if she was alone.

But with the others there, it was the same old story. Her throat tightened almost at once and as the familiar ache overlaid the wheezy near-silence of her efforts, she felt a wash of frustration and disappointment.

Everyone else, of course, sang beautifully. With Nelson's encouragement they were belting their hearts out, and sounding mellow and rich.

Joanna mimed along and watched the others. Some of them, especially the younger ones, were smiling at each other across the room as they sang, their faces softened and lit by the pleasure of it.

It was preposterous at her age, she thought, but she could feel the prick of tears behind her eyes. Oh, why can't I do that? What's the matter with me? *Why* can't I sing?

She was standing next to Nelson, who would have to turn fully to verify that she was not singing. This was a relief to her. She did not want to be shown up, now she just wanted to get the class over with and go home.

Chapter Four

Rebecca had walked fast but the class had obviously started. She could hear singing through the open windows of the community hall. For a second she considered ducking out, but the singing sounded really good, some sort of gospel hymn she guessed. Besides, she could hear male voices in there. She listened intently, trying to count them. Half a dozen at least, she thought. Worth a little look.

Her mind made up, Rebecca swung into the room with drummed-up confidence. She dropped her bag beside a row of others against the wall, hoping it wouldn't get nicked.

About twenty people were standing in a loose circle, feet apart, backs straight, heads up, concentrating. Some of them were clutching their midribs, testing the depth of their breathing as they sang.

Some looked up and returned her smile while still singing, others just kept going without acknowledging her.

About a third were men, most of them a lot younger than her. The big black dude with a lot of hair was obviously Nelson, the teacher. He held his right arm bent, with his elbow sticking straight out from his shoulder and his hand flat. He lifted his arm up and down as the sound rose and fell.

Still singing, he smiled at Rebecca, and with his free hand waved her to stand between him and a little bearded guy, who seemed reluctant to give up his place next to teacher.

A distinctly classy woman (drop-dead suit, Issey Miyake probably, must have cost a fortune) on the other side of Nelson had to shift up to make room for her. She smiled her thanks, and looked round at the circle of singers.

How do they know the words? she wondered: this is lesson one, and they don't have any song-sheets. But Nelson gave her another big toothy smile and she found herself following him in a repeating round of the same few phrases:

Wadin' in the water
Wadin' in the water
Wadin' in the water
God's a gonna trouble the
water

They prolonged the last mellow notes, commanded by Nelson's hand, then stopped cleanly as his arm flicked up in a decisive halt. They smiled at each other, pleased and surprised. Nice chap, thought Rebecca, dead friendly.

'So,' Nelson said, 'we establish everyone can sing. So we won't have no crap 'bout how you's tone deaf or nuttin'. Everyone in the whole wide worl' can sing. B'lieve me. They just need showin' how.'

He stepped back to the piano and banged the lowest note at the bass end repeatedly with one finger. 'You hear that?' he said. Then tinkled the high end with the other hand. 'An' that? Do they sound the same to you?' He glared round the circle. 'There's a difference OK? Anyone can't hear the difference?' He hit low and high again. Low and high. His glare moved round his class, holding everyone's gaze for a second, aggressive but smiling. 'Anyone still want to tell me they tone deaf?'

They grinned sheepishly at each other, mumbling 'No' or shaking their heads.

'Good,' said Nelson, 'now we knows y'all can sing, we go round the room, introduce oursel'.'

It was the usual mixed bag, thought Rebecca: four couples, one of them proudly lesbian, and five or six singles under forty. Among the over-fifties, she counted three single women besides herself: Joanna, the posh suit on the other side of Nelson, who turned out to be a businesswoman, a big black woman with a great voice, and an overweight food writer in a shapeless trouser suit and terrible haircut called Lucy, who could certainly sing. But of single men over forty there was, of course, a dearth: just the bearded ecologist who introduced himself as a bird-freak, and one old guy, very tall and completely bald, who declared himself a medical scientist.

When it came to Rebecca, she described herself as a partner in an interior design business. Not exactly true, she thought. What I should have said is I'm the dogsbody in my ex-husband's company, for which he pays me peanuts.

After the introductions, they followed Nelson in stretching, breathing, humming and making unmusical animal sounds. And then they were back to 'Wadin' in the Water', then 'Motherless Child' and finally 'Swing Low, Sweet Chariot', sung sweetly and gently, hardly recognisable as the maudlin rugby anthem bawled by oafs on the terraces.

Within an hour they were into three-part harmony, and Rebecca was singing with real pleasure, smiling at the others, happy and relaxed. Even her man-hunt had been temporarily forgotten.

Chapter Five

Lucy knew she'd been bullied into joining the choir by the combined forces of her daughter, son-in-law and grandchildren.

They'd won the battle one Sunday a few weeks ago. It had started with Grace in her kitchen.

'Mum,' Grace had said, 'you can't go on mouldering in the country for ever, eating junk and watching daytime telly.'

Lucy had tried to ignore her daughter's aggrieved tone. 'Why not?' she'd asked, sliding the Tesco pizza out of its box. 'And this won't be junk for long anyway. I'm fixing it.' She cut off the wrapping and slid the pizza onto a baking tray. 'And my mouldering, as you charmingly put it, doesn't make any difference to you, does it?'

'Yes, it—'

'Darling, you should be pleased. You were always pleading for "real sausages, like we have at school"; "proper ice cream from Wall's", "white bread from the shop, like normal people . . ."'

'For God's sake, Mother, that was twenty years ago!' Grace had flicked the tea towel off the rail and dried the saucers with a lot more energy than necessary. 'And of course you staying at home day after day makes a difference to us. The children don't see you enough for a start.' She'd faced Lucy and her voice had softened. 'And we worry about you. Besides, Dad wouldn't want you moping, would he?'

Irritation had licked at Lucy. She knew Grace was motivated by

genuine concern, but it felt like interference. Grace never gave up and, true to form, she persisted,

‘You don’t go walking with that group any more, and you’ve given up the choir. Why not just give that singing group off Ladbroke Grove a go? I think it sounds perfect, and you could stay the night with us, and the children could see something of their gran.’

Lucy had shaken her head, feeling obstinate, even truculent. No, she thought. No, why should I?

Grace, however, had not finished.

‘You’ve even stopped cooking, Mum. Tesco’s pizza for God’s sake! You used to be the kind of cook who bakes her own beans!’

Suddenly Lucy had felt more defeated than defiant. All this family emotion was so *tiring*. It was bad enough feeling wretched herself; considering the feelings of her children seemed beyond her.

What Grace had said was true, of course. At first she had tried to keep up the habits of her marriage. She’d gone to church. Gone walking with the Cotswold Wardens with whom she and David had hiked for years. But the empty pew beside her had been horrible, and the walkers’ sympathy had made David’s absence worse, not better.

And she could not have borne going back to her old choral group to sing the music she and David had learned together, rehearsed together, performed together. Even a snatch of Fauré’s *Requiem* on the radio was enough to make her cry. Singing it would be impossible.

As for cooking, what was the point? Cooking was about love and caring and togetherness. Cooking for one was a waste of time.

She’d watched Grace stacking the mugs on the shelf, her back speaking heroic patience with an obstinate mother. She hasn’t a clue what I feel, Lucy had thought. She thinks I should just pull myself together.

‘Mum, for God’s sake, just give the choir a go. It’s perfect. Not quite *St Matthew Passion* I know, but you like gospel, don’t you? You used to sing it to us all the time.’

Lucy had closed her eyes for a second before responding.

‘Grace, could we give it a rest, do you think? I’m trying to cook lunch, and you are being horribly persistent.’

Lucy had known her voice sounded dead and unfeeling. Her daughter’s heavy sigh and resigned shake of the head as she resumed unloading the dishwasher had not surprised her. Grace’s clear belief in her own rightness, funny as a child, now grated. Two weeks before, she’d insisted Lucy go to the doctor, who told her she was depressed. Depression is caused by a chemical imbalance he’d said. Not your fault. Just take the tablets.

Lucy had refused the tablets and rejected the diagnosis. She was unhappy, sure, but she had good reason to be. If your husband died and you were not unhappy, what kind of marriage would that have been? Certainly not one to spend half your life on. And wasn’t losing your job, one which gave you everything a good job should – challenge, opportunity, satisfaction, interest, status, interesting colleagues, money – a reason to be down in the mouth?

She had then made an effort to stop swatting mental flies, and concentrated on adding slices of sun-dried tomatoes, chunks of mozzarella and a few squashy olives to the pizzas. She poured a thin dribble of Italian olive oil over them and slid the tray into the oven.

‘Lunch in ten minutes’ she’d said briskly. Then, relenting, she’d touched Grace’s arm and said, ‘Don’t worry about me, darling. I’m not desperate. Just rather poor company at the moment.’

Grace had gone in search of the children and Lucy had laid the table, thinking about their conversation. Maybe what she resented wasn’t Grace’s bossiness but the fact that she was not allowed, or at least not expected, to grieve. You had to do things. You had to ‘move on’. Horrible phrase. Resume everything you did before, accept all the invitations of kind friends. Lucy thought there was merit in the ancient tradition of wearing black and mourning, when people accepted that you didn’t feel up to much, certainly not up to singing.

But Grace was right about the cooking. Why had she collapsed into convenience food, stopped doing what she’d loved doing all

her life? Before David's death a ready-made pizza, even with home improvements, was unheard of. Even after he died and she still had her column, she managed a real interest in the food she was writing about. But it was an academic interest, a conjured-up enthusiasm from remembered or imagined meals, markets, ingredients. It did not extend to her own shopping and cooking.

Now the fridge was full of shameful things – shameful for a respected food-writer anyway. Ready-made meals from the farm-shop, bottled mayonnaise, chiller-cabinet soups, roast chicken from the rotisserie, salads in puffed-up bags, Marks and Spencer's panna cotta.

These things were for when the family came down. When she was on her own, which was most of the time, Lucy ate fingers of cheddar and a fresh pear, or maybe a banana. Or yoghurt straight from the pot. Occasionally she made a tomato and cheese sandwich, or poached eggs on toast. Sometimes she just ate chocolate.

That same afternoon, when they'd been watching Johnny and Clare petting the donkey in the paddock, Archie had a go at her too. He'd put his arm round her shoulders (rather tentatively as though he knew the gesture was required but could not feel any real affection for his mother-in-law to go with it) and said, 'Lucy, you know Grace is right. Why not join a London choir? Just for fun?'

'I am not after fun. And it wouldn't be fun.'

'Really, Lucy, it's not just about the choir. You could combine it with a night or two with us, and you could meet a friend for lunch, go to a gallery or something. Make something positive about not having to work. And Johnny and Clare would love it.'

Lucy had not replied that she would rather be at home with her cat than any of this. She had protested that she still had to work: she'd lost her newspaper job but there was her column in *HOT Restaurant* and she had a cookbook well over her publisher's deadline. Archie had let it drop.

But when, over tea, her grandchildren, obviously put up to it by Grace, had added their pleas for her presence, Clare wheedling,

Johnny tugging her hand and saying, 'Go on, Gran. Give in', she'd crumbled. She could not let the children suspect that she was uneager to spend time with them. Indeed, she was ashamed of her reluctance and worried by it. She used to so love their company, rather more than their parents' in fact, but somehow they did not delight her as before.

A week later Lucy was in the train, on her way to London. She pulled her eyes away from the Cotswold landscape sliding past the window and returned her thoughts to the matter in hand. She booted up her laptop and found her file: 'Draft One. Peasant Soups'. To her irritation the font size had somehow gone back to the factory setting that twenty-year-old techies working in Microsoft might be able to see but she couldn't, even with her glasses on. Why were computers so maddeningly disobedient? For the umpteenth time she reset the default to font size fourteen.

Lucy worked steadily for an hour. When she got to the recipe for *ribollita* she paused, wondering if her preference for Italian sour-dough bread was born of snobbishness or because its toughness stopped it falling completely apart in the soup. And did it have to be *cavalo nero*, or could you use spinach or chard? Suddenly a wave of acute boredom engulfed her. Who gives a toss, she thought. I don't, that's for sure. She closed her laptop and rubbed her eyes, boredom transmuting into anxiety.

This singing thing isn't going to work, she thought. I don't want to pay fifty pounds every week to come up to London on this inevitably late train, stay in Johnny's bedroom with nowhere to put my things and the bathroom down the corridor, and, worst of all, a Thomas the Tank Engine duvet. I detest duvets. And all so I can sing in a group that Grace thinks will do me good. I don't want anything that will do me good.

She gazed out at sloping valleys, sun on stone, picture-book sheep with laughable lambs gambolling about, a spring scene to lift the heart. But Lucy's heart remained unlifted.

Her mind picked at her crossness with her daughter. Why had Grace turned out so controlling? She, Lucy, had never been strict with her. Neither had David. In fact, when Grace was little, she'd longed for her husband to be a bit more Victorian and a little less indulgent.

Now Grace claimed her instincts for order were a reaction to her over-lax childhood. She thinks David and I should have made her go to church and tidy her bedroom. And that we should have said no to pierced ears, loud music and boys. It's true we hardly ever said no. Except maybe to junk food.

Lucy sighed, and closed her eyes. It must be Archie's influence, she thought, he is such a middle-aged thirty-five-year-old. *Daily Telegraph*, pinstripes and umbrella, well-shined shoes. Even ironed cotton shirts at the weekend.

With an effort, Lucy wrenched her mind out of complaint mode. She must stop this constant brooding. She sat up and smiled at the woman opposite, who reacted with a nervous half-smile and a swift return to her book.

Be positive, Lucy told herself. She resolved to enjoy singing gospel and blues.

And she did. The teacher, Nelson, was a pro. He used that 'patterning' gesture with his hand held flat to signal higher or lower, while keeping eye contact with everyone in turn, and somehow he managed to lift the group above the only-just-in-tune into the spot-on tuneful. It was good to feel her lungs fill and her diaphragm working. The sound, round and true, seemed to fill her head. She had forgotten how liberating singing could be.

The little hall off Ladbroke Grove had great acoustics, and there were some excellent singers – a big black woman with a huge rich-as-velvet voice, and two tenors who had clearly sung a lot before. One chicly-dressed woman, with obvious money and style (she'd arrived late in a black jersey dress and strappy leather sandals) had a quiet but very pure alto. There was really only one dud, a rather uptight woman next to her, whose voice didn't seem to work at all.

After the class, she forced herself to stay a few minutes and make polite conversation with her fellow singers, then excused herself, explaining she was due back at her daughter's for supper. She walked slowly, enjoying the replay of melodies in her head, reluctant to break her pleasant mood. Even a little reluctant to face her grandchildren. She'd have liked to go on singing.

Chapter Six

For Joanna the whole evening had been a disaster. They'd sung nothing but gospel songs you can learn without words or music. Even she could tell that Nelson was a good teacher, and by the end the group was singing complicated three-part harmonies worthy of Harlem, and most of them were swaying and moving in a wholly un-English way. Joanna had made sporadic efforts to join in, but the pain was intense and the sound almost non-existent, so she quickly returned to miming.

At one point, still conducting and grinning at the group, Nelson had leaned close, his ear near her mouth. The game was up . . .

She'd endured the agony, longing for release. But then, at the end, when everyone else was flushed with success and talking about next week, Nelson came over and took her arm.

'Come with me, lady,' he said.

She'd followed him to the piano, out of hearing of the group.

'This group's no good for you,' he went on, 'not by itself. You gotta fin' yo' singing voice, and right now you don' know how or where. Right?' He looked seriously into her face, forcing her to meet his eyes. They were big, slightly bulging and intense.

Joanna nodded. 'Right,' she said, almost crossly, 'but it's no good you saying everyone can sing.' Her voice didn't sound right in her own ears. Why was she getting so emotional about this? 'I can't do it. I just can't.'

Nelson did not challenge this. 'What happens when you try?'

‘You listened to me. No sound comes. Even if you asked me to sing ‘Three Blind Mice’, I could not force any voice through my throat. It just closes, tight and hard. And it hurts.’

He did not say anything for a moment, just looked straight at her.

Then he said, ‘I bet you sing fine on your own – in the bath. In the car?’

He was right. If there was no one around, she could karaoke away with the best of them, sing Cole Porter while watering her posh little garden, or belt out ‘Toreador’ while boiling pasta. She shook her head and said, ‘OK, I sometimes sing a bit on my own, but I don’t suppose it’s in tune.’

‘That don’ matter. Point is, you can sing without hurting, which means yo’ trouble is in yo’ head.’ He looked hard at her, forcing her to look at him. ‘I can make you sing, lady, I promise.’

She shook her head, and said, ‘No, forget it.’

But Nelson cheerfully insisted. He took Joanna’s telephone number and said he’d put together two or three people from the group, and they could come an hour early, and together they would get her singing. He opened his arms wide, all smiles, and said, ‘And then the Albert Hall!’ and roared with laughter.

Joanna suddenly realised how ungrateful and feeble she must seem. Indeed what a wimp she was being.

‘I’m so sorry, Nelson. You’re a really nice guy. You don’t need to do this, do you? All you signed up for, presumably, was to give a singing class, not nanny me through my problems.’

‘No sweat,’ he said.

Joanna went home surprisingly cheered, and found herself singing ‘Wadin’ in the Water’ as she drove up Kensington Park Road. There was no strain and no pain, just the pleasure of singing.

Chapter Seven

Lucy's serene mood after the singing class gradually evaporated as she walked up the hill. She began to worry that she was late. Grace did not approve of the children staying up. She pulled her jacket close and, head down, quickened her pace.

Suddenly she was startled by a too-close bike skidding to a stop beside her. She jumped round.

It was Nelson, the teacher. 'I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to frighten . . . So sorry. I couldn't remember your name to call you.'

Lucy, smiling with relief, said, 'No, no, it's fine. I'm Lucy.'

'Oh, yes of course. Lucy. I wanted to ask you a favour.'

'Go ahead,' said Lucy, wondering what on earth a forcibly retired food columnist and glum widow could do for a confident, charming, talented (and fashionably black) blues teacher? Whose accent, she noticed, veered from broad Jamaican to the Queen's English. Was that for show? Self parody?

They were standing outside a pub, and it was hard to hear above the noise of music and drink-raised voices. Nelson said, 'Let's walk. Where are you going?'

She told him Pembridge Square. As they set off up the hill Nelson asked, 'Did you notice that the woman between you and me didn't sing at all? Just pretended?'

'Yes, I did. She looked so miserable. Joanna wasn't it? The business-woman?'

Nelson grinned. 'That's right. That's her.'

Lucy could not think where this conversation was going.

‘She’s got a problem,’ Nelson went on. ‘She can’t sing with other people. Her throat constricts from anxiety, and then no sound will come. It’s quite common. I thought we could help her.’

Lucy looked into Nelson’s face and could see his concern was genuine.

‘We? I can see you could . . .’

‘She needs a couple of singers who’ll have semi-private sessions with her. It’s the big group that paralyses her. She can sing on her own, she says. I thought I’d ask Rebecca as well. The blonde lady with the alto.’

Hmm . . . thought Lucy, the middle-aged trio together. But of course she agreed. How could she not? And besides, the woman’s predicament intrigued her. She’d heard plenty of people who sang flat, or sharp, or were too shy to try, but never someone who tried, but couldn’t make the sound come out.

The family had waited for her, and of course the table was properly set, with real linen napkins and candles. Grace had roasted a chicken with lemon and tarragon, and the children were bathed and looking angelic in their pyjamas. Lucy, hugging her granddaughter, noticed that her wide mouth, so like David’s, was now sporting serrated new front teeth.

There was a bottle of robust red wine, and ten-year-old Johnny went round and poured it like a waiter, with one hand behind his back and a napkin on his arm. It was sweet and funny. He’d learnt waiter behaviour for a play at school, he said.

‘It’s cool you having my room, Gran,’ he said.

‘It’s good of you to let me. But why is it cool?’

‘I like sleeping on the sofa.’

Clare said, ‘That’s because you put the telly on in the middle of the night.’

‘I do not!’

Grace interjected, ‘I’m sure you don’t, Johnny, and Clare, don’t

try to get your brother into trouble. Eat up, both of you.'

The children obediently returned to their food, glowering at each other under their brows in a half-hearted way.

Lucy, as always, was impressed with her daughter's control of the children. When Grace had been little she could only, it seemed, govern with her consent. But Grace was the boss here, and her children knew it.

Once in bed Lucy found herself, as she still did most nights, talking to David. Not aloud of course, just in her head. She knew some widows actually wrote to their dead husbands, or kept a sort of mourning diary. She just carried on mental conversations, observations and accusations.

Darling, it's been over six months now. The worst of my life. But tonight I forgot about you for a good three hours. And I felt a stirring of real affection for my grandchildren, making faces at each other below Grace's radar. Now I'm under the horrible duvet, but feeling mellow and not sad. Progress, don't you think?

Chapter Eight

When Joanna got home after her disastrous singing class she was in such a good mood that she did something she had not done since Christmas. She rang her parents in Australia.

She needed to be feeling brave to do this, to face the inevitable accusation from her mother, uttered or unsaid, of having been the beneficiary of a pampered childhood and privileged education and given them nothing back. There was some truth in the charge. She had fled to Europe as a twenty-two-year-old, and never returned.

Her parents had visited her once but, almost from the moment of their arrival, she had been desperate for them to leave. Her dad had been as generous and affectionate as ever, but she was still in her thirties and not grown up enough to be relaxed about his Crocodile Dundee clothes, coarse manners and expansive loudness. In front of her smart City friends with their pink-striped shirts, button down collars and mobile telephones (they were new then and the size of bricks, but they were the mark of the new elite) he embarrassed her quite as much as her mother did. More in fact. Her mother, as ever, nagged both her and her father mercilessly but at least she liked London, and didn't tell people they were talking cobblers, or insist on drinking Foster's in smart restaurants.

It was nine in the morning in Melbourne, so Joanna reckoned she should get her mother. She would not be downstairs yet, since she always dressed slowly and late, stuck in some interior vision of herself as a sort of Scarlett O'Hara, surrounded by servants and

adorers who do everything for her, but marooned in a ranch miles from the excitement of the city.

Her mother was almost eighty now, but she had been Miss Australia and had been headed, she reminded everyone frequently, for a glittering career on the stage. Instead, she had made the mistake of marrying Joanna's father, who seemed a good bet at the time since he was the richest property developer in Melbourne.

But when he'd made his pile, he'd sold up and bought a 30,000-acre cattle ranch in the middle of nowhere and imprisoned his beautiful bride in it. At least, that was the version her daughter had been fed throughout her childhood. It wasn't until she could do the arithmetic that Joanna worked out that her mama had been forty something when they moved to the ranch, long past any spin-off glory from her nineteen-year-old flowering as Miss Australia. Poor woman, thought Joanna, I should have had more sympathy for her delusions and her unhappiness, but she irritated me then, and irritates the hell out of me now.

She dialled the number and almost immediately heard her mother's voice.

'Hullo, is that you, John?'

'No, Mother, it's me.'

'Who? Who is this?' Her voice held a touch of disdain.

'Me. Your daughter. Joanna.' Joanna spoke loudly and clearly. Her mother was slightly deaf.

'You don't have to shout you know. I'm not deaf.'

And I don't have to ring you up, thought Joanna. But she said, 'OK, Mum. How are you? How's Dad?'

'I thought you were John. I'm waiting for a call from John.'

'Who's John?'

'My hairdresser. He's good enough to come all the way out to this godforsaken place to do my hair because my back is too bad to jolt over these awful roads.'

'God, Mum, that must cost a fortune!' The ranch was fifty miles

from the nearest town, and there was a nine-mile drive along the gum-lined drive once you were on the property.

‘Your father can afford it. It’s the least he can do. And John stays for lunch, so at least I get some civilised company for once.’

Joanna sighed. How could her mother have been married for sixty years, and still be complaining? Why didn’t they divorce years ago?

They discussed her mother’s bad back, her thinning hair, her isolation (as always), the weather (drought, sheep dying, farm labourers quitting) – which seemed to give her more satisfaction than concern.

Joanna waited to see if her mother would ask her one single question. But no. It was always the same. These conversations were only ever about her mother. Joanna still minded, and always noticed. In a way there was a kind of grim satisfaction in each time noting that her mother never showed any interest in her, any concern or affection. Yet when she’d been little her mother had been proud of her. Like a performing monkey or a designer accessory, thought Joanna.

When she had run out of complaints, Joanna asked, ‘Is Dad still there? I’d like to catch him before he goes out on the ranch.’

‘I’ve no idea.’

But she did put the call through, and Joanna heard, with guilt and love combined, her father’s broad Aussie accent.

‘Darling girl,’ he boomed, his voice at eighty-five as strong as ever. ‘Great to hear you. Tell all. How’s the best head-hunter in the western world doing then?’

Joanna laughed, ‘Oh Dad, you know I’m not a head-hunter any more. I sold the search business years ago and I now work for Innovest, the venture capital guys.’

‘So you did, so you did. I’m getting senile. Well, how is the best venture capitalist in the western world doing then?’

She told him about her new life, working for Innovest and doctoring companies in trouble, and she felt like she used to when

she came home from school with a good report. He was so pleased and proud of her. Then they talked about the ranch, how he was herding sheep by helicopter now. And yes, of course he had learnt to fly it. He had been flying single-engine flat-wing planes for years, so it wasn't difficult. He loved the chopper, said it was so manoeuvrable you could be a sort of aerial sheep dog. But he still rode out every day on old George, his chestnut gelding – but for pleasure (and to get away from Mama, thought Joanna), not to inspect the sheep or cattle. And come shearing time, he still liked to do his bit.

'I can't keep it up all day any more,' he said, 'but I can still have a fleece off a sheep faster than the lads, and without a single nick.'

When father and daughter had done boasting to each other, Joanna reluctantly replaced the phone. Why am I not mature enough to put up with her carping? If Dad can, why can't I?