

# Flawless

Tilly Bagshawe

Published by Orion

Extract

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# FLAWLESS

TILLY BAGSHAWE



# One

'Jake, be careful! You'll lose the stones!'

The panic in Julia Brookstein's voice was unmistakable as she reached down the side of the bed, her long fingers searching blindly through the cream shag-pile carpeting for a missing pink diamond.

'Sweetheart,' Jake Meyer's gravelly, infinitely sexy North London accent whispered in her ear. 'I carried these stones across three continents. I ran checkpoints full of armed police in Chechnya, saw off bandits in the hills of Kazakhstan, and even made it through a knife fight with some particularly tricky Triads in dear old London before I got them this far. Trust me, I'm not going to lose the finest natural pinks I ever laid eyes on under a bed in Beverly Hills. Now come here.'

Pinning both her arms above her head in the soft, marsh-mallow mound of pillows behind them – how the fuck did she and Al sleep on so many pillows? They must get terrible neck ache – he ran his tongue slowly along the length of her collar bone, the stubble on his chin barely grazing the tops of her massive, perfectly spherical breasts. Scattered across the black satin counterpane were more glittering diamonds, each the same translucent pink of guava flesh. Scooping some up with his left hand, Jake began dropping them carelessly onto her naked body, smiling with satisfaction at the way they glowed against the smooth, bronzed skin of her belly and thighs.

'Oh, Jake!' she gasped, clutching wildly at his blonde hair as his tongue moved tantalisingly lower. Her legs had begun to twitch with excitement, and he could feel her toes

stiffen and arch beneath him, a sure sign that she was close to a climax. ‘Put one inside me! Please. I want to feel it inside me!’

Jake Meyer had slept with a lot of rich, married women like Julia. They were his bread and butter as a diamond dealer in Beverly Hills, and seducing them sexually went hand in hand with the job of seducing them with the gems he brought back from Russia and Africa. Or in this case, from a little known facility in New Jersey that made some of the best simulants – fake diamonds – in the world. The little pink stones that Julia had so admired were in fact man-made garnets – gadolinium gallium garnets to be precise, known in the trade as GGG – and were almost completely worthless. But they looked the part, every bit as brilliant and dispersive as the real thing, as long as you didn’t scratch them. Jake was betting that neither Julia nor her husband Al, a fearsomely powerful studio boss, would know the difference. Julia, a woman for whom size clearly mattered, would be delighted with the necklace and matching bracelet he’d have made up for her. Her old man would be convinced he’d beaten Jake down to a bargain basement price. And Jake would walk away with a very tidy profit. Everyone’s a winner!

At thirty-five, Jake and his twin brother Danny were well on their way to becoming the most successful independent diamond dealers in the US. A pair of Jewish wide boys from North London, and the third generation of Meyers in the diamond trade, they had moved to America in their late teens to set up the now hugely profitable Solomon Stones, with Danny working the East Coast market and Jake responsible for LA and the West. Their father, Rudy, had been a world-renowned cutter, as well as a part-time smuggler in his younger days, working the dangerous but lucrative market of Zaire. Ironically, their grandfather, Isaac, had spent most of his adult life working for the CSO, the De Beers cartel in London set up to limit the supply

of diamonds to the market and capture illegally smuggled stones, in an attempt to keep prices both constant and high. To say diamonds ran in the Meyer blood would be an understatement. But neither Isaac nor Rudy had had the gift of the gab, that innate talent for salesmanship so powerful it becomes more of a compulsion than a skill, that the twins were both born with. By the age of ten, Jake and Danny already had a lucrative playground business at St Michael's Primary School, Primrose Hill, selling cigarettes and liquor that they'd painstakingly decanted into sweet packets and bottles of Panda Cola respectively. Three expulsions and a smattering of O-levels later, they left school to work as full-time apprentices to their father. It soon became apparent to Rudy that neither boy had the patience or the temperament to make a master cutter. When he caught Jake trying to sell bags of worthless shavings from his workshop at Camden Market as 'genuine diamond dust' – not just trying but succeeding, and at quite a price too – he bowed to the inevitable. Two years later he agreed to provide his sons with the seed capital to start Solomon Stones, buying them each a one-way ticket to America.

Success was by no means instant. Diamond dealing is a tough game, fraught with dangers at all levels, both physical and economic. The Meyer brothers were fast talkers and had an instinctive feel for a good deal and a kosher stone, but they lacked vital experience. Even professional jewellers with years in the business are often unable to tell the difference between a rough diamond and a skilfully cut and coated piece of glass. At the end of their first year, having worked like dogs to build up a nascent client base and generate some savings, Jake and Danny lost everything on a single shipment of stones from a supposedly reliable cutting centre in Israel. Like every other rookie dealer, they learned the hard way that there is no comeback with diamonds, no sale or return, no redress. It's still a handshake business, a closed and uniquely male club. By virtue

of their birth, the Meyer boys were members of that club, but that wasn't protection enough. After all, the value of a handshake depends on whose hand it is you're shaking. From that point on, they never wholly trusted anyone except each other. And they made a vow to stick to what they knew, never getting greedy, keeping their operation small and focused and, crucially, well below the radar of the big cartels and established, gang-funded dealerships.

As the years passed their mistakes grew fewer, their client base expanded, and they woke up one morning to find themselves small but established players in the biggest market for polished diamonds in the world. If their family name and good instincts helped them with suppliers, it was their looks and charm that made them favourites with clients. Although twins, they weren't identical. Danny was a good inch shorter than Jake and more stockily built, and although they had the same, unnervingly intense violet-blue eyes and thick, dirty blonde hair, Jake was undoubtedly the more classically good looking of the two. With his long, straight nose, arrogantly curling upper lip and growling, bear-like voice that reduced women to quivering mounds of desire whenever he opened his mouth, he was a natural choice for the looks-obsessed Hollywood market. Danny was handsome too but in a softer, more understated way that played well with the more sophisticated and conservative New York women whom it was his job to impress. Both brothers were possessed of the sort of untiring libidos usually associated with basketball players or porn stars. The first time Jake bedded Julia Brookstein, she'd told him it felt like being ravished by a death-row prisoner on day release. He was renowned amongst the diamond-buying wives of Los Angeles for fucking every beautiful woman like she might be his last.

Sliding further down the bed till his feet touched the padded satin footboard and his head was positioned perfectly above Julia's billiard-ball-smooth waxed pussy, he slipped

the largest of the pink stones into his mouth. Grinning as her butterscotch thighs parted like the Red Sea to receive him, he gently pulled apart her glistening pink labia and, using his tongue, pushed the 'diamond' high up into the hot, wet tunnel of her vagina.

'Hmmm.' She moaned with pleasure, clamping her legs tightly around him, and he glanced up just long enough to see the lust dilating her pupils and her lips open expectantly before returning his attention to her clitoris. Flicking his tongue across it as lightly as a dying butterfly fluttering its wings, he mentally counted to three. Right on cue Julia came, stifling her cries with a pillow as her body shuddered with spasm after spasm of pure ecstasy. With each wave of orgasm, the stone slipped lower and lower, until eventually it oozed out of her body back onto the bed, dewy-wet and shining with her juices.

'Beautiful. Like watching an oyster giving up its pearl,' sighed Jake, easing himself back up the bed till he was lying beside her face to face. 'I'd better clean that one up and give it a quick polish before your husband sees it.'

'You're terrible,' giggled Julia. 'You'll do anything or anyone to make a sale, won't you, Jake Meyer?'

She seemed to have conveniently forgotten that it was she who'd dragged him into bed this morning and not the other way around.

'Not true,' said Jake as he padded barefoot into the master bathroom, pulling up the jeans he hadn't had time to take off. 'I wouldn't screw Antonia Jacobs if she promised to buy the Star of India from me.'

Julia giggled again. Ron Jacobs was another studio boss, her husband's great rival, and his wife was what was politely referred to in Beverly Hills society as 'plus-sized'. 'Don't be mean,' she scolded. 'Toni has a glandular problem; it's not her fault. She's got a heart of gold.'

'Yeah, and an arse of lead,' said Jake, turning on the gold taps at one of the his 'n' hers black onyx sinks in Julia's

bathroom and gently scrubbing the stone with soap and water. It never ceased to amaze him how women like Julia could show such genuine loyalty and sisterhood towards their girlfriends, but thought nothing of screwing over their poor schmuck husbands. Of course, Al Brookstein might be doing the dirty on his wife too. A guy like that must have bimbos all over him, day and night. But he'd be hard pressed to find a better lay than the one he'd married. Jake should know.

'What time do you think your old man might get back?' he asked, slipping the cleaned stone into a dry felt pouch in his pocket, then scouring the carpet for the few smaller strays that had fallen off the bed before. 'He's not gonna flake on me, is he?' Cause I've got a lot of people interested in these pinks.'

Julia's beautiful, miraculously surgery-free face instantly hardened. She didn't give a damn who else Jake slept with, but she'd never forgive him if he let another woman touch those diamonds. She was, in so many ways, a woman after his own heart.

'He'll be here,' she said frostily. 'I told him three o'clock, to give us time to ... you know.'

'Negotiate?' suggested Jake, stuffing the rest of the diamonds into his briefcase and pulling his black T-shirt on over his head.

'Exactly,' said Julia.

Just then a door could be heard slamming downstairs and a loud, nasal voice began echoing round the house. 'Ju-Ju? Jules? Are you there, honey?'

Julia's face drained of as much colour as her professional fake-bake tan would allow, and she looked with wild-eyed panic at Jake. 'Oh my God!' she whispered. 'It's him; it's Al. He's twenty minutes early, the stupid jerk. He's *never* early!'

Jake shook his head, looking remarkably unperturbed. 'Some people are so thoughtless.'



‘This is not a joke,’ hissed Julia, her voice half-whisper, half-sob. ‘What the hell are we going to *do*?’

Grabbing her yellow Fred Segal sundress from the floor Jake threw it at her, then pulled her roughly up off the bed and on to her feet. ‘Get into the bathroom and get dressed,’ he said. ‘Lock the door. And take this with you.’ Reaching into his jeans pocket, he pulled out the enormous rock that moments ago had been throbbing between her legs and thrust it into her bewildered hand. ‘Go! I’ll deal with things here.’

Straightening the bed in lightning-quick time, he opened his briefcase and hurriedly emptied the remaining pinks back onto the black satin bedspread. He barely had time to slip on his handmade Italian loafers and straighten his blonde mop of hair before Al Brookstein stormed in, looking far from happy.

‘What the fuck are *you* doing here?’ he snarled at Jake. ‘Where’s my wife?’

‘She’s in the bathroom, looking at a fuck-off pink diamond I brought back from Siberia,’ said Jake breezily. ‘What do you think of these?’ He gestured to the jewels sprinkled across the bed.

Ignoring him, Al marched over to the bathroom but found the door locked. ‘Julia?’ he called. ‘You in there?’

‘Oh hi, Al. I didn’t hear you come in.’ Appearing in the doorway in her cute yellow sundress and flip flops, her long honey mane tied back in a ponytail and her skin still slightly flushed from sex, she looked both utterly desirable and a picture of innocence. Al, a short, beetle-browed man in a crumpled suit who looked every one of his fifty-two years, softened slightly.

‘Jake was showing me some diamonds,’ Julia smiled. ‘Aren’t they beautiful?’

‘Hmmm,’ said Al, fingering the pink stone she handed him and calculating how much Meyer might try to charge him for it. The thing was almost the size of a fucking golf

ball – never a good sign in his book. ‘He couldn’t show you downstairs?’

Julia looked worryingly blank for a moment, but Jake came to her rescue.

‘I wanted her to see the colour against a black background,’ he said casually, ‘so we came up here. Nice bedding by the way, Alan. Very P. Diddy. Come and have a look.’

Torn between annoyance at Jake, who he was sure was mocking him, and desperation to steer his young wife towards the smaller, more affordable diamonds, Al grumpily walked back over to the bed. He was a wealthy man, but Julia’s diamond obsession would have tested the bank account of the Aga Khan. Like many of Hollywood’s rich and powerful men, Al Brookstein had developed a distrust of Jake Meyer that bordered on loathing. Not only did the bastard look like Daniel Craig, with the sort of washboard abs that few fifty-something husbands could aspire to, but he was always sniffing around Julia and her friends, dangling bling in front of them like a fucking drug dealer. The mere sight of his distinctive blue and silver Maserati in the driveway just now had already brought on Al’s chest pains.

‘Pretty,’ he said grudgingly, picking up a mid-sized stone. ‘How much?’

‘Al,’ Julia chided him. ‘I’m sorry, Jake. My husband has no soul.’ She was about to come out of the bathroom, but thought better of it when an unmistakably fishy whiff of sex drifted up from her body, retreating instead for a surreptitious wash while Al was still distracted.

‘Not at all,’ said Jake brightly. ‘I’m always happy to cut to the chase and talk business. Perhaps you and I should go downstairs, Mr B? Get down to the nitty gritty, as it were.’

‘I’m not necessarily buying anything from you today, Meyer,’ said Al, in the hopeless tone of a man who knows he is already defeated. ‘Let’s get that straight right off the bat.’

‘I want the big one!’ yelled Julia from the bathroom.

Jake smiled. Sometimes his job really was too easy.

An hour later, pulling out of the Brooksteins’ wrought iron gates onto North Canon Drive, Jake gave a little whoop of triumph. He’d just sold a three-carat hunk of GGG for six hundred and fifty thousand dollars, to a man famed throughout the entertainment business for being one of the toughest negotiators in Hollywood. Flicking the switch to let the top down on his beloved customised convertible, he luxuriated in the sunshine that seemed to pour out of the LA sky like an inexhaustible stream of liquid butter, even in December. He often missed London, his mates, the pub, the know-it-all taxi drivers, the women with breasts that jiggled when they moved, and faces that moved when they talked. But he had to admit that Los Angeles could be a pretty spectacular place to live too, especially on days like today.

Heading down the canyon into Beverly Hills proper, speeding past the seemingly endless rows of naff Persian mansions with their manicured lawns and vast, vulgar statues of lions in gold or marble guarding their gates, he couldn’t resist putting in a brief, gloating call to Danny. He imagined his brother freezing his arse off on a Manhattan street somewhere, soaked to the bone in icy drizzle, and began to feel even more pleased with himself as he punched out the familiar number.

‘Dan?’ The phone rang only twice before Danny picked up. ‘You’ll never guess what I’ve just done.’

‘Not now Jakey,’ came the terse reply. ‘I’ll ring you back.’

And to Jake’s astonishment, Dan hung up on him.

‘Well, that’s just bloody charming, that is,’ grumbled Jake to himself, pulling into one of the subterranean parking garages on Rodeo. He was closer to his twin brother than to anyone else on earth, and loved him unconditionally, but

they had always been deeply competitive. Every Christmas, back home in London, they compared notes on their earnings for the year. For the last three years Danny had just pipped Jake to the post, but today's coup with Brookstein would turn the tables for sure. He'd been looking forward to rubbing his brother's nose in it – in the nicest possible way, of course – but now he was going to have to wait. And though Jake had many good qualities, patience had never been one of them.

Stuffing the pouch containing his remaining simulants into the glove box of the car and locking it, he headed for the elevator. Late lunch on his own at Nate 'n Al's was hardly the celebration he deserved. On the other hand, their chicken matzo ball soup put even his mother's to shame. After the marathon fucking session he'd just had with Julia, followed by the adrenaline rush of pulling a fast one on her husband, he'd worked up quite an appetite.

On the other side of the country, Danny Meyer was in the midst of a deal of his own. Unfortunately for him, his client was not a rookie like Al Brookstein, but a hard-nosed Russian jeweller known simply as 'Vlad' who'd once worked the infamous Udachnyi mine in the frozen Siberian plains of Yakutia, and who knew an overpriced stone when he saw one.

Poring over his diamond balance, a sort of miniature old-fashioned kitchen scale, in the back room of his dingy little store in Queens, Vlad placed the second of Danny's five stones in one pan and, with tweezers, began adding tiny weights to the other pan. It was mesmerising to watch this big oaf of a man, his hands as fat and clammy as bear paws, perform the delicate operation with such consummate skill. Danny stood back to let him work, concentrating on maintaining his poker face while the jeweller made his own assessment of the diamonds he'd brought him, judging each stone according to the 'four Cs' that

everybody in the industry worked from – colour, cut, clarity and carat.

Danny wouldn't have been foolish enough to try to cheat an old hand like Vlad on carats. The stones were all tens and eights (one tenth or one eighth of a carat), as the Russian would soon discover for himself. But on clarity, he *had* chanced his hand, claiming all five diamonds were 'perfect', a technical term meaning that a grader would have to magnify them at least ten times to be able to identify any blemishes, when in fact only three fully met that standard. He could only pray that at the end of a long day, and in such dreadful light, Vlad might slip up and miss the small inclusions he'd omitted to mention.

Unlike Jake, however, this wasn't to be Danny's lucky day. Pulling out a standard, 10X colour-corrected loupe, Vlad lifted the stone out of the scale and examined it closely.

'What the fuck ...' he mumbled, his broad giant's brow furrowing into a frown. 'You theenk I'm fucking blind? Perfect my ass. This is an SI one. Maybe even a two. Is worth half the price you asking.'

'Bollocks,' said Danny, doing his best to look affronted. There was nothing for it now but to bluff it out, and pretend that he hadn't noticed the small inclusion, or internal scratch, himself. If Vlad believed he was being deliberately cheated – if he was sure of it – things had the potential to turn very nasty indeed. 'There's nothing wrong with that stone. Let me have a look.'

Vlad passed him the loupe, and Danny made a great show of looking very closely, as if unsure that what he was seeing was a blemish at all.

'Are you talking about the feather, top right? Come on. I can barely even make it out.'

'Barely?' The Russian looked at him witheringly. 'You said "perfect".' Carefully rewrapping each of the stones in diamond paper, he handed them back to Danny. Then, very

ominously, he clapped his hands. Seconds later, two even burlier figures emerged from the shadows behind him.

‘All right, mate, calm down,’ said Danny, swallowing nervously, his eyes swivelling around the room scoping out the nearest means of escape. He’d been in many a sticky situation during his years in the business and knew how to handle himself in a fight, but these odds weren’t good and he knew it. ‘How long’ve we been doing business together, eh, Vlad? It was an honest mistake.’

He could see the Russian thinking about it for a moment. Clearly, everybody in the room knew what had really happened. Honest mistakes from diamond dealers were rarer than a flawless four-carat rock, and Vlad was nobody’s fool. But if he was two parts thug, he was three parts opportunist. Suddenly the power dynamics of the transaction had shifted in his favour. He might as well make use of that.

‘Thirty grand, all five,’ he barked.

Danny started to protest. ‘Are you smoking fucking dope? The other stones *are* perfect, and that feather’s a VS one at most.’

‘*Very small,*’ Vlad laughed mirthlessly. ‘You calling that inclusion *very slight*? I see Manhattan apartments smaller than that feather. You treeck me, you a-hole.’

‘They’re worth three times what you’re offering, and you know it,’ said Danny truthfully.

‘Thirty thousand,’ repeated Vlad. ‘Or twenty-five and I break your fucking fingers.’

The heavies behind him cracked their enormous knuckles with relish. What the hell did Russian mothers feed their kids, wondered Danny. Miracle-gro?

‘All right, you bastard,’ he said bitterly. ‘Deal. But that’s the last trade we ever do, my friend.’

‘You damn right it is,’ wheezed Vlad, pulling out wads of filthy banknotes from a drawer in his desk. ‘I see you in my store one more time, Danny Meyer, I fucking kill you.’

Danny's first stop was the nearest Bank of America.

After fifteen years in the business, he was used to carrying hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of stones hidden about his person, in chewing gum, fountain pens, even sewn into the fly flap of his trousers, but he'd never got comfortable wandering around with cash, especially not in New York. It was almost closing time and the branch was full of commuters running end-of-the-day errands. Everyone seemed happy, glad to be out of their offices or off the bitterly cold streets. A few people ahead of him in the line were even exchanging pleasantries with one another, a rare sight indeed in this city. Just as he reached the cashier's window, the witching hour of six p.m. struck, and the girl at the counter firmly waved a 'position closed' sign in his face. It was turning out to be that kind of a day.

'Come on, darling, give a guy a break,' he pleaded, shooting his hand under the clear plastic so she couldn't fully close the shutter between them. 'It's Christmas.'

'I'm an atheist,' she shot back wryly. But something about Danny's face made her hesitate. He was handsome in a brutish, gangster sort of a way, and his broken nose and sexy British accent reminded her of one of those guys from *Lock, Stock*. He also had the most exquisite eyes she'd ever seen, the same liquid purple as grape-juice.

'So? I'm Jewish,' he smiled, sensing her weakening, and realising belatedly that she was actually very pretty in a young Demi Moore sort of a way. 'But that doesn't mean I can't spread a bit of festive cheer. Look, I'll make you a deal. If you let me deposit this wodge burning a hole in my pocket, I'll take you out for the biggest cocktail we can find; how's that?'

'Make it dinner and it's a deal,' said the girl, suddenly deciding that she'd like nothing more than to be the recipient of this divine man's festive cheer for the evening. Removing the position closed sign, she reopened her

window, her eyes widening as Danny shoved the filthy bundle of hundreds tied with twine through to her side of the plastic glass wall.

‘Early Christmas present,’ he grinned. ‘From my Aunt Fanny in Maryland.’

The girl rolled her eyes. ‘Hey, don’t know and don’t wanna know, OK? But dinner’d better be somewhere good.’

It was four hours later before Danny finally remembered to call his brother back.

‘Oh, cheers,’ said Jake grumpily. ‘Nice of you to remember my existence.’ Danny could hear the noise of a raucous bar behind him, with a lot of over-excited female voices. ‘Why d’you hang up on me before?’

‘Sorry,’ said Danny, turning the sound down on the TV. Having reluctantly dropped the bank girl back at her apartment earlier – Chiara; lovely, melodious name – he was now back home himself, at his loft pad on Broadway and Bleeker, drinking a hot whisky toddy in bed in front of the latest Tivo-ed episode of *EastEnders*. ‘I was in the middle of something.’

‘Woman?’ asked Jake.

‘Sadly, no. A deal. But after you called the whole thing went seriously shape-au-poire.’ He told Jake about his little miscalculation with Vlad, and how he’d narrowly escaped a serious going-over from the jeweller’s heavies. ‘I tell you, all that back and forth we had about staying out of Africa ’cause it was too dangerous ... Russia’s getting just as bad. He made me sell him the whole bloody lot for thirty grand. I’m at least sixty out of pocket now.’

‘Don’t worry, bruv,’ said Jake, unable to keep the smile of triumph out of his voice. ‘I’ll be happy to lend you a quid or two till you get back on your feet.’

Danny sighed good-naturedly. ‘All right then, come on, you’re obviously dying to tell me. What masterpiece of



salesmanship have you pulled off now, you jammy little sod?’

Jake, who’d been waiting all day to share his good news with somebody, gleefully lingered over every detail of this morning’s events, from Julia Brookstein’s fabulously responsive, gym-toned body to the gleam of genuine satisfaction in Al Brookstein’s eyes when he clinched the deal, convinced he’d just struck himself a hard bargain.

Danny’s reaction, however, was less admiring than he’d hoped.

‘GGG?’ he said incredulously. ‘Have you totally lost it? What if he has the thing independently appraised?’

‘He won’t,’ said Jake confidently. ‘He’s already asked me to set it for him as a pendant. Insisted I “throw that in” in fact, as part of the deal. If he was gonna get it checked out, he’d do it now, before I set it.’

‘But anyone who sees a pink that size is gonna know instantly it can’t be real. Did you say three carats?’

‘Yeah,’ Jake laughed. ‘Trust me, if this were London or New York, I’d agree with you, but things don’t work like that out here. People in LA assume you can get anything you want for the right price. Striped blue bananas, snow in August, diamonds the size of a plum. This is Al King-of-Hollywood Brookstein we’re talking about. Everyone’ll think he paid ten million, and hey presto, he “found a way” to get a super-sized pink. The word impossible doesn’t mean much in this town.’

‘Oh yeah? What about the word “prison”? Have they heard of that one in Governator-ville?’

‘Give me a break,’ said Jake. ‘We make a living selling contraband; we’re not fucking Tiffany’s. Brookstein doesn’t want to explain to the judge how he came to pay six hundred grand cash to a dealer, with no receipt, any more than I do.’

‘All right, well how about “bankrupt” then,’ said Danny. ‘Does that ring any bells?’ His earlier festive spirit seemed

to have waned. ‘You can’t keep doing this, Jake. It only takes one punter to catch you out flogging a fake and our reputation is shot. Everything we’ve worked for could be wiped out overnight. This affects both of us, you know.’

‘Whatever,’ grumbled Jake. ‘You’re just jealous ’cause I made six hundred in a day *and* had sex with one of the most beautiful women in America, while you got taken up the arse by a fat Ruski and blew three hundred bucks on dinner with a tart from the bloody bank.’

Despite himself, Danny laughed. He was furious with Jake for taking such a stupid risk – in their business partnership as in life, Danny had always been the more sensible, practical one, struggling to rein in his brother’s daredevil temperament – but maybe Jake did have a bit of a point. His encounter with Vlad *had* left him feeling more than a little bitter.

‘She wasn’t a tart, unfortunately for me,’ he said, smiling as a furious Pam St Clement, all caked blue eyeshadow and dangly plastic earrings, loomed up as Pat Butcher on the plasma screen in front of him. ‘I tried to get her back here for a coffee but it was nothing doing. Great pair of knockers she had, and lovely dark hair. Funny too. Italian.’

‘Oh dear, oh dear. You’re not falling for her already, are you?’ Jake teased him. Danny had a romantic side, a quiet hankering for stability and perhaps even some real love in his life that Jake had always found baffling and amusing in equal measure. Who needed true love in their business, when there was a steady stream of no-strings-attached hot sex on tap? ‘Mum won’t like that. If she’s an Iti she’s bound to be Catholic, which’ll go down about as well as a fart in a space-suit back home.’

‘God, Mum,’ Danny groaned. ‘Have you got her Christmas present yet?’

It was already early December. In a little over a week both brothers would be heading home to London for Hanukkah and then Christmas. Culturally the Meyers were

Jewish to the core, but they weren't big synagogue-goers, and had never seen the point in boycotting Christmas, which they looked on as a perfectly good opportunity for more eating and drinking, not to mention a great excuse for the giving and receiving of yet more diamonds. Both Jake and Danny looked forward to their winter trip home all year, as a chance to catch up with old friends in St John's Wood and to soak up the atmosphere of the grimy, cold, ridiculously expensive city of their birth. After fifteen years in America, the twins remained British to the core, and had never fully conquered their homesickness for London.

'You'd better not try to pass off any of your GGG rubbish on her.'

'On Mum?' said Jake. 'Christ, I'm not *that* stupid. She'd have my bollocks off with the electric carving knife before she'd even unwrapped it. I was thinking of using the last of those marquises we picked up in Amsterdam this summer. Make her up a nice ring.'

'If you do, let me know and I'll do the earrings,' said Danny. 'Listen bruv, I ought to go. It's past my bedtime here you know.'

'Crap,' said Jake. 'You just want me off the phone so you can get back to your *EastEnders* fix on BBC America, you sad git.'

'Oh, piss off,' grinned Danny, hanging up. That was the problem with having a twin. You could never put anything past them. Sometimes he felt like Jake knew him better than he knew himself.