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Written by Tilly Bagshawe

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TILLY BAGSHAWE

Friends and Rivals

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For my children:
Sefi, Zac, Theo and Summer.

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TB.

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

Catriona Charles sucked in her stomach as hard as she could and yanked on the zip of her burgundy velvet dress. It had fitted her perfectly when she'd bought it in Oxford four weeks ago, but now voluptuous folds of flesh seemed to be creeping out everywhere, like excess pastry flopping over the top of a pie dish. Tomorrow, without fail, she would go on a diet. No more Hobnobs. Or cheese. And she would cut out booze for a month. Well, perhaps not a whole month. Two weeks would probably be enough to make a difference.

'Can I help? Two hands are better than one.'

Ivan Charles, Catriona's husband of fifteen years, walked up behind her. Pulling the two sides of fabric together, he pulled the zip to the top and fastened the hook and eye.

'There.' He smiled triumphantly. 'You look gorgeous.'

He was right. With her tangle of honey-blond hair, full, sensual lips and intelligent green eyes, not to mention a pair of breasts that many girls half her age would have given their eye teeth for, at thirty-eight Catriona Charles was still an extremely attractive woman. Admittedly two kids, a fondness for gin and tonic and cheese on toast and a loathing of

physical exercise in all its forms had allowed her figure to blossom a little *too* much in recent years. It would be fair to say Catriona looked better in an evening dress than a bikini. But men had always found her Nigella-esque, just-rolled-out-of-bed look a turn-on, and couldn't understand Catriona's own insecurity about her looks.

'Really?' she sighed. 'You're sure I don't look like a lump of cookie dough squeezed into a wine bottle?'

Ivan laughed, kissing her on the back of her neck. 'Mmmm. Cookie dough and cabernet. Two of my favourite things. And here are two more.' He squeezed her breasts. 'Happy Birthday to me, eh?'

Tonight was Ivan Charles's fortieth birthday party, an event that had consumed every waking hour of his wife's time for the past three months. As co-founder and owner of Jester, a successful music management company, Ivan Charles was one of the most well-connected men in the record business. Ivan's 'friends' were so numerous they could have banded together and formed their own country. Even at Oxford, where he and Catriona had first met, and where Ivan had also met his Jester business partner, Jack Messenger, Ivan was infamous as a *bon vivant* and all-round party animal. With his model good looks (dark hair, blue eyes, toned rower's physique) and immense personal charm, he was also well known as a ladies' man. Hundreds of hearts were broken the day that Ivan Charles walked down the aisle with Catriona Farley. Though the marriage had been stormy at times, they had had two gorgeous kids together and were still going strong the better part of two decades later. Ivan Charles congratulated himself on that. Then again, Ivan Charles congratulated himself on a lot of things for which he was not, in truth, responsible. For all his wit and charisma, beneath the dazzle, Ivan Charles was a deeply arrogant man.

He's so bloody handsome still, thought Catriona, watching her husband adjust his bow tie and flick a piece of lint from the lapel of his dinner jacket. *How lucky I am to be married to him.*

Ivan looked at his vintage Omega watch, a gift from a grateful client. 'Six o'clock. Shall we have a sneaky glass of champagne before the locusts descend?'

'Are you joking?' wheezed Catriona. She could barely breathe in the dress. 'I still have all the place cards to do, the caterer's having a cow because only half the mixers got delivered and the playroom looks like a bloody bomb's hit it.'

'Who's going to be going in the playroom?' said Ivan reasonably. 'Come on, Cat. One drink.'

'Muuuuuuuum!' A wild, animal shriek echoed along the hallway. Catriona recognized it as her twelve-year-old daughter, Rosie. 'Hector put food colouring in the shampoo bottle. My hair's gone fucking BLUE! It won't come out!'

'Don't fucking swear,' Ivan bellowed back, earning himself a reproving look from Catriona. 'What? She needs to be told. Both the children swear like bloody truck drivers.'

'I wonder why!'

'Muuuum! I need you! Now!'

Catriona rolled her eyes to heaven. It was going to be a very long night.

Jack Messenger turned his Bentley Continental off the A40 onto the single-track road marked 'Widford'. He'd first come to this part of the world in his teens, when he'd won a Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford, and it had always occupied a special place in his heart. To Jack, an American, the Cotswolds were like something out of a theme park or a Disney cartoon. The ancient churches and cottages, the

crumbling dry-stone walls, the welcoming pubs and lush meadows dissected by rivers whose names conjured up a romantic, lost England: Leach, Churn, Dun, Windrush, Evenlode; all of them delighted him and inspired a sense of wonder that he'd never lost.

Since founding Jester with Ivan Charles, his best friend from those halcyon undergraduate days, Jack Messenger had lived most of his adult life in Los Angeles. Jack ran Jester's LA office, managing primarily pop acts, while Ivan oversaw the London operation. Ivan's clients were mostly classical artists, although in the last three years he'd made a concerted effort to diversify his list. Back in the early days, when they were still building the business, Jack made regular trips back to Blighty to see his old friend. With his wife, Sonya, he'd enjoyed countless boozy suppers at the Charleses' London house – Ivan and Catriona had lived in Battersea at the time. Jack remembered those evenings fondly: Catriona the ever-welcoming hostess, Ivan rattling off anecdote after anecdote until Sonya had literally collapsed with laughter at the table.

They felt a long way away now.

Sonya Messenger, Jack's adored wife, had died three years ago of breast cancer. For Jack, the laughter had died with her. After three months spent sobbing in bed, he had finally got up one morning and gone into work. The joke at Jester was that he had been at his desk ever since. The president of the United States had more downtime than Jack Messenger, whose workaholic habits were famed throughout the business; in stark contrast to those of his business partner Ivan Charles.

The conventional wisdom was that Jack and Ivan had grown apart, but in fact the two men had always been very different, the most unlikely of friends. Even as a young man,

Jack Messenger had come across as earnest and serious. His nickname at Balliol had been 'Sam Eagle' after the pompous, all-American character from *The Muppet Show*. Despite his good looks (Jack was blond and tall with long legs and a straight, almost military bearing), he had never enjoyed Ivan's success with girls, most of whom thought him arrogant and aloof. In fact, Jack was neither of these things. He was shy; something that only a few close friends, like Catriona and Ivan, fully recognized. And Sonya, of course. Jack's wife had done wonders for his confidence, coaxing out his wry sense of humour, encouraging him to be more open in public, more relaxed. Marriage suited Jack Messenger. When Sonya was alive he had flourished like a sapling in the sunshine. But her death had blighted everything. Annihilated by grief, Jack retreated further into his shell than ever. Even old friends struggled to reach him, though Catriona kept trying, inviting him on family holidays (Jack was godfather to her and Ivan's son, Hector) and to stay with them at Christmas.

Meanwhile, after a few months of genuine sympathy, Ivan started to grow tired of his partner's mood swings. 'I understand him being sad,' he complained to Catriona. 'I know how much he loved Sonya. But he's so bloody self-righteous at work, it's driving me crazy. He's always breathing down my neck about the accounts or new business or how I need to put more "face time" in at the office. It's my bloody office! And what the fuck is "face time" anyway? I ask you. Just because he uses work as a crutch doesn't give him the right to preach to the rest of us.'

In fact this was a heavily edited version of Jack's professional battles with Ivan. As Jester became more and more successful, so Ivan grew more arrogant, lazy and entitled. He often told friends that the London office 'ran itself'. The

truth was that Jester's underpaid junior staff ended up carrying ninety per cent of the workload while Ivan swanned around the South of France 'networking'. And that wasn't the worst of it. Now that he was rich, Ivan had sold the villa in Battersea and bought The Rookery, an idyllic Elizabethan manor house in the Windrush Valley, complete with stables, dovecotes, peacocks and a four-hundred-year-old maze. It was Catriona's dream house, and she and the children lived there full time while Ivan commuted to a smart bachelor flat in Belgravia, where he proceeded to bed a string of Jester's young, female interns, along with a fair number of the prettier clients. Jack was livid.

'It's un-fucking-professional.'

'Nonsense,' quipped Ivan. 'I'm committed to closer client liaison, that's all. And it's important to stay on top of one's staff.'

'It's not funny,' snapped Jack. 'What about poor Catriona? She'd be heartbroken if she knew.'

Ivan's voice hardened. 'Yes, well, she doesn't know. And as long as you keep your mouth shut, there's no reason she ever should. Look,' he added, 'I love Catriona, OK? But it's complicated. She knew I wasn't a saint when she married me. There are a lot of temptations in our line of work.'

'Horseshit,' said Jack succinctly. 'I'm not banging every secretary or starlet that walks through the door in LA.'

'Well maybe you should be,' said Ivan, irritated. 'A good fuck might lighten you up a bit, you miserable sod. Just because you're gunning for a sainthood, doesn't mean the rest of us have to. If I want marriage guidance, I'll ask for it.'

That conversation had been over a year ago now. Since then, Ivan's midlife crisis, if that's what it was, seemed to have cooled. He and Jack had repaired their working

relationship, but the easy friendship of old was gone for good. Catriona had invited Jack to numerous parties and events but he'd managed to wriggle out of almost all of them, using work and the long LA–London flight as an excuse. But Ivan Charles's fortieth birthday party would be the biggest music industry bash in England for almost a decade. There was no way Jack could skip it without raising serious eyebrows as to the state of the union at Jester. That was the last thing Jack wanted.

As soon as the Bentley dipped down into the valley, Jack heard the distant *thump, thump* of music drifting on the warm summer air. It was only eight o'clock, and still light, but it sounded as if the party was already in full swing. The Rookery was approached via a long, winding drive, which one entered through old, lichen-covered stone gates. Jack had been to the house before, of course, but had forgotten how ravishing it truly was, with its formal gardens, leaded windows and wisteria-covered façade. Catriona was a natural-born homemaker, and had made it look even more magical tonight, with candles in glass pots hung from the trees, and wooden tables outside covered in a mismatched patchwork of cloths, each one sporting a jug stuffed to the brim with wild flowers.

The paddock was already heaving with cars. Jack parked his Bentley next to a filthy Land Rover and headed into the house. He hadn't got past the hallway when a very pretty, very drunk Asian girl ran up to him giggling and literally threw herself into his arms.

'I'm a damsel in distress!' she slurred. 'The zip on my dress is broken. Can you help me fix it, please? Ivan says he won't.'

Something about her dress was certainly broken. It was barely bigger than a handkerchief anyway, a wisp of red

silk, but what little of it there was kept slipping off the girl's tiny frame and revealing more than Jack wanted to see.

'Joyce!' Ivan's voice boomed out from the drawing-room doorway. Jack looked up to see his partner grinning like the Cheshire Cat. 'Put Mr Messenger down, darling. You're scaring him.'

The Asian girl released Jack and scurried over to Ivan, who slipped an arm around her tiny waist. Jack looked at her face more closely. Good God. It was Joyce Wu, the virtuoso violinist, one of Jester's most successful classical artists. Known for her awesome discipline and focus, Joyce Wu was still only nineteen. Her publicity pictures showed a serious young woman, usually dressed in a polo neck and long skirt, clutching a Stradivarius. It was hard to connect *that* girl to this one, drunkenly trying to cover at least one of her breasts while Ivan idly ran his fingers through her silken black hair.

'Good to see you, Jack. Can I get you a drink?' Ivan stopped a passing waiter with a tray of cocktails.

'I'll have a Diet Coke, please.'

'No you won't. It's a party,' said Ivan, thrusting something colourful and umbrella-ed into Jack's hand. Before he had a chance to protest, Jack was accosted by both the Charles children, leaping up at him and yapping like a pair of puppies. Rosie, at twelve, looked distinctly pre-teen in her 'sophisticated' Monsoon evening dress and blue-streaked hair. But Hector, her younger brother and Jack's godson, was still very much a child at eleven. Physically, he was a carbon copy of his father, dark-haired and handsome with a deliciously naughty twinkle in his eye. But in temperament, Jack had always thought of him as more like Catriona. Laid-back, gentle, sweet.

'Did you bring me a present?' he asked Jack, guilelessly.

Jack grinned. 'I might have. I guess it depends. How well behaved have you been lately? Do you deserve a present?'

‘He’s been bloody awful,’ said Ivan, letting go of Joyce Wu and grabbing his son affectionately by the arm. ‘Kicked out of St Wilfred’s. Catriona’s at her wits’ end.’

‘I got my green belt in karate, though,’ said Hector cheerfully. ‘Anyway, I know you’ve got me a present, because you always do. Is it an iPad 2?’

‘If it is, I’m confiscating it,’ said Ivan, shoving both his children towards the playroom where various kids were watching movies and gorging themselves on salt-and-vinegar crisps. ‘Now sod off, would you? Uncle Jack has people to see.’

Ivan led Jack through the heaving drawing room, stopping every few seconds to introduce him to new clients and remind him of the names of the old ones. The room itself was beautiful in an old English sort of a way. The walls were panelled in original dark oak, worn to a rich gleam over centuries of use, and the fireplace was a vast, baronial effort in rough-hewn Cotswold stone, tall enough for a woman to stand up in without stooping. In the wintertime, huge pine logs crackled and spat in the hearth day and night. Tonight, however, the flags were swept clean and an absolutely enormous display of white flowers exploded in its centre: roses and lilies and freesias, all of them so powerfully scented that a passing bee would have fainted if it had come within a yard of them. Above the fireplace, where one might have expected to see a giant mirror or an oil painting of some illustrious ancestor, one of Catriona’s photographs hung in pride of place. A brilliant amateur snapper, her specialty was portraits, but this piece was a landscape shot of the Windrush Valley in winter. To Jack it conjured up nothing so much as the forest of Narnia; a magical, snowy wonderland too strange and beautiful to be of this earth. He’d offered to buy it countless times,

but neither Ivan nor Catriona would contemplate letting it go.

'Joyce Wu seemed a little unhinged earlier,' Jack whispered in Ivan's ear as they made their way towards the bar. 'Is everything OK there?'

'Joyce is fine,' said Ivan breezily. 'Better than fine actually. Polygram just made her a whopping two-album offer.'

'That's not what I meant. I meant is she coping OK with the fame, the pressure? She's still very young.'

Ivan put a hand on Jack's arm. 'Jack. She's fine. As you say, she's young. She's letting her hair down at a party, that's all. It's called having fun. You should try it some time.'

They emerged onto a stone terrace. It was twilight now, and the view of The Rookery's gardens with the meadows and river beyond was unutterably lovely. Jack sipped his cocktail and soaked up the beauty of it all. *Ivan's right. It's a party. I should try and relax.*

'Speaking of unhinged clients,' said Ivan, 'how's Kendall?'

Jack felt the tension surge back into his body. Kendall Bryce, a twenty-three-year-old pop sensation with Kim Kardashian's body and Aretha Franklin's voice, was probably Jester's most famous client. She was also Jack Messenger's personal protégée or, as he preferred to think of it, the cross he had to bear.

'Kendall is Kendall. She's difficult.'

'Is she using?' Ivan asked bluntly. Kendall Bryce's cocaine problems were as well documented as her love life. She was a good kid deep down and Jack was very fond of her. But she was insecure as all hell.

'No. I've got her doing tests weekly. She knows if she slips up again she's off our books for good. I meant to talk to you about that, actually. I need you to make sure she keeps up with the drug tests in London. Every Friday, without fail. And she's not supposed to drink either.'

‘Sure,’ said Ivan. But he said it with a nonchalance that made Jack profoundly uneasy. Kendall was due to perform six concerts at UK venues over the next three weeks, a thought that filled Jack with dread and relief in equal measure. Relief because it meant he got a three-week break from playing bad cop. Policing Kendall Bryce’s lifestyle was becoming a full-time job. But dread because he had no control over what she might do once let off the leash.

‘Jack!’ Catriona Charles came running across the lawn, her face flushed with happiness, tendrils of dirty-blond hair escaping from pins in all directions. Jack had a sudden flashback to Oxford, and Catriona tearing barefoot around the quad at Magdalen on the night of the ball. Give or take a few laughter lines around the eyes and the odd pound of extra weight, she hadn’t changed. ‘You made it!’

‘Of course I made it. Wouldn’t have missed it for the world,’ lied Jack.

‘We’ve been catching up,’ said Ivan, swapping his empty glass for a full one. ‘Discussing our most badly behaved clients.’

‘Well, I hope you aren’t going to be boring and talk business all night,’ Catriona said firmly, taking Jack’s hand. ‘Come on. Loads of the old gang are here.’

By ‘the old gang’ she meant Oxford friends. Old turned out to be the operative word. For the next hour Jack found himself shaking hands and reminiscing with a series of paunchy, balding men, none of whom he’d have recognized had Catriona not told him their names. It was depressing.

‘We’ve aged,’ he said to Catriona, once he finally managed to get her alone. ‘Jamie Grayson looks as old as the fucking hills.’

‘Poor Jamie,’ Catriona frowned. ‘He’s had a rough year, what with the divorce and everything. Anyway, *you* haven’t

aged. You and Ivan both look disgustingly young and handsome.'

Jack laughed. 'Ivan maybe. Not me. How is he, anyway? How are the two of you?'

'We're fine.' Catriona smiled, hoping it didn't look as forced as it felt. Jack was too tactful to spell it out, but she knew what '*how are the two of you?*' meant. About five years ago, she'd discovered Ivan had been having an affair with one of the girls at Jester. He'd broken it off, and seemed genuinely remorseful at the time. But then a year later, she'd caught him at it again. Since then, things had been a lot better. When Ivan was in London he called every night to say goodnight to her, and to reassure her he was alone. He'd started going to therapy, and talking to Catriona more openly about his insecurities. Turning forty, in particular, bothered him, but rather than boosting his ego with another fling, he'd started spending more time with the children, especially Hector who worshipped his father like a god.

'I think Ivan's finally growing up,' Catriona told Jack. For some reason she felt the need to expand on 'we're fine'. 'I don't mean that nastily. It's just that, you know, he's struggled with his age and the changes in our lives. But he seems more peaceful now. More content.'

'Who's more content?'

A pretty American woman in a shapeless Ali Hewson black dress sidled up to them. Jack's heart sank. 'Hello, Stella.'

Stella Bayley was the wife of Brett Bayley, lead guitarist of supergroup The Blitz. Brett and his bandmates were clients of Jack's in Los Angeles, but were currently halfway through a European tour, so Brett and Stella were temporarily based in London. Brett was thick as a plank with an ego the size of Kansas and, if the groupies were to be believed, a dick to match. His wife, oblivious to Brett's affairs but accepting

of his long absences, had devoted her free time to becoming a tireless (and tiresome) eco-campaigner. Her blog, Stella's World, in which she doled out lifestyle and parenting advice to the masses, was an inexplicable hit online. Inexplicable because anyone who had actually *met* Stella Bayley knew that her entire life was run by a fleet of exhausted staff, and that she herself had about as much maternal nous as a banana skin.

'How are you liking England?' Jack asked politely. 'Are you settled in yet?'

'Settled in?' Stella gave her trademark tinkling laugh. 'If you call living out of packing cases settled in, then yeah. You know the other day, Miley comes up to me and she's like "Mommy, Mommy, can we have a picnic?" And of course it was raining outside, so I got some sheets and draped them over two of these damn cases, like a little tent, you know? And we had an *indoor picnic!* How cute is that? A little quinoa, some rice cakes and raisins made to look like smiley faces. I put it on the blog and my readers were like, Oh my God that is so *cute*. And I'm like, I *know*. I love England! I love the rain! You should hear Miley's accent. I swear she sounds like Princess Diana, doesn't she, Catriona?'

'Erm . . .' said Catriona. She had only met Miley Bayley once. As she remembered, the three-year-old barely spoke, but when she did she sounded like Mickey Mouse on helium.

Stella prattled on. 'I'm always telling my readers: having fun with your kids doesn't have to mean spending a lot of money. Brett and I are all about the simple things.' She tossed her expensively highlighted mane of blonde hair and flashed a new set of porcelain veneers in Jack's general direction. 'But anyway, enough about me. I came over to talk to Catriona about this fabulous new personal trainer I've found – Morten. He's based in Primrose Hill, but he has

lots of clients in the country. Morten'll help you shed those excess pounds faster than you can say colonic irrigation. I'll give you his number.'

Eventually Stella fluttered off to share her words of wisdom with Ned Williams, a well-known tenor who lived locally and was another of Jester's clients. The look of wild-eyed panic as Stella approached was enough to make even Jack Messenger chuckle.

'Maybe I should get a trainer,' sighed Catriona, looking down at her escaping bosom and yanking up the bodice of her dress.

'And shrink the best bust in England? Don't you dare,' said Jack, kissing her on the cheek. He could have strangled Stella Bayley. 'Don't ever change, Cat. Especially not on the advice of that ridiculous woman.'

'She means well.'

'She's horrendous. You're wonderful.'

He says the nicest things, thought Catriona, watching him weave his way back into the house. She so hoped he and Ivan managed to patch things up.

Inside, Jack suddenly realized he was famished. Ignoring the dainty silver trays offering caviar blinis and mini vol-au-vents, he headed straight for the kitchen and helped himself to a large peanut-butter sandwich and two mugs of tea, ignoring the death stares from Catriona's catering staff. The Rookery kitchen was a cosy, welcoming room, dominated by a pink six-oven Aga and a gnarled old farmhouse table that looked as if it hadn't been moved for centuries. Hector and Rosie's artwork covered most of the available wall surfaces, with the remainder given over to family photographs, all taken by Cat. Hector as a baby, his chubby face smeared with chocolate cake. Rosie, aged seven, on her first pony, beaming a gap-toothed grin as she held up her 'Highly

Commended' rosette. Jack was ashamed to feel a stab of envy. He and Sonya had never had children, though they'd both wanted them. Sonya was halfway through her first round of IVF when her cancer was diagnosed, poor darling. *Am I tougher on Ivan because I'm jealous? Because he has a family and I don't?* It was an uncomfortable thought.

Pushing it from his mind, Jack went upstairs in search of a bathroom. The queue for the downstairs loo was enormous and all that Earl Grey had gone straight to his bladder. There were two sets of stairs at The Rookery: the grand, sweeping mahogany staircase that led up to the principal bedrooms and that tonight was lit by simple white candles and bedecked with yet more flowers and greenery from the garden; and the back, servants' stairs, a narrow, steeply winding passage that spat one out into a long corridor, giving on to a series of smaller, pokier rooms. Vaguely remembering there was a guest bathroom at the end of this corridor, Jack took the back stairs. Pushing open the last door, he stopped dead.

'Jesus!'

Ivan was standing at the foot of the bath with his pants around his ankles. Joyce Wu was bent over the bath, spread-eagled and moaning as he took her from behind, thrusting so hard that Joyce's tiny apple breasts quivered like twin jellies with each jerk of the hips. The young girl's eyes had a familiar, glazed look. Sure enough, when Jack glanced at the sink, a fine line of leftover white powder was clearly visible.

It took Ivan Charles a second to realize that they had been interrupted. Joyce, lost in her own world, took longer, only registering Jack's presence once Ivan stopped moving. She opened her mouth to scream, but Ivan lunged forward, covering her mouth with his hand.

'Now, now, darling. We don't need a bigger audience. One's enough.'

Shaking, Joyce grabbed her red dress off the floor and held it protectively over her naked body. Jack Messenger held open the bathroom door. 'Go home,' he said quietly.

Joyce darted into the hallway, sobbing. Ivan, meanwhile, looked distinctly unruffled. He'd pulled up his pants and was busy smoothing down his hair and removing lipstick marks from his face and collar with a damp flannel.

Jack spoke first. 'Are you out of your mind?'

'I don't know,' drawled Ivan. 'Am I?'

'Anybody could have walked in!'

'Indeed. But it had to be you who actually *did*, didn't it Jack? You're like an old housemaster, prowling the dorms looking for miscreants. And lo and behold, you found me.' He held out his hand in mock supplication. 'Go ahead, whip out your cane. I'm used to it.'

Jack's stomach turned. 'You think this is funny.'

'Well, I don't think it's tragic, let's put it that way,' Ivan shot back. 'OK, so I've been a naughty boy. But nobody knows, so there's no harm done.'

'No harm?' Jack spluttered. 'She's a client!'

'So?'

'She's a teenager!'

'Only just,' said Ivan, cleaning up the cocaine remnants before swigging from a bottle of mouthwash and spitting into the sink. 'It's my birthday. Joyce was my present. Oh for God's sake, stop looking so thunderous. It was a one-off, all right? It won't happen again. Jack. Jack!'

But Jack had stormed off down the corridor, ignoring Ivan's shouts. The servants' stairs were blocked by a kissing couple so he veered left, practically running down the grand main staircase, so eager was he to get out of there. *Bloody fool. I should never have come tonight.* So much for Ivan turning over a new leaf.

‘Oh, there you are.’

Jack was so caught up in his own thoughts that he almost knocked Catriona flying.

‘You’re not leaving already, are you?’ Her face fell. ‘We haven’t even had the fireworks yet. You must stay for those.’

‘Sorry,’ he mumbled awkwardly. ‘Something’s come up. I have to get back to London.’

Goddamn Ivan for implicating him in his bullshit. Now Jack was forced to stand here and lie to one of his oldest friends.

Catriona tried to be understanding. ‘Oh. Well, I suppose if you have to. Anyway, before you go, I just wanted to let you know that I’ll look out for Kendall when she comes over. As you know, lots of Ivan’s clients come up here to stay when they’re burned out or stressed or whatever. We’ve become quite the heartbreak hotel, haven’t we?’ she laughed. ‘I doubt even Miss Bryce can get into too much trouble in the bright lights of Widford on a Saturday night.’

‘Thank you. Really. That means a lot.’ Jack looked at Catriona, then hugged her tightly, squeezing as if he might never let her go. ‘You’re a good woman, Catriona Charles. Ivan doesn’t deserve you.’

Catriona smiled wryly. ‘He probably doesn’t deserve you either, Jack darling. I know he must be difficult to work with. But don’t give up on him. For my sake.’

Speeding back towards London half an hour later, Jack Messenger felt as depressed as he had in months. Every time it seemed as if Ivan might finally have turned a corner and developed some scruples, he went and did something so shatteringly stupid and selfish it beggared belief.

Jack wished he *could* give up on Ivan. But after fifteen years as partners in Jester, their lives and interests were

irrevocably intertwined. Being in business with Ivan Charles was like walking through life with a bomb strapped to your chest. The unpredictability, the selfishness, all wrapped up in a lethally charming package.

Come to think of it, Ivan Charles had a lot in common with the other giant headache in Jack Messenger's life. But, he reflected with relief, at least *she* was safely ensconced in his Brentwood guesthouse under the watchful eye of her twenty-four-hour sobriety coach.

Not even Kendall Bryce could get into too much trouble in those circumstances.