

FOREWORD

When my four friends and I meet up – as we do every month – to drink wine and share confidences, we all agree on one thing: We may not *be* young, but we still *feel* young.

At my age my mother dressed like the Queen. We like to dress stylishly, to go out and enjoy ourselves. As one of the characters in *The Time of Their Lives* points out, ‘the only way you can tell a woman’s age these days is to look at her husband!’

We are the first generation who may live for another thirty years and sometimes, to the irritation of our children, there’s one thing we’re sure about – we intend to make the most of it!

‘I don’t even use the word because, first of all, that’s what old people do and, secondly, that’s what you do after dinner.’

Dame Marjorie Scardino, ex-rodeo rider and first woman CEO of a British FTSE company, on the subject of retiring.

CHAPTER 1

‘OK, girls,’ Claudia looked round at her three closest friends who were gathered for their usual night out in The Grecian Grove, a basement wine bar sporting badly drawn murals of lecherous shepherds chasing nymphs who didn’t look as if they were trying that hard to get away, ‘does anyone know what date it is today?’

To call them girls, Claudia knew, was pushing it. They weren’t girls, as a matter of fact, they were women. Late middle-aged women. Once they would have been called old, but now, since sixty was the new forty, that had all changed.

Sal, Ella and Laura shrugged and exchanged mystified glances. ‘It’s not your birthday? No, that’s in February and you’ll be—’ Ella ventured.

‘Don’t say it out loud!’ cut in Sal, ever the most age-conscious of them. ‘Someone might hear you!’

‘What, some snake-hipped potential young lover?’ Laura teased. ‘I would feel I owed him the truth.’

‘It’s the thirtieth of September,’ Claudia announced as if pulling a rabbit from a hat.

‘So?’ They all looked bemused.

‘It was on the thirtieth of September that we all first met.’ Claudia pulled a faded photograph from her bag. ‘The first day of term at university. Over forty years ago!’

Sal looked as if she might pass out. The others scrambled

to see. There they were. Four hopeful eighteen-year-olds with long fringes, short skirts and knee-length boots, optimism and hope shining out of their fresh young faces.

‘I must admit,’ Ella said proudly, ‘we look pretty good. Why do the young never believe they’re beautiful? All I remember thinking was that my skin was shit and I ought to lose a stone.’

Claudia looked from her friends to the photo. At first glance Sal had worn best, with her chic clothes and fashionable haircut, but then she’d never had a husband or children to wear her out. Besides, there was something a little overdone about Sal’s look that spoke of trying too hard. Laura had always been the most conventionally pretty, given to pastel sweaters and single strings of pearls. You knew, looking at Laura, that as a child she had probably owned a jewellery-box with a ballerina on top which revolved to the music. This ballerina had remained Laura’s fashion icon. Next there was Ella. She had always been the elfin one. Then, three years ago, tragedy had struck out of a blue sky and had taken its toll, but she was finally looking like the old Ella. Oddly, she looked younger, not older, because she didn’t try to alter her age.

Then there was Claudia herself with her carefully coloured hair in the same shade of nut-brown she always chose, not because it was her actual colour, she couldn’t even recall what that was, but because Claudia believed it looked more natural. She wore her usual baggy beige jumper with the inevitable camisole underneath, jeans and boots.

‘It can’t be as long ago as that,’ Sal wailed, looking as if she could see a bus coming towards her and couldn’t get out of its path.

‘They were good times, weren’t they?’ sighed Ella. She knew her two daughters judged things differently. They saw their parents’ generation as selfish, not to mention promiscuous and probably druggy. The baby boomers had been the

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lucky ones, they moaned, inheritors of full employment, generous pensions and cheap property prices while their children had to face insecure jobs, extortionate housing costs and working till they were seventy.

Ella thought about it. They were right about the promiscuous bit. She would never dare confess to her daughters that at the age of twenty she'd prevented a man from telling her his name as they made love, preferring instead the excitement of erotic anonymity. How awful. Had she really done that? Not to mention slept with more men than she could remember the names of. Ah, the heady days after the Pill and before Aids.

Ella found herself smiling.

It had been an amazing moment. The music, the festivals, the sense that the young suddenly had the power and that times really were a-changing. But it was all a very long while ago.

Claudia put the photograph carefully back in her bag. 'I have a question to ask.' She poured them another glass of wine. 'The question is, seeing as we may have another thirty years to live, what the hell are we going to do with the rest of our lives?'

'Won't you go on teaching?' Ella asked, surprised. Claudia was so dedicated to her profession and had been teaching French practically since they left university. 'I thought you could go on forever nowadays.'

'I'm not sure I want to,' Claudia replied.

They stared at her, shocked. 'But you love teaching. You say it keeps you in touch with the young!' Laura protested.

'Not enough in touch, apparently.' Claudia tried to keep the bitterness out of her voice. 'I'm out of tune with technology, it seems. My favourite year group has been reassigned to a younger teacher who gets them to learn slang on YouTube.'

It's having an energizing effect on even the slowest pupils according to the deputy head.'

Claudia tried not to remember the deputy head's patronizing tone yesterday, when she had explained, as if talking to a very old person, that Peter Dooley, a squirt of thirty known by the rest of the staff as Drooly Dooley because of his habit of showering you with spit when he talked, would be taking over her favourite pupils.

'Mr Dooley!' Claudia had replied furiously. 'He has no experience of the real France! He looks everything up on the Internet!'

Too late she realized her mistake.

'Exactly!' the deputy head insisted; she was only thirty herself, with an MBA, not even a teaching degree, from a university in the North East – an ex-poly at that, Claudia had thought bitchily.

'But you've always been amazing with your pupils!' Sal defended indignantly. 'Do you remember, years before the Internet, you made tapes up with you and Gaby speaking French to one another? Your pupils loved them!'

Claudia blanched. The deputy head had actually produced one of these twenty-year-old anachronisms during their interview and had had the gall to hold it up and ask in a sugary tone, 'Of course you probably think the old ways are best, don't you, Claudia?'

Claudia had wanted to snap that she was perfectly au fait with modern teaching methods, thank you very much. But the truth was she was beginning to feel defeated. For the first time, since those heady days of the photograph, she had started to feel old. And it wasn't the fault of memory loss or the war with grey hair.

It was technology.

Jean-Paul Sartre might say hell was other people, but he'd

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never been to an Apple store on a busy Saturday, only to be told you needed an appointment to talk to a ‘genius’, one of a thousand identikit geeky youths, before you could ask a simple question.

Nor had he to contend with the horrors of the ‘managed learning environment’ where pupils and even their parents could go online and access their school work from home. Even the tech-savviest staff found it a nightmare to operate. As if that weren’t enough, now teachers were expected to identify their pupils’ weaknesses using some hideous software developed by a ten-year-old!

‘Snotty cow,’ Ella’s angry voice echoed through The Grecian Grove in Claudia’s defence. ‘You’re far better at technology than I am. I still think an iPad is something made by Optrex. What are you going to do about it?’

‘Actually,’ Claudia realized the truth for the first time herself, ‘I might even resign.’

‘Claudia, no!’ Laura was shocked. ‘But you love teaching and you’re really good at it!’

‘Am I? Seriously, girls, the bastards think we’re has-beens. Drooly Dooley even said, “If it’s any consolation, Claudia, a lot of the older teachers are struggling with the system.”’

‘Bollocks!’ protested Sal, emptying her glass.

‘Anyway, another school would snap you up!’ Laura, always the positive one in the group, happily married for twenty-five years and a great believer in the virtues of the institution, was attempting to answer Claudia’s question. ‘You’re a wonderful teacher. You’d find something else useful to do. Funny, it only seems the blink of an eye since we first met. We should just keep calm and carry on. It’ll only be another blink till we’re ninety.’

‘Except that this blink will be punctuated by arthritis, memory loss and absence of bladder control,’ Sal pointed out

laconically. ‘And anyway, you should fight back! Don’t take ageism lying down. We’re not old yet. Not even middle-aged.’

Maybe because she was the one who most needed to earn her living, Sal was fighting ageing the hardest. She had declared war on body fat, laughter lines and any clothing in baggy linen. The dress she wore today was black gabardine, strictly sculpted and teamed with high heels. Ella had given up on anything but flatties years ago, and Claudia was wearing trainers so that she could walk to the tube.

She liked to walk to work on school days. But would there be any more school to walk to? Claudia asked herself glumly, as she poured out the last of the resin-flavoured Greek wine into their glasses.

‘You’d definitely find another teaching job,’ Laura comforted, with all the encouraging optimism of someone who didn’t really need to work.

‘Would I?’ Despite the jeans, Claudia felt suddenly old. Who would want to employ a teacher on a high pay-scale who wouldn’t see sixty again?

‘Come on, Clo,’ Ella encouraged. ‘You’re the dangerous radical in our midst. You were in Paris in ’sixty-eight throwing paving stones! You can’t just give up because some snotty jobsworth is trying to sideline you!’

Claudia sipped her wine and winced. The trouble was she wasn’t sure she wanted to fight back. She was beginning to feel tired. She looked around at her friends. ‘A toast.’ Claudia raised her glass. ‘To us. It was bloody amazing while it lasted.’

‘I’ll drink to that,’ Sal seconded. ‘But it isn’t over yet!’

‘Oh, come on, Sal, admit it.’ Ella shook her head. ‘We’re not middle-aged, we’re ancient.’

‘No we’re not. There’s no such thing as old any more. We’re YAHs – Young At Hearts. Or maybe we’re SWATS.’

‘I thought that was a valley in Pakistan,’ Claudia giggled.

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‘Or some kind of police unit,’ seconded Ella.

Sal ignored them. ‘Still Working At Sixty.’

‘If we *are* still working,’ Claudia sighed. ‘Or in your case, Sal, maybe it’s SOTs. Still Out There at Sixty.’

‘That makes me sound like an ageing cougar with a drink problem!’

‘And your point is . . . ?’ Ella teased.

‘Now, now,’ Laura admonished. ‘Don’t gang up on Sal.’

‘The thing is, we’re just not old like people have been old in the past,’ persisted Sal. ‘At my age my mother looked like the Queen – with a curly perm and twinsets. I wear jeans and shop at H&M!’

‘It’s true we all look nothing like our mothers did,’ Laura conceded. ‘The only way you can tell a woman’s age these days is to look at her husband!’

‘The thing is we may *be* old but we don’t *feel* old,’ Sal insisted, ‘that’s what makes us different. We’re the baby boomers, the Me Generation. We’ve always ripped up the rules and done it our way. Ageing isn’t inevitable any more, it’s a choice! And I, for one, am not choosing it.’

‘I don’t know.’ Ella stretched out the arm in which she got occasional twinges of rheumatism. ‘Sometimes I do feel old.’

‘Nonsense! We’ll never be old. We’re the Woodstock generation! What was that Joni Mitchell song?’ Sal delved into the recesses of her memory. ‘You know, the one about being stardust and needing to get back to the Garden?’

‘Yes,’ Ella raised her glass. ‘Let’s just hope the Garden’s wheelchair accessible.’

On the tube home Claudia got out her phone and set it to calculator. Yes, she was tech-savvy enough to do that, thank you, even though her daughter Gaby said she only used her

phone to send nags-by-text. She roughly added up their major outgoings. If she gave up now it would damage her pension. She couldn't help smiling at Ella's jibe about her throwing paving stones in 1968, when here she was agonizing about pensions. What would the young Claudia have thought of that?

But then she'd only been an accidental anarchist. In fact, she'd really been an au pair, only seventeen, trying to improve her French before A levels, staying with a well-heeled family in the smart sixteenth arrondissement. That's when she met Thierry, best friend of the family's son. It had been Thierry, darkly good-looking with black horn-rimmed specs and an intellectual air, who had persuaded her, on her rare day off, to come and see what the students were doing.

Claudia, from safe suburban Surrey, had been entranced by the heady air of revolution, the witty graffiti daubed on the elegant buildings: *Be realistic, demand the impossible, I am a Marxist, Groucho Tendency*, and even more by the alluringly radical Thierry himself.

It had all been so daring and exciting. She had joined hands with Thierry and his clean-cut friends in their corduroy jackets and short haircuts, not at all the standard image of revolting students, to block the Paris streets so that the hated *flics* couldn't pass. She had ridden on his shoulders – like girls now did at music festivals – in the Latin Quarter with hundreds of thousands of others demanding sexual liberation and an end to paternalism.

It all seemed a far cry from today.

She went back to her calculations. How would they survive without her salary? Badly. At this rate, if she gave up teaching, she'd have to get a job in B&Q like all the other oldies! The most infuriating thing was that Claudia knew she was good at her job. She could enthuse her students and she

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was popular too. But it was true that she didn't use new technology as much as Peter Dooley did. She wondered if she was being a Luddite. *No*, she reminded herself, *I'm bloody good at what I do*. And what if she did give up? She could always coach pupils at a crammer.

But what Ella had said was true; she was still a bit of a boat-rocker and she hated privilege that could be bought by rich parents. *If I give up, I'm bound to pick up some work*, she told herself. But, deep down, Claudia knew that no matter how good she was, her age was beginning to tell against her.

By the time she got home, the brief respite from her problems brought on by wine and friendship had evaporated. She walked up their garden path, noticing that the light was on in the sitting room and that, unusually, her husband Don – also a teacher, in his case of politics – was sitting at the computer underneath the cheese plant, another feisty survivor from the Sixties. The height of fashion in 1969, cheese plants were as quaint as aspidistras now, but Claudia felt an inexplicable loyalty to it and refused to chuck it out.

She had spent most of last night moaning to him about the deputy head. In contrast to her own gloomy mood, Don seemed unusually cheery, which amazed her since recently he had been depressed about his own job. Tonight he seemed a different person.

'Hello, love.' He grinned at her, suddenly boyish. 'I think I may have found the answer to our problems!'

Somewhere deep inside, alarm bells rang. This wasn't like Don. She was always the one who got things organized, made the decisions, rang the changes. Don had always been impractical, disorganized, totally disinterested in anything remotely useful. He was usually far more caught up with how to make the electoral system come alive to bored and phone-fixated teenagers than whether the roof was leaking or where they could

get a better rate of interest on their modest savings. These things he left to 'Clever Claudia'.

Their daughter Gaby had followed his example and always turned to her mother, not her father, for loans, advice and late-night lifts.

'OK,' Claudia took off her coat and hung it in the hall cupboard. 'So what *is* the answer to our problems?'

'We'll look into retiring. It'll only be a couple of years early. They always used to be asking for volunteers among the older teachers. We cost more. They can easily replace us with some kid straight out of teacher training, then we can sell this place and downsize to Surrey, near your parents, and live on the income from our investment.' His eyes shone like an early-day evangelist with a new parable to preach. 'You could keep chickens!'

Claudia shuddered. She'd always said retiring was something you did before going to bed, not with the rest of your life. On the other hand, could she stomach Drooly Dooley easing her out of her own department?

She could think of a number of extremely rude French slang expressions to describe the little toad, much ruder than those on the Internet, of which *pauvre mec* was by some way the tamest. What if she protested to Stephen, the head teacher? He was almost her own age. Would that mean he would support her or take his deputy's part? Claudia knew she had a bit of a reputation for arguing. No doubt Stephen would remember it. Besides, the days of mass early retirement for teachers was long gone. Too expensive and too many teachers, worn out by classroom confrontation, had already opted for it. Still, they might be open to negotiation . . .

She'd have to make herself more troublesome.

One thing she knew. She didn't feel ready to bury herself in the sticks. 'But I don't want to keep bloody chickens! And I don't want to move to bloody Surrey!'

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‘It’s only twenty miles down the motorway,’ Don placated, his eyes still shining dangerously and his missionary zeal undimmed. ‘Half an hour on the train, max.’

‘What about me?’ demanded a voice quivering with outrage. ‘Surrey is the home of the living dead.’ Gaby, their daughter, stood in the doorway, her face ashen at the prospect of a rural retreat.

Claudia, who’d grown up there, quite agreed.

Gaby, at twenty-eight, still lived at home. Claudia loved having her. Her daughter was terrific fun and often filled the kitchen with her friends. But she also worried that Gaby really ought to be finding a job that paid enough for her to be able to move out. Gaby’s response was that due to the greedy depredations of the generation above she was too broke, but Claudia sometimes feared it was because she wasn’t a sticker. She had a perfectly good degree in geography but had thrown herself, in swift succession, into being an actress, a waitress, the receptionist for a vet, a call-centre operative, a circus performer (only two weeks at that), and an art gallery assistant. Recently she had decided she wanted to be an architect. Claudia and Don had exchanged glances and not mentioned the extremely lengthy training. Currently, she was at least working for one, albeit in a very junior capacity.

‘We could help you with the rent on a flat,’ her father announced, as if the solution were obvious.

Gaby brightened perceptibly while Claudia wondered if Don had lost his mind. ‘Somewhere in Shoreditch, maybe? Or Hoxton?’ Gaby named perhaps the two hippest areas in the now-fashionable East End.

‘I’m not sure about that,’ Don began.

‘Neither am I,’ Claudia agreed waspishly. ‘More like in Penge on what our income will be if I leave. But that’s because this whole idea of moving is ludicrous.’

‘Why?’ Don stood his ground for once.

‘My job is here. I like London.’

‘But as you say yourself, you may not want to go on with your job. What happens if Dooley gets Head of Department?’

Claudia ignored this hideous prospect. ‘What about the culture on our doorstep?’ she protested. ‘Theatres, galleries, restaurants?’

‘You never consume the culture. You’re always saying theatre tickets are priced so only Russian oligarchs can afford them.’

‘Art galleries, then.’

‘When did you last go to an art gallery?’

Claudia moved guiltily onwards, conscious that, living in the middle of one of the world’s great cities, she rarely consumed its cultural delights. ‘And then there’re my friends! I couldn’t move twenty miles from The Grecian Grove!’

‘Don’t you think you’re being a little selfish?’ Don demanded.

‘Don’t you think *you* are?’ Claudia flashed back. ‘You’ve never even mentioned moving before and now it’s all *my* fault because I don’t want to live in the fake country.’

‘Surrey isn’t the fake country. Anyway, we could move to the real country. It’d probably be cheaper.’

‘And even further from my friends!’

‘Yes,’ Don was getting uncharacteristically angry now, ‘it’s always about the coven, isn’t it? The most important thing in your life.’

‘How dare you call them the coven?’

‘Hubble bubble, gossip, gossip. Sal bitching about her colleagues. Ella moaning about the son-in-law from hell, Laura judging every man by whether he’s left his wife yet.’

Despite herself, Claudia giggled at the accuracy of his description.

‘Thank God for that,’ Gaby breathed. ‘I thought you two

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were heading for the divorce court rather than the far reaches of the M25. You never fight.'

'Anyway, what about *your* friends?' Claudia asked Don. 'You'd miss your Wednesdays at the Bull as much as I'd pine for my wine bar.' Each Wednesday Don met up with his three buddies to moan about their head teachers, Ofsted and the state of British education. But friendship, it seemed, wasn't hard-wired into men as it was into women.

'Cup of tea?' offered Don as if it might provide the healing power of the Holy Grail. 'Redbush?'

Claudia nodded. 'The vanilla one.'

'I know, the vanilla one.'

She kissed Gaby and went upstairs. He knew her so well, all her likes and dislikes over thirty years. They were bonded by all the tiny choices they'd made, each a brick in the citadel of their marriage. But citadels could lock you in as well as repel invaders.

Claudia undressed quickly and slipped into bed, her nerves still on edge.

Don appeared bearing tea, then disappeared into the bathroom.

Two minutes later he slipped naked into bed, the usual signal for their lovemaking. 'I'm sorry. I shouldn't have sprung it on you like that. It was really unfair.'

'Telling me.'

He began to kiss her breast. Claudia stiffened, and not with sexual anticipation. How could men think you could use sex to say sorry, when women needed you to say sorry, and mean it, before they could even consider wanting sex?

Ella got off the bus and walked along the towpath where the Grand Union Canal met up with the Thames. It was a moonlit

night and a wide path of silver illuminated the water, vaguely swathed in mist, which reminded her of one of the holy pictures she had collected as a child at her convent school. These holy pictures often featured the effect of light on water as a symbol of supernatural peace. But Ella didn't feel peaceful tonight. It was one of those nights when she missed Laurence.

Any religious faith she'd had had long deserted her. It might have been a help, she supposed, when Laurence had died so suddenly, without her even being able to say goodbye, a random statistic on the News, an unlucky victim of a rare train crash. The safest form of travel. Ha. Or maybe, if she'd had faith, she might have lost it at the unfair nature of his death, away on a day's business, standing in for a colleague, not even his own client.

She thought of Claudia, and Claudia's question. What were they all going to do with the rest of their lives? It was a good question. Work, she knew, had saved her then.

It had only been her job that had got her through the grief when Laurence died. Without work to go to she would have pulled the duvet over her head and never got out of bed again.

Of course, she'd had to be strong for her daughters, but they were grown-up now, thirty-two and thirty, no longer living at home. In fact, another reason Ella had had to be strong was to prevent Julia, her eldest and bossiest daughter, swooping down on her and treating her like a small child incapable of deciding anything for itself.

Cory, her younger daughter, had been harder to console because the last time she'd seen her dad they'd quarrelled over some silly matter, and she couldn't believe she'd never see him again so they could make it up.

That had been three years ago; Ella almost had to pinch herself. The imprint of his head on the pillow next to hers had hardly disappeared. The bed felt crazily wide and every

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single morning she woke, she heard the empty silence of the house and had to put the radio on instantly. Jim Naughtie had proved no substitute for Laurence but he was better than nothing.

A tactless colleague, whose own husband had left her, insisted that death was better than divorce because at least you had the memories.

But sometimes the memories were the problem. She could still walk into the house, put her keys on the hall table next to the bunch of flowers she'd picked from the garden, and listen, expecting to hear the sound of sport on the television.

Her job as a lawyer had been doubly useful. She had fought the train company for an admission of guilt, not just for her but for the others. And then, when she got the admission, the fight had gone out of her. As soon as she'd hit sixty, she'd retired, just like that. Everyone had been stunned. Perhaps herself most of all.

Now she was crossing the square in front of her house. Even though it was in London it had once been a village green where a market was held, and archery contests. Now it was gravelled over but still felt more a part of the eighteenth century than the present day.

Ella stopped to look at her house, the house on which she had lavished so much care and love, the house where she had spent all her married life.

It was a handsome four-storey building of red brick with square twelve-paned windows and large stone steps going up to the front door. It was this entrance she loved the most, with its elegant portico and delicate fluted columns. Once it had been lived in by weavers, now only the substantial middle class could afford to live here.

She stopped for a moment as she put her key in the door and looked upwards. A jumbo jet was just above her, on its

descent into Heathrow. It seemed so close she could reach out and catch it in her hand. Incongruously, these triumphs of Queen Anne elegance were right beneath the flight path. The area where she lived was a tiny enclosure of history surrounded on all sides by towering office blocks benefiting from their nearness to the profitable M4 corridor. The square was one of those little unexpected revelations that made people love London.

Inside the front door she could hear a radio playing and stood stock still, frozen in memory. But it wasn't Laurence, Laurence was dead. It was probably Cory, who had the disconcerting habit of turning up and staying the night if she happened to be nearby. In fact, once she'd got over the shock, Ella was delighted to have her younger daughter there.

'Cory!' she called out. 'Cory, is that you?'

Footsteps thundered up the wooden stairs from the basement and a coltish figure flung itself at her. Cory was a striking girl, slender, with skin pale as wax against a waterfall of dark brown hair. But it was her eyes that arrested you. They were a quite extraordinary bright dark blue. Sometimes they were dancing with light, yet, more often, Ella saw a sadness in their depths that worried her. Cory had so much to feel confident about – an ethereal beauty, quick intelligence, and a job she enjoyed as a museum administrator – but it had only been Laurence who had the capacity to make her believe in herself. When Ella tried to praise her daughter she somehow got it wrong – and Cory would shrug off the compliment, whether to her good taste in clothes, or an acute observation she had made – with a little angry shake, like a duckling that is eager to leave the nest but can't quite fly unaided. Today, at least, she seemed in an effervescent mood.

'Hey, Ma, how are you? I was at a boring meeting in Uxbridge and thought you might love to see me.'

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‘Did you now?’ laughed Ella, taking in the glass of wine in her daughter’s hand. She was about to ask, playfully, ‘And how is that Sauvignon I was saving?’ But she knew Cory would look immediately stricken, so she bit the comment back. ‘Don’t worry,’ Ella shrugged, ‘I’d join you but I’ve been out with the girls already.’

‘Speaking of girls, your next-door neighbour is popping back in a mo. She’s got something to ask you.’

‘Ah. She and Angelo probably want me to water the cat or something.’

‘Are they going away?’

‘They’re *always* going away.’ Her neighbours, Viv and Angelo, shared the disconcerting energy of the prosperous early retired. They were both over sixty but had arrested their image at about twenty-six. Viv had the look of the young Mary Quant, all miniskirts, sharp bob, and big necklaces. Angelo had well-cut grey hair, almost shoulder-length, and was given to wearing hoodies in pale apricot. They drove around in an open-topped Mini with loud Sixties music blaring. If there was a line between eternally youthful and weird and creepy, they were just the right side of it. Though, looking at them, Ella sometimes wondered if anyone admitted to their age any more.

It was a constant source of surprise to Ella that Viv and Angelo also had an allotment. And this, it transpired, was the source of the favour Viv wanted to ask when she rang the doorbell half an hour later.

‘Sorry it’s so late. Cory said you’d be back. It’s just that we’re off at the crack of dawn. And I just wondered, Ella love, if you could cast an occasional eye over the allotment for us. Once a week will do, twice at the most.’

‘How long are you away for?’

‘Only three weeks. Diving in the Isla Mujeres.’

‘Where on earth is that?’

‘Mexico, I think. Angelo booked it.’ Viv and Angelo went on so many holidays even they lost count. Their pastimes always made Ella feel slightly exhausted. Paragliding, hill walking, white-water rafting, cycling round vineyards – there was no end to activities for the fit and adventurous well-heeled retiree.

‘And what would I have to do?’

‘Just keep it looking tidyish. The allotment police are a nightmare. Keep threatening to banish anyone who doesn’t keep their plot looking like Kew Gardens.’

‘There aren’t really allotment police, are there?’ Cory demanded.

‘No,’ Viv admitted. ‘That’s what we call the committee. They used to be old boys in braces and straw hats. Now Angelo suspects they’re all LGBT.’

‘What is LGBT?’ Ella asked.

‘Mu-um!’ Cory corrected, looking mock-offended. ‘Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender.’

‘Good Heavens!’ Ella didn’t often feel old but she did now. ‘Well, that’s pretty comprehensive.’ In fact it probably said more about Angelo than the allotment holders.

‘You just need to do a bit of deadheading, sweep the leaves, look busy. We’re always being reminded of what a long waiting list there is – of far more deserving people than we are. Here’s the key.’

Viv kissed her three times. ‘Oh, and by the way, we’ve had a burglar alarm fitted next door. Angelo insisted.’ She handed Ella a piece of paper. ‘Here’s the code if it goes off. You’ve got our keys anyway, haven’t you?’

‘Yes,’ agreed Ella, beginning to feel like an unpaid concierge.

Viv was already down the garden path. ‘Off at six. Angelo hates wasting a whole day travelling so we have to get the first flight out.’

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‘You have to admit,’ marvelled Cory, ‘they’ve got a lot of get up and go for oldies.’

‘Too bloody much, if you ask me. They’re trying to prove there’s nothing they’re too old for.’

Ella double-locked the door and dragged the bolt across, then began drawing the heavy silk curtains, undoing the fringed tiebacks with their gold gesso moulding. This was a job she especially liked. The old house with its wooden floors and oak panelling always seemed to emanate a sigh of satisfaction and embrace the peacefulness of night-time.

‘You know, Mum,’ Cory’s thoughts broke in, ‘you really ought to do the same.’

‘What? Deep-sea diving? Or paragliding?’

Cory smiled ruefully, laughing at the unlikely idea of Ella throwing herself out of anything. ‘Get a burglar alarm.’

‘I hate burglar alarms,’ Ella replied. She almost added: ‘You can’t forestall the unexpected, look at what happened to Dad’, but it would have been too cruel. ‘You’re beginning to sound like your big sister Julia. Come on, time for bed. Do you want a hottie?’

Cory shook her head. ‘I think I’ll stay up and watch telly for a bit.’

Ella went down to the basement kitchen and made tea, thinking of Laurence. It was the little habits that she missed most, the comforting routines that knit together your coupledom. And here she was still doing it without him. Now all she had to look forward to was babysitting her neighbours’ allotment while they swanned off living the life of people thirty years younger. Except that people who were actually thirty years younger couldn’t afford to do it.

Ella turned off the light, listening for a moment to the big old house’s silence. It had been a wreck when they’d bought it, with a tree growing in the waterlogged basement. She had

coaxed the house back to life with love and devotion, steeping herself in the history of the period, studying the other houses in the square so that theirs would be just as lovely.

‘Good night, house,’ she whispered so that Cory didn’t think she’d finally lost it. ‘We’re all each other has these days. Too much to hope anything exciting is going to happen to me.’

She shook herself metaphorically as she went upstairs to bed. She’d tried so hard to resist self-pity during the dark days after Laurence’s death, she was damned if she was going to give in to it now.

Sal stood in the wastes of Eagleton Road hoping a taxi would come past. She shouldn’t get a cab, she knew. It was unnecessary and not even something she could charge to expenses, as one could in the heyday of magazines, when staff just charged everything they liked and The Great Provider, aka *Euston Magazine*, paid up without a whimper. Now the publishing landscape was getting as bleak as Siberia.

Sal began walking desultorily towards the tube station, playing one of her favourite games which decreed that if a cab went past before she got there, fate intended her to jump into it, and who could argue with fate? Sal realized she was stacking the odds by walking particularly slowly in her unsuitable high heels. The thing was, these shoes were made for taxi travel and no one, especially their designer, had envisaged a customer schlepping down the uneven pavement of Eagleton Road.

Fate was on her side and a lone cab hove into view with its light on.

Sal hailed it with all the joy and relief of a refugee getting the last berth on a transport ship out of some war-torn hotspot.

‘Middlebridge Crescent, please.’ They headed off for the rather sleazy enclave in North Kensington, on the borders of

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upmarket Notting Hill Gate, where Sal had managed to find an unfurnished flat thirty years ago, settling for four somewhat uninviting rooms in an unappealing road in exchange for the nearness of its glamorous big sister.

The truth was, although Sal gave every appearance of being the career woman on top of life, there were aspects of living she was hopeless at: mortgages, pensions, savings plans. None of these had ever caught her imagination like sample sales, freebies to exotic spas, London Fashion Week – these were what made Sal’s heart beat faster.

She paid the cab driver, and was touched that he waited till she had safely descended the steps to her front door, in case any marauding mugger should be concealed there. ‘Good night, miss,’ he called, although he knew and she knew that this description, though technically true, was an entirely generous gesture.

‘Good night,’ she responded, opening her grey-painted front door. Funny how grey front doors had suddenly become *de rigueur* on brick-fronted houses, and any other colour suddenly seemed strange and somehow wrong. That was how fashion worked, of course. Grey wasn’t simply the new black, as far as front doors went; it was the new red, green and blue.

She shivered as she turned her key, grateful for the warm embrace of central heating, which might not be as enticing as a waiting lover, but was a lot cheaper to run and far less temperamental.

October already. Incredible. She smiled at the memory of the photograph of the four of them and then recoiled at the thought of how many years ago it was. She had never imagined that here she would be, more than forty years later, living alone, paying her way, dependent for her standard of living on the whim of Maurice Euston and his daughter Marian, who had just been elevated to Managing Director.

It struck her as she sat down on her aubergine velvet sofa and shucked off her agonizing heels that the all-important Christmas issue would be out by the end of the month. Of course, the whole thing had been put to bed months ago. All those children simpering round the Christmas tree in cute pyjamas had actually been sweating in a heat-wave. All the same, she – Sal – still believed in the fantasy. It didn't matter if they had to cheat a little to make the fantasy work. She had never felt cynical and bored, never wanted to shout: 'Oh for God's sake, I've heard that idea four hundred times before!' at some hapless young journalist.

Sal loved magazines. When she was growing up on her Carlisle council estate, she hadn't been able to afford them and had devoured as many as she could at the hairdresser when her mum had her Tuesday afternoon cheap-rate shampoo and set. They remained a gorgeous parcel of me-time. Gift-wrapped with glossiness and sprinkled with celebrity stardust, they brought pleasure to millions. Well, maybe not quite millions, that was half the problem, but thousands anyway. To Sal, a magazine was still something you held in your hand, savouring the thrill of flicking through the first pages, not something you summoned on your iPad or furtively consulted online during your lunch break. She knew you had to keep up, though, and had worked hard to make sure these options were there, and as inviting as any offered by *Modern Style's* rivals.

Sal made herself a cup of green tea. She mustn't let the magazine take up her entire waking life. She was no workaholic. She had other interests and passions.

Didn't she?

Laura parked in the driveway of her solid suburban house. She had been careful only to have two small glasses so that

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she would be below the limit. Laura preferred driving to taking the bus or tube. Somehow it meant she didn't have to leave the protective cocoon of home, and that was how she liked it. You could argue that the tube was more interesting. All those different nationalities. People reading books, e-readers, free newspapers, playing games on their phones. And the fashions. She liked seeing all the ways young women put their clothes together. But there were also beggars, stringing you some story, the noisy drunks talking out loud to themselves, and the exhausted, worn-out workers who made Laura feel faintly guilty about her easy life.

Tonight, though she knew it was awful, she also felt slightly smug. It was amazing that, out of the four of them, she was the only one who was truly happy with her life. Ella had had that tragedy, so utterly unfair, out of the blue like that; Sal never thought about anyone but Sal, which was why she'd ended up on her own; and Claudia had been married a long time, but she was always moaning about Don's head being in the clouds, and they never seemed to be soulmates. Not like she and Simon were.

It was an object of pride to Laura that Simon loved her and his home as much as he did, that they were perfectly happy in each other's company. Of course she loved her friends, but Simon came first.

And she knew he felt the same about her. In fact, the only source of friction between them was their children. When Bella had become a Goth, Simon was appalled. Laura, on the other hand, rather admired her for it. She knew that she herself was a boringly conservative dresser and partly blamed this for Bella needing to express her individuality by clothing herself like the heroine of a Hammer horror film in a silk top hat, veil and Victorian riding gear. When Bella had dyed her silky blonde hair inky black, Simon had almost cried.

And she knew that their son, Sam, quiet, heavy-metal loving Sam, who loathed all sports, was a disappointment to Simon too. Simon had been so thrilled at having a son that he had plonked him in front of the TV for *Match of the Day* from the moment he was born. And the only result had been that Sam hated football until he was at least twelve.

Even though it could be stressful at times, Laura was still grateful that both her children lived at home. Home and family were the same thing in her book. And, Laura had to admit, their children were especially precious after all the fertility problems they'd had. There had been times when Laura had almost given up. Simon had argued the whole thing was taking too much of a toll on her, though she'd felt that he was referring to himself. He had hated all the rollercoaster of hope and disappointment of assisted conception even more than she had. And then, finally, at forty, to find that she was pregnant with Bella! She would never forget that positive pregnancy test as long as she lived. And to make their world complete, Sam had come along two years later.

Ever since their arrival, she had wanted to be here for them, not out at work, but providing a safe and happy environment. She relished being home when they came back from school and shouted, 'Hi, Mum, I'm back.'

Still hugging herself at how much she loved them she went up to bed. The sight of her bedroom always made her happy. It was so exactly what she'd wanted. Soft carpets, crisp white linen, roses in a vase. The air in the room was cold since Simon, the product of boarding school, liked the window wide open. It was one of the few things besides the children that they argued about. Fortunately, he slept like a corpse so she could get away with closing it as soon as he nodded off. If she remembered, she would guiltily open it a few inches in the morning before he woke.

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As she slipped into bed he murmured and turned. She thought perhaps he was feeling amorous and experienced a wave of guilt as he shifted back to the wall, eyes closed.

The sheets had been clean this morning, which always gave her a dilemma. There was something seductive about clean sheets, but, equally, did one want to spoil them with the messiness of making love? Not that they had much of that these days. Simon seemed perfectly affectionate yet rarely pushed for sex. Laura had even wondered about Viagra.

‘With my husband we had to wait forever for it to work,’ warned Susie, her tennis partner. ‘Not to mention me having to wank him like a Thai hooker all the time unless he did it himself. And then, just as you’re nodding off, there it’ll be, poking into your bum. And once it’s up, it’s up for hours.’

Laura had giggled, imagining an erotic puppet show with Mr Punch using his willy instead of the usual stick and chanting, ‘That’s the way to do it!’

On the whole she was glad Simon was sound asleep.

CHAPTER 2

‘Hello, Claudia dear, is that you?’

Claudia’s mother Olivia had the habit of shouting down the phone as if it were her daughter rather than herself who was slightly deaf. Claudia supposed that at over eighty you were allowed a few foibles. Olivia had plenty.

‘Yes, Mum. How are you?’

‘My bones ache in the morning. Takes me a good half-hour and a hot bath to get going. Let me give you some advice, darling. Don’t grow old.’

‘I’ll do my best. How’s Dad?’

‘Not too bad, considering the alternative.’ This was the joke her father made every time anyone asked how he was. ‘Now look, darling, I’m ringing about Christmas.’

‘Of course.’ Claudia felt a flash of guilt. Her mother always liked to get Christmas settled early. Usually by Boxing Day the year before. ‘Are you coming here as usual?’

‘Well actually, darling – not this year.’

‘You’re not?’ Claudia was flabbergasted. They always came. ‘Where are you going?’

‘We thought Istanbul.’

‘Istanbul? Why Istanbul?’ Claudia asked incredulously.

‘I found this wonderful offer on the Internet. And Dad’s fed up with the vicar. Told him we were going to have a Muslim Christmas. Just to annoy him.’

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Claudia giggled. She adored her dad. And the vicar was one of those who went on and on about Christingle. ‘Do they celebrate Christmas in Istanbul?’

‘Apparently there’s this lovely little Christian church your father’s found right in the middle of the city. He’s also got this idea of watching three ships go sailing by on Christmas Day in the morning, like in the nursery rhyme. From the Bosphorus. There are hundreds of ships there, apparently. It’s quite a sight.’

‘Right.’ This did indeed sound like her father, she had to concede. He adored watching ships. ‘When do you go? Maybe we should have a pre-Christmas Christmas?’

‘That sounds nice.’ Claudia could hear the doubt in her mother’s voice. ‘Though we are rather busy.’

Knowing her mother and father, Claudia knew this was an understatement. Her parents, Olivia and Len, had a social life that was far busier than Claudia’s own. Their life seemed to be a whirl of bridge evenings, pub quizzes, and dinner parties. In fact, her parents had time for all the things Claudia would like to do herself but never did. The latest addition was Olivia’s passion for Internet offers of cut-price meals, spa days and outings to garden centres which seemed largely to be taken up by silver surfers. Claudia had once accompanied her mother to a three-course lunch with champagne when the entire clientele had white hair and Zimmer frames. The food had been diabolical but Olivia had quipped, entirely without irony, ‘I know, dear, but it is half-price.’

‘Gaby will be really disappointed if we don’t do something Christmassy,’ insisted Claudia.

‘We’re free on Monday the sixteenth in the evening, if that’s any good,’ offered Olivia generously. ‘I’m sure I could find us a Christmas offer.’

‘No, no. I’ll cook.’

For a moment she wondered if she would still be working by Christmas but she wouldn't worry her mother with that. 'Will you, dear?' Olivia sounded dubious. She had given up cooking altogether since discovering the Internet with all its tempting restaurant deals. 'Are you sure you want to go to the trouble?'

After much negotiation over how long they would stay, all of it due to her parents' busy schedule, they finally agreed their arrangements. It struck Claudia, depressingly, that her mother was probably more Internet-savvy than she was.

'Of course, you could always come here for Christmas, if you wanted a change,' her mother offered. 'The house will be empty. Gaby might like it.'

'Thanks, Mum,' Claudia said, rather too quickly. It wasn't Gaby who'd like it, it was Don. She could just imagine it. He'd become a man on a mission and hang around estate agents' windows.

After they had rung off, Claudia sat at the kitchen table thinking about her mother. There was something strange about Olivia's manner. She couldn't put her finger on it, but her intuition told her something was not quite right. She seemed to be almost gabbling in her eagerness for these offers. There was a breathless enthusiasm, a heightened sense of glittering excitement that was hardly merited by spa outings and trips to the garden centre. She didn't have much time to think about it, since Gaby came back from work pale and distraught because her current boyfriend had suggested they take a break.

'Do you think it's over, Mum?' Gaby raised eyes that were smudged with mascara. Black runnels of misery marked her cheeks, producing an overwhelming tenderness in her mother. The answer was yes, but she would never say that. It was best just to listen.

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Gaby had a habit, along with job-changing, of falling for unsuitable older men who seemed wildly exciting but who nearly always ended up breaking her heart. Claudia worried that it was some fault of her upbringing. Nice normal types like her father didn't appeal to Gaby. Only the difficult and unattainable. Maybe, as she was an only child, they had expected her to adapt to an adult world instead of entering into the fun and silliness of the child's. Even when she had been eighteen, Gaby had preferred twenty-five-year-olds to her own age group.

Claudia opened her arms and patted her daughter. First, she'd worried about her mother, now she was worrying about her daughter. The price you paid for being part of the swinging Sixties and delaying childbearing as long as humanly possible was this. You were the sandwich generation who worried about your parents and your children both at exactly the same time.

Ella stood looking out at her garden with its large lawn dominated by a vast cedar of Lebanon. Usually it was a scene she found calming. She remembered her excitement at finding a document in the house stating that the tree had been planted in memory of one Samuel Browne, the house's first owner, and that the said much-loved Samuel was buried beneath it. Ella imagined the person who had effected this unusual burial-site was Samuel's wife and what a struggle it must have been with Church and state to be allowed to do this.

Behind her sat the source of her lack of calm. Her daughter Julia. Julia had taken up a post at the huge kitchen table and was consulting her laptop. 'God, Mum, your WiFi signal is crap here. You really do need to emerge from the eighteenth century!'

Julia was thirty-two and had married young, so that her two sons, Harry and Mark, were already into their teens. To Ella's disapproval they had been sent off to their father's old

public school, and though she loved her grandsons, she feared they were fast becoming as pompous and narrow-minded as he was. She knew Julia had opposed Neil at first but she'd been worn down by his endless arguments that their sons' futures would be blighted by going to the local school and that she was being selfish to resist.

Laurence had always lectured Ella about being less disapproving of Neil and giving the boys a chance, they were her grandsons, after all, and Ella did try. It was just that she thought they would be much nicer and more tolerant of other people if they had been sent to a normal school instead of the ludicrously expensive and ultra-traditional boarding establishment which seemed mainly to teach them that they were superior to everyone else on the planet.

The cost of fees for this dire place was so huge that Julia and her husband Neil were permanently looking for ways of paying up. And this house, Ella's beloved home for all her married life, was their perpetual target.

'Look, Mum.' The laptop was open at Zoopla. Julia, it seemed to Ella, was obsessed with house prices – especially the price of this particular house – and seemed to spend half her life on websites which detailed exactly how much every property nearby had gone for. 'Look, that's Number twenty-two.'

Ella studied the house on the screen. It was indeed the house four doors down, where the Lamberts had lived for thirty years. There hadn't been a For Sale sign up and the Lamberts hadn't mentioned anything about moving. But that was what the ludicrous situation with house prices did to people – it made them behave like characters from one of the Molière plays she'd studied at university. In this case *The Miser*. Everyone was terrified that other people would find out how much they'd made. Well, Ella had to concede, property-price websites had put an end to that worry.

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‘My God, it went for nearly two million!’ Julia squawked, too stunned to hide her excitement.

‘That’s nice for the Lamberts. I expect it’s their pension,’ Ella conceded.

There was a pause during which Ella had to stop herself grinning, Julia was so transparent. ‘What about you?’ Julia enquired hopefully. ‘Won’t you need to downsize too?’

‘No. I have a company pension from my time as a lawyer.’ She almost added ‘Sorry to disappoint you’, but thought better of it.

Julia had less sense. ‘I mean,’ she blundered on, ‘this place is far too big for you without Dad. And it’s so full of wood that needs endless polishing . . .’

‘I love the wood,’ Ella said quietly. ‘I love the square. I love the garden. I love the tree that makes me think of Dad. I rescued this house and maybe that’s why I love it so much.’

‘Yes, but think what you could do with two million . . .’

‘What *you* could do with two million,’ Ella thought but didn’t say. She loved both her daughters and of course she loved her grandchildren; she would like to give them a helping hand with money, even though she had never had one herself, but not yet. She would give them a sum to help them buy their own home, but not for school fees to that particularly pig-headed school which seemed to live in a previous century, as did Neil himself. Especially since she suspected Julia was the one who suffered from her sons’ absence. And certainly not if it meant giving up this house with all its treasured memories. She might make Cory understand that the house kept Laurence alive in her heart, but Julia would just say that was a bad thing, another reason to sell. ‘You should move on, Mum,’ would be her instant advice. But Ella thought moving on was over-rated.

If Julia had had any sense she would have stopped there,

but Zoopla had shown her the pot at the end of the rainbow.
'Of course Neil says—'

'You've discussed me moving with Neil?' Ella asked quietly.

'We've got your own good at heart, Mum. We worry about you here all alone.'

'Thank you, darling. And what does Neil say?'

'That giving money away seven years before . . .' Even Julia balked at saying 'before you die'.

'Julia, darling, I might live for another thirty years.'

'All the more need to plan your financial future.'

'Is that what Neil says too?'

Julia flushed slightly. Clearly Ella and Ella's finances were a popular topic in her daughter's household.

She sat down next to Julia and gently closed up her laptop, then she reached for her daughter's hand. 'Look, darling, I love this house and I'm not moving any time soon. I think it would be better for us all if you and Neil accepted that.'

Her daughter's face took on a mulish look. 'It's just that the school fees are so crippling . . .'

'Then don't send them to that school. They'll only turn out like . . .' Now it was Ella's turn to pause.

'Like their father? That was what you were going to say, wasn't it? Well, I think you're a selfish old woman.'

Ella shrugged. Maybe she was selfish. And then she thought of Laurence and how he would have backed her up although he would also have put it more diplomatically, and it was only because he wasn't here that Julia was saying this. She was damned if she were going to feel guilty.

For now she needed to get outside, to blow away all these thoughts chasing each other round her brain. She would go to the allotment.

'I have to go and change,' she announced, grateful to abandon the subject.

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‘Out with the coven?’ Julia asked acidly. Clearly Don’s description of the four of them was catching on.

‘Not today. I promised to keep an eye on my neighbours’ allotment.’

‘You?’ Julia laughed. ‘Growing vegetables? Neil says it’s ridiculous anyway. Grow-it-yourself types are causing potato blight. It would be much better if the land were used for housing.’

‘I might agree if I didn’t know what kind of housing he means.’

‘You’ve never liked Neil, Mum!’ accused Julia.

Ella felt a pang of guilt. ‘He has lots of good qualities. Anyway, he’s not my husband.’

‘No,’ Julia replied sullenly. ‘He’s not. And look at Cory. Thirty and no boyfriend now or ever.’

Ella felt the knife going in. She worried about Cory. That her younger daughter, who had been such a daddy’s girl, still hadn’t recovered from Laurence’s death and that this was an element in her lack of relationship. She had tried to get Cory to go to bereavement counselling but Cory had just replied: ‘Julia isn’t going to counselling.’ But then Julia and Cory were as different as sisters could be.

It was a good day at Sal’s office. One of the days when she loved her job, liked the people, adored the buzz of the busy building.

Modern Style, with its rather incongruous name, was based in a tall, thin early Victorian house in Soho. Next door on either side were shops that sold trimmings for costumes, stuffed with row after row of ribbons, sequins and feathers. Sal often wondered how they stayed in business year after year with margins that were infinitesimally small. Maybe a lesson for the magazine world.

Modern Style was owned by Maurice Euston, who had once owned countless strip and porn joints, which explained their location in Soho, but had decided ten years ago to go straight. He was in the process of handing over the reins to his daughter, Marian.

Sal's office was on the second floor. The décor had originally been haute bordello, all plush velvet and deep-pile carpets with crystal chandeliers and more gilding than Versailles. Marian had effected a makeover last year and the entire building was now bone-coloured and minimalist, a victim of Farrow & Ball fascism.

Sal was sitting at her curved glass desk looking through the Christmas edition. This edition sold so much better than any other that they had started bringing it out earlier and earlier so that two editions could be squeezed out of the holiday period. There was always a race between similar magazines to see who could get their Christmas version out earliest.

Sometimes Sal thought it might end up in September.

The phone rang and she picked it up. It was her assistant. 'Great edition,' she congratulated. 'Maurice and Marian want to take you out to lunch. One o'clock at The Ivy.'

This was a good sign. If the two Ms were displeased it would have been the trattoria over the road, the only restaurant in London that had ignored the arrival of modern Italian cuisine and still served stodgy lasagne with pride. Or maybe even sandwiches in the office.

Maurice, short and stocky, with skin that was mottled with dark patches like a bruised apple that had fallen off the tree, sat muffled in a coat and scarf as if the temperature outside were freezing, rather than it being a balmy October day. Marian, dainty in pastel mohair with bows down the front that belied the razor sharpness of her mind, sat next to him, a glass of champagne by her side. She ordered another for Sal.

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‘Sally, good to see you. Have a seat.’

‘I see we’re drinking champagne.’ Sal beamed. Her contract was due for renewal and she had been worried about the year-on-year sales figures and that the National Readership Survey had shown a small decline in reader reach as well as advertising, but the fizz seemed to belie all that.

‘Are we here to talk about the Christmas issue?’

‘The Christmas issue is great. What we actually need to address is where we go from here. We have big plans.’

‘I hope that means a budget increase?’ It amazed Sal that she was expected to produce the magazine for the same page rate as the one she had edited twenty years ago, and had to exploit unpaid interns, streams of hopeful young journalism graduates eager to get their feet in the door, while having zero budget for training anyone.

They ordered their food.

‘The thing is, as you know, magazines are changing fast,’ Marian announced, ignoring the food on her plate. ‘To keep up with the competition we need to extend across all the different platforms.’

Sal hated the obsession with platforms. She saw herself as a magazine editor but increasingly she was expected to be that hideous piece of jargon, a ‘platform-neutral content provider’, which meant she had to produce endless material for websites, Facebook, Twitter and even appear on everyone else’s platforms promoting *Modern Style* whenever she could.

‘And the thing is –’ Unusually, Marian paused.

At that very moment Sal caught sight of a scene that stunned her. Over Marian’s fluffy shoulder sat Simon, Laura’s husband, the one she raved about being so happy with, and he was kissing the palm – actually kissing the palm in a restaurant celebrated for its gossipy media types! – of a stunning young woman. Sal studied her in horror. On closer inspection she

wasn't as young as she'd seemed at first, probably in her mid-to late thirties, voluptuous, with long red hair and a predatory look.

Oh shit, thought Sal, not hearing what Marian was droning on about, that was the worst possible age. He would be thinking their affair was all about his incredible sexual prowess while she was hearing nothing but the ticking of her biological clock. Poor, poor Laura. Men were so bloody predictable.

'Of course you have been a highly satisfactory editor,' Maurice Euston's voice finally penetrated her consciousness. Sal's radar picked up the past tense and gave them both her full attention. 'But the future is going to be challenging. It requires a digital native, someone who grew up with these platforms, who lives and breathes them.'

'Producing a great magazine is about ideas, not platforms,' Sal scanned their faces for a reaction and found none.

'Certainly, but it's becoming hard to argue that good ideas are enough,' Marian's eyes narrowed, giving her the look of a pink sugar mouse wielding a sub-machine gun, 'which is why, Sally, I'm afraid we won't be renewing your contract.'

At that moment Simon stood up and swept his companion into his arms, kissing her passionately as if there were no one else in the room.

'Bastard!' Sal expostulated, unable to contain herself further at this barefaced betrayal.

Marian stood up. 'I will advise our lawyers of your response. I can't say I'm surprised. I have always found you an intractable employee. You needn't return to the office. We will waive your notice period and have all your things sent round in a cab.'

'Sorry?' Sal asked, recovering her wits. '*What* did you just say?'

'I don't think we need go over it again, Sally.' Marian stood

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up and waved for the bill even though they were only halfway through the meal. 'I wouldn't pursue unfair dismissal, if I were you. Half the restaurant heard what you called me.'

Marian was struggling into her coat with Maurice Euston helping her. 'Bag up Ms Grainger's meal please,' he asked a passing waiter. 'I can't bear waste.'

Sal stood, uncharacteristically speechless, as a doggy bag of posh shepherd's pie was pressed upon her. What was the point of explaining? Marian was clearly using this as an excuse for something she had already decided on.

Her former employers were halfway across the restaurant when Simon, hiding his shock beneath a front of unconvincing bravado at being caught out by one of his wife's best friends, pretended to greet Sal enthusiastically.

'Sal! This is Suki, a colleague of mine. Fancy meeting you here.'

'Simon, I am a journalist,' Sal replied in what she hoped was a sufficiently withering tone, 'and this is one of the best-known media haunts in London.' She looked his luncheon companion up and down. This sleazebag and his floozy had helped cost her the job she loved. With a sweet smile she handed Simon the greasy brown receptacle. 'Here. Have this doggy bag. Maybe your bitch might enjoy it.'

Laura, entirely unaware of the drama unfolding in town, was happily filling in her diary when she remembered their anniversary was fast approaching. She had been thirty-eight when they married. She could remember the look of amazement mixed with relief on her parents' faces when she'd told them about their wedding plans. 'Going to make an honest woman of you, is he?' her dad had joked. The awful thing was, Laura knew he meant it. He really did see marriage as completely different from living together. That 'piece of paper' was worth

its weight in gold to her parents. How stunned they'd be to find their daughter and son-in-law still together twenty-five years on. Of course her parents were both dead now which Laura had to admit was a slight relief as their disapproval of Bella and her Goth propensities would have been stinging.

She was pretty stunned herself. It was quite an achievement in the modern world that she and Simon had lasted so long. She grinned, remembering the day Bella had come to her and said that it was so unfair, nearly everyone in her class had divorced parents. Apparently divorce meant double the presents, no insistence on homework, and the unlimited potential to play off one parent against the other. Bella, with two parents who had stuck together, was apparently a disadvantaged minority.

The question was, what should they do to celebrate it?

Simon didn't really like surprises but Laura loved them. Besides, if she left it to him to arrange something, it would never happen.

So Laura decided to think of a way to mark the last twenty-five years and look forward to the next twenty-five, and which would be a complete secret.

Smiling to herself, she began to make a list. A party? Their oldest friends round to dinner? A romantic weekend away? Laura realized that much as she loved her children, the surprise would work better if it were just her and Simon so she could give him her undivided attention. A weekend away, then. She sat down at the computer and began to browse. The Top Ten romantic locations came up as Venice, Paris, Amsterdam, Rome, Barcelona, Prague, Copenhagen, Budapest, Berlin and – Brighton!

Laura laughed out loud because, amazingly, that was where they had met. It had been a reunion for their year at Sussex University and they'd both gone expecting to have a so-so time, convinced that reunions were for losers.

The Time of Their Lives

Instead they'd met each other. Their acquaintance while they were at college had only been slight, but suddenly they'd clicked and couldn't stop talking all night. And then, to crown it all, in what Laura wasn't to know was the only genuinely romantic gesture of Simon's life, he took her hand and led her down to the beach.

Having equipped himself with a bottle of wine, a blanket and a portable CD player, he laid the blanket out under Brighton Pier and played 'Under the Boardwalk', warbling flatly along to the chorus that, under the boardwalk on a blanket with his baby, was where he'd like to be.

Laura had been charmed. And even more so when it turned out that he'd booked them a room in an extravagant Art Deco hotel, just like the ones in the movies in the days when a private detective might barge into the bedroom with a camera to capture infidelity and earn Brighton its reputation as the dirty-weekend capital of Britain.

Laura felt her heart skip with excitement. That was exactly what she'd do again, the same hotel, the beach, under the boardwalk, all of it. And the brilliant thing was she could keep it all secret and pay for it herself. Unlike a weekend in Venice or Amsterdam, a night in Brighton was something she could afford out of her own money.

She hugged the pleasure and anticipation of the venture to her chest. She thought of Ella without Laurence, Sal all alone, and Claudia with her dull Don, and felt like she was the luckiest woman alive.