

Appreciating Assets by Mark Speed

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Chapter One

The pink book wasn't there.

They'd had sex for the first time in three weeks last night. It was the best they'd had in years – easily.

It had slipped his mind that she'd been off the booze for a couple of weeks, so he'd got into bed a little tipsy, having had a bottle of red on his own. He'd also had a couple of sly cans whilst watching the late Friday night comedy slot. She'd been in bed a while, reading one of those novels with a pink cover and a goofy title.

She turned off the light and, as soon as he pulled the duvet over himself, his underpants were hijacked by her roving hand, which began to stroke him to life. He hooked his pants down and threw them out of the bed. But when he turned to kiss her she stuck her right breast in his face. He sucked her nipple dutifully while searching his mind for an occasion he might have forgotten. Her twenty-ninth birthday had been months ago, and he was pretty sure it wasn't their anniversary. Indeed, their relationship had been so chequered that surely even she couldn't keep track of all their anniversaries.

But he wasn't complaining – far from it. He kissed his way down her stomach, then kissed her thighs before focusing his attention between them. She moaned in a way she'd not moaned in months, bucked and writhed. Presently she raised her pelvis, quivered, and put her hand under his chin. He went back to the top of the bed to kiss her but she moved down his body. He was surprised by her hungriness for him, because he'd not showered since the morning. After a couple of minutes she straddled him. He watched her breasts bounce up and

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down in the silky-soft light, her eyes closed as she worked frantically. He pulled himself up on his elbows to kiss her but she shoved him back on the bed.

They came around the same time and she sat on him, eyes closed, getting her breath back. It was only when he had shrunk out of her that she opened her eyes and lay down beside him.

Again, he leaned over to kiss her. She gave him just a single kiss on the lips and said “Goodnight,” as she rolled over. He lay there for a minute, looking at the back of her head. It troubled him as he waited for sleep to come. Was it a scene in the novel she was reading? He would have to look at that novel, find where she’d got to, and work it out.

It was now Saturday afternoon. The pink book with the goofy title wasn’t there. He cast his mind back, through the haze of lunchtime alcohol, to the morning.

He’d heard her get up and shower around half-seven, leaving him in bed with his hangover. He’d surfaced around half-nine, showered and had a couple of slices of toast, not wanting to ruin his appetite for lunch. He went to the corner shop for the paper and spent one hour and two cups of tea reading inconsequentialities – a relaxing contrast with the weekday reading of critical facts and figures.

She’d not turned up for lunch at the Derbyshire, but that was normal. Although girlfriends, wives – *cohabiting partners* like Sarah – weren’t discouraged, they got in the way of the bloke-ish banter. Sunday was family and females; Saturday belonged to the boys. When Steve’s girlfriend had dropped by late in the afternoon and asked after Sarah, there was no way he could brag of the unexpected exuberance of Friday night’s sex in mixed company. When he’d got back at half-four with a couple of ready meals for the microwave, he’d been hoping for an encore.

That was when he’d noticed something missing. He couldn’t quite put his finger on it

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but his subconscious was nagging at him from behind the five pints of beer he'd drunk that afternoon. It was like looking at a set of doctored accounts: he knew one detail would reveal the whole picture. The living room looked somehow different, and it felt strangely... *quiet*. That was when he'd gone to the bedroom and seen that the book was missing.

Then he realised.

It was her, Sarah. She was missing.

And it wasn't just Sarah that was missing. All of Sarah's stuff was missing. He opened her wardrobe. Empty. Her other wardrobe in the spare bedroom-cum-study was also empty. Her CD collection was gone from the living room. Apart from his shaving kit, there was only one worn-out toothbrush, some toothpaste, his deodorant and some shower gel in the bathroom. No shampoo, no moisturiser, no tampons, no make-up.... The place was Spartan. It looked like... it looked like a bachelor's bathroom.

Things began to make sense. The washing machine had been running non-stop all week, which is why he'd been unable to launder anything of his own. It was a combi that doubled as a tumble-dryer. When she'd moved in four years ago she'd turned her nose up at it because of her Green stance, insisting they dry everything on an ugly clotheshorse in the spare bedroom. He recalled having teased her about her sudden use of the dryer on – when was it? – Wednesday evening. She must have laundered everything.

He went through to the spare room and kicked the empty clotheshorse: the only remaining symbol of her four-year occupation. His foot caught in the white plastic-coated wire and he stumbled backwards against the wall, hitting his head just hard enough to make him stop and think.

He took stock. He felt a peculiar numbness; almost guilty at not feeling shocked. Had he committed some heinous act? Was there someone else? Unlikely, given last night's – apparently valedictory – sex.

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Normally he'd observe a polite, middle-class hiatus between the lunchtime session and an evening beer. But not now: no one would sigh, raise their – *her* – eyebrows or make a comment. The fridge had gone the same way as the bathroom. She'd not removed anything from it, but it had run down to the three basic bachelor Bs: beer, bread and butter. He put the two ready meals in and opened a bottle of beer. No need for a glass now.

They'd never been in love. Very fond occasionally – but never both at the same time, and never in love. They'd never felt lost without each other, never had the heady heartstring pulling of romance. The joke to his friends had always been that she was his default girlfriend. She would drift back into his life whenever he was single, like some back-up program for regular sex. Even when he'd been dating – or, more correctly, trying to get into the pants of – other women at university, she'd appear out of nowhere and they'd end up in bed. And she'd always been the one to finish the relationship weeks or months later, which he accepted without much comment, for there was never any reason for it – nothing he could fathom, anyway.

She'd never quite fitted in to the regular flow of his life and his circle of friends as he'd expected of a perfectly tailored partner. She was quite pretty – average height, average build, shoulder-length brown hair, blue eyes. That was rather the point: she fitted the bill for a 'default' girlfriend. In all those years of living together, marriage had never been seriously discussed and he had always avoided presents of jewellery.

But this was different from the times she'd dumped him during their dating years. She'd not said a word. There was no note. Nothing on the answering machine. Should he call her? His hand toyed with his mobile.

He could hardly declare his undying love. So far as he knew, there was no specific apology to be made. Unless she felt she was due one for four years – fourteen percent of their lives, he calculated – of unstimulating togetherness. But she was as much to blame as he was.

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What could he offer her – another forty years of the same? If he called her, was he surrendering and saying he didn't want this freedom? He sensed a turning point.

His guilt and his mobile tugged at him. He scrolled down through the directory to her name, wondering whether he was doing the right thing. He couldn't not say anything, could he? Well, clearly *she* could. But two wrongs don't... He didn't want any acrimony, and he'd always liked her parents.

He pressed the button, more nervous than he'd expected, and held the phone up to his left ear.

"Hi."

"Sarah, hi. It's Ian."

"Yes. Caller ID. Amazing, isn't it?"

"Your stuff's not here."

"I took the last of it at lunchtime. I've been moving it out all week. You were working late."

"That's why you left?"

"There was no reason to stay."

"So that's it."

"If you say so."

"I didn't say that. I..."

"You what, Ian? What *did* you say?"

"..." He hated this. Never argue with a lawyer: all sentences were death sentences. He took a swig of beer.

"What, exactly, was keeping us together?" she asked.

"Well. That's no reason..."

"No reason to what?"

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“Please don’t make this difficult.”

“It was remarkably easy, Ian. Shall we keep it that way?”

“But what about last night?”

“What about it?”

“Well, I enjoyed it and I think you did too.”

“That’s all it ever was, or at least all it had become. Be honest.”

“I suppose.” He felt like a naughty ten-year-old.

“And if you want that kind of thing now, you’ll just have to get off your fat arse and go and get it, won’t you?”

“...” He felt hot blood pulsing in his ears.

“Well?”

“Well maybe I will!”

He terminated the call. Why didn’t they make mobiles you could slam down? He felt like calling her back and giving her a piece of his mind, but she’d just ring off. He could text her something hurtful. Nothing came to mind and he was dying for a pee. He put the phone back in his right trouser pocket, took another swig of beer and went to the toilet. He had just started to relieve himself when the phone burst loudly into life and vibrated against his scrotum. His penis in his left hand, a couple of fingers holding the elastic of his underpants down, he reached for the phone. The LED screen said ‘Sarah’. The anger rose in him again. He stabbed the green button, hoping she’d hear the sound of him urinating.

“What?”

“I just called to wish you luck. Fat men are attractive in some cultures.”

That was *it!* Instinct made him want to swap the phone to his left hand so that he could gesticulate properly. In that moment of drunken hesitation he lost his grip on his underpants. The elastic snapped back and the warm urine poured inside his trousers. He grappled with his

penis and sprayed the floor around the bathroom as he got the phone back to his ear. The line was dead. He was still searching for a comeback anyway. He dismissed the thought of calling her again.

Fuming, he dabbed at the mess with a pad of toilet paper, then took a shower. The only clean trousers he could find were so uncomfortable around the waist he took them off again to check the size: thirty-four inch waist. He had changed to a thirty-six last year, but even so.... He looked at himself in the mirror and saw a twenty-nine-year-old accountant with the ghost of a double chin and a podgy stomach. Boringness personified.

Forensic accountant, he reminded himself. That counted for something.

His slight chubbiness wasn't unusual in someone of his age and profession. No sense in doing anything rash: he was a busy man. He'd figure this one out. Caution was what was needed. Sudden lifestyle changes were ill-advised.

Besides, it wasn't like he'd just gone through a divorce. The flat was his and she'd just pitched in with the odd bill. If he'd taken a lodger, four years would have seen him reduce his mortgage by around twenty-five percent. Had all that sex on tap been worth those thousands of pounds of lost revenue? He decided against calculating an average cost per fuck because he knew the figure would appal him. But he knew his monthly mortgage repayments to the penny and part of his mind instantly estimated the number of fucks per month. The cost per fuck – *CPF*: a new accounting ratio with which to benchmark the happiness of cohabiting couples – rang up in his head with a *ker-ching* like figures on an old-fashioned cash register.

It was a good job this had all happened now. Imagine if he'd married her? He'd watched his boss, Donald Peterson, going through it the last couple of years. The rage, the humiliation, the paperwork, the meetings and phone calls, the exclusion *from his own home*, having to start again at the age of sixty on the property ladder. No thanks. This was a lucky escape, and he knew it.

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But why shouldn't he take Sarah up on her challenge? He'd show her. She'd held him in check in that final year at university. "Fucking default girlfriend," he muttered, remembering the merciless ribbing of even his female friends at her continual dumping of him.

With only suits left to change into, he opted for a night in wearing a dressing gown, savouring a decent bottle of red. There was a profound satisfaction to eating food that he had microwaved himself, having the washing machine on – especially as it switched to environmentally hostile tumble-dry mode at the end of the wash cycle – and watching in peace the programmes he wanted to watch, even if they were awful. Four years of cohabitation scrubbed clean, with no comeback. He felt glad to be alive and overjoyed to be single: all the sex he'd missed was out there, waiting for him. Lock up your daughters – the all-new Ian Bourne was off the leash tomorrow and he was in town to *party*. He was carefree and single, and his old inhibitions had vanished.

But then it dawned on him how much electricity the tumble-dryer was using. He turned it off and laid out his washing on the clotheshorse in the spare room before going to bed.

Chapter Two

Sunday morning put the fear of God into him.

He reached out an arm and felt cold, empty bedding. Her pillow didn't even have a dent in it. Before leaving on Saturday she must have plumped hers up in the morning, as she always did. Its unused smoothness seemed to glare at him. He felt very alone. His head ached and his tongue was furred but Murphy's Law dictated that he had an even better erection than on Friday night. The hangover enhanced his anxiety and a light, clammy sweat formed on his forehead.

The magnitude of his crisis engulfed him. He was approaching thirty, single, and there was no prospect of sex on the horizon. Furthermore, he realised that the days of condomless sex were over. From now on, he would remain sheathed – assuming he even got that far. Spontaneity would have to be planned and sensitivity was gone. Each new partner would be a gamble. Awkward questions about contraception, fumbling with a condom, the danger of deflation. He was weeks, months – perhaps even years away from a sexual partner he'd be able to trust enough.

He dealt with his morning glory the way he had in his teenage years – though at least he had fresh images of Friday night in his mind to spur him on. But four years of cohabitation meant that he didn't have any tissue to hand when the moment of climax grew near, and he had to run to the toilet to finish the job – an uncomfortable end to a less than satisfying release. The contrast with Friday night was crushing. So much for the previous night's plan to get out and grab some sex.

He dithered all morning as to whether to show up for lunch at the Derbyshire. Realising he didn't want to spend the rest of the day alone, he pulled himself together by half-eleven and made the short journey to Balham high street. He rehearsed various conversations in his

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head but, since he didn't know who was going to be there, it was a little pointless.

The empty pub stank of Saturday night's stale beer, and the squeak of his footsteps echoed across the wooden floor. He checked himself in the mirror. Pale, puffy face and pinhole eyes. With his new single status, he reassessed the barmaid. She caught him staring at her and he looked away too quickly. He mumbled his thanks as she handed him his pint. She gave him his change without a word and walked to the other end of the bar.

The arrangement was that whoever was first bagged some space and waited until one o'clock before ordering food. He took a mid-sized table near the fake fire and spread out a newspaper. As the pub filled up, he bought himself another pint. Time dragged and he began to get twitchy. He nodded to a few familiar faces, but there was none of his own crowd here. Other tables were packed and he was getting looks from people standing at the bar with menus. He drank quickly, toes curling. With every opening of the door he looked up. Nothing was ever pre-arranged, but someone always came. Always. At ten past one, his third pint was interrupted by his mobile. 'Stu' flashed up on the screen. He smiled.

"I've got us a table. Can I get your food ordered, avoid the wait?" Ian asked with forced jocularity.

"Lunch is being served. The invitation was for half-twelve, lunch at one."

He felt a pang. Seven years ago to the day he'd been Stu and Nina's best man. "Sorry. Sorry to Nina for me. Been a lot going on. Be there ASAP." He downed his beer in one and then regretted it on his empty stomach. He'd forgotten to tell Stu about Sarah but thought better of ringing back.

He and Stu were childhood friends. Stu was a burly Bristolian lad, just over six feet tall, son of a policeman and a nurse, who had inherited the best qualities of both professions. Whilst Ian had gone north to Newcastle, Stu had gone to university in the capital and fallen for Nina, a native Londoner on his course. Somehow, Stu had gone to the teeming metropolis

and found a woman with the home-making qualities of a West Country lass, like his mother. She was sturdy, with a slightly ruddy complexion and thick, fair hair like her husband's, only longer. They had married a month after graduation.

For a pair of teachers, they'd done remarkably well thanks to her local knowledge and Stu's earthy practicality. A year after graduating they'd bought a wreck of a house on the border between a well-to-do and a down-at-heel neighbourhood. As Nina had predicted, the latter had become trendy and their house had multiplied threefold in value. Ian, the professional money-man, had not done nearly so well. He'd arrived green to the capital and spent two years studying for exams whilst the market had gone up without him. Before he was priced out altogether, he'd panic-bought into a small apartment block in an already gentrified street. His unhappiness had increased when he'd gone so far as to calculate what Stu and Nina's pensions would be for their public sector non-contributory schemes. Even factoring in the cost of a child, with another due in four months, he knew they'd do well. He was also envious of their longer holidays, and what he perceived as fewer working hours.

He queued for a card, flowers and a bottle of decent red, thereby extending a quarter-mile journey to twenty achingly slow minutes. When he arrived at their house he was dripping with sweat and reeking of beer. Stu let him in with a smirk and nodded him towards the knocked through kitchen-living-dining area. He pecked Nina on the cheek as she accepted the flowers and card. "Sarah not coming?" she asked.

As he sat down at one of the two empty seats he said, "She's left me." Looks were exchanged between husband and wife. "Yesterday. Got home and she wasn't there."

"Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that," said Stu, uncorking the red wine Ian had given him. "D'you know why?" He poured a glass and handed it to Ian.

"Just..." he waved his hands over the steaming plate of casserole and rice that had appeared in front of him. "Just, that was it, I guess. No reason." He took a sip of wine.

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“How are you feeling?” asked Nina.

Rather drunk, he wanted to say. “Great,” he said. “World’s my oyster. Free at last. Cheers.” He took a large gulp of wine and topped up his glass.

“But you’ve been together years,” said Stu. “I can’t believe you’re being so flippant.”

“I’m going to have a bumper sticker saying ‘Accountants write it off’,” said Ian.

“Except you don’t have a car, you wally,” said Stu.

“Ian, if that’s the way you feel, get yourself on one of those internet dating sites,” said Nina. “Get back on the horse that threw you.”

“Horse? I’d have said fucking *moose*,” said Ian, shovelling in another mouthful. “Or bitch.”

“Ian!” said Stu. “Listen to yourself. And stop that swearing. Jeremy might be asleep but I want his first word to be three letters – ‘Mum’ or ‘Dad’ – not four.”

“Sorry. It’s just that there was no word, nothing.”

“Where’s she gone?” asked Stu.

“Dunno. I phoned her and she wasn’t what you’d call talkative. At least not in a ‘miss you’ kind of way. I mean, she wouldn’t be would she?”

“There must have been *some* reason,” said Nina, with what Ian took to be a nod at his wine glass, which was already half-empty again. He rolled his eyes at her.

“Look, you didn’t know us at university. It was just a convenient relationship in our last year-and-a-half there. It was a mistake. Really.”

“Some mistake, living together four years,” said Stu.

“We met at a party, ended up in bed together and it all went badly wrong after that.”

“Doesn’t sound bad to me at all,” said Stu. “She’s a lovely lass.”

“You don’t understand,” said Ian. “It was never like that. She kept dumping me but always came back.”

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“A lot of men would love a woman that faithful.”

“It restarted as a shag-of-convenience when she was settling in London. Except that when you’re living with someone it’s not so easy to dump them.”

“Apparently it is, though,” said Stu, finishing his casserole.

“You two make it all look so easy.”

“Oh, no,” said Nina. “It’s not easy. You have to work at relationships.”

“And how do you know Sarah wasn’t the one for you if you don’t know who you’re looking for?” added Stu.

Ian often felt he was back at school when he was talking with these two. “Look, what I want is sex,” he said. “I don’t want to end up regretting for the rest of my life all the shagging I never did at college.”

Stu and Nina looked at each other. “You don’t think we have enjoyable sex?” asked Stu.

Ian helped himself to more red. “That’s not what I mean. I want variety. I want to play the field before I get old.”

“Well that’s not the road to happiness,” said Stu. “And my mum’s been nursing Aids patients.”

“You’re not even thirty,” said Nina. “You’ve got your whole life ahead. There are plenty of wonderful women around. Take my friend Betsy – she’s lovely and she’s newly single like you.”

“Betsy? A woman called *Betsy*?” said Ian. “I don’t wish to appear ungrateful, or judgemental, but even her name puts me off. She sounds either like a cow or a seventy-year-old. Or both.”

“I think you’ve had quite enough to drink,” said Stu, taking Ian’s glass away from him. “How much did you have last night, and how much have you had today?”

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Ian knew not to bother even reaching for the glass. Stu was his father's generation now. It was as if aliens had snatched him up and reprogrammed him. He resisted the temptation to stab him to see whether he bled red or green.

"You need fresh air," said Nina. "You've been cooped up in that flat by yourself. The pair of you take Jeremy for a walk. I'll wash up."

Ian helped clear the table while Stu went through the pilot's check-list of life-support equipment required to launch Jeremy and his pushchair for a thirty-minute orbit of the local park.

"Sure you're up to this?" asked Stu as they left the front door. Ian's withering stare was lost on Stu's serious face.

They walked in silence for a minute or two. Ian was savvy to this police procedure. He wasn't going to crack first and spill his guts.

"So have you told your parents about Sarah yet?"

"No."

"They were quite fond of her, you know."

"I know."

"And I think they had their expectations."

"I know."

"Because they're not getting any younger."

"...."

"And your sister's got two daughters. I 'xpect your dad'll be wanting you to carry on the Bourne name."

"This is *my* life, Stu. Okay, it's not glamorous: I'm an accountant. A *forensic* accountant, mind you. Remember when we were ten? I wanted to be an astronaut. From astronaut to accountant in nineteen years. Game over. I never even applied to become an

astronaut. I just got the ‘naut’ bit of astronaut: nought; nothing. But you know what? All the major rock bands have tour accountants. Maybe NASA has mission accountants? But even then it’s unlikely they’d ever blast me off to calculate the depreciation of a satellite, isn’t it?

“But you, Stu. I swear I could see it when we were young. You were programmed to Do The Right Thing, to find a sensible woman like Nina and produce the next generation of Lloyds. Bingo! Mission accomplished right on schedule. Stuart Lloyd can return to Earth.”

Stu stopped the pram. “Is that really what you think?” He placed a powerful hand on Ian’s shoulder and looked him straight in the eyes. “You think this is all a game? You’re dealing with people’s lives, my friend. Your parents wiped your arse and fed you. Just be grateful. And bloody grow up.”

“Sorry. It’s not a criticism of you. I’m happy you’re happy. I’m just not ready for this stuff yet.” They resumed walking.

“Which is probably why Sarah left you,” said Stu. “She’s another one not getting any younger. It’s different for women, you know. You ever thought of what there was for her in your relationship?”

“Well, she had a flat for free.”

“Great. She didn’t own a *share* of the flat. No commitment from you.”

“I said the flat was for free.”

“Material things again. You’re a natural-born accountant, aren’t you? Nothing emotional. Remember when I got that beautiful old mini Cooper when we were eighteen? You told me all the running costs and said I’d be better off with a bike. That was – hang on – *six years* before you qualified. Christ, I can’t imagine what it must have been like living with you. Did you tell her how much it cost every time she put the kettle on?”

Ian’s mind flicked up yesterday’s CPF calculation in his head and Stu saw the hesitation in his friend’s face. “Bloody Nora, you did, didn’t you?”

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“She paid the electricity and gas bills, that was the deal,” he blurted. “I just didn’t love her. And it was a two-way thing. She never loved me.”

“How’d you know?”

“She never said it.”

“Doesn’t mean to say she didn’t. Lawyers are always careful about what they say, aren’t they?”

They retired to the pub, where Stu was more his old self and less the parent – though his father was evident in him. As they sat there talking, Ian envied him for this settled contentedness. Fast-forward eighteen years and he could see Stu – same seat, same pint but with Jeremy a young man, supping bitter with his father.

He got back to his empty flat around six, with stocks to replenish the alcohol he’d consumed. He ate the microwaved meal he’d bought on the way home the previous day – Sarah’s meal. He had five shirts to iron for the coming week. Each one had been chosen by her, on painfully boring shopping expeditions. She was all around him in his clothes. Wherever she was, he hoped her heart was breaking.

Nina’s advice struck him as good. He took the laptop out of the spare bedroom-cum-study, sat on the sofa and booted it up. A search on the word ‘dating’ produced a list of candidate sites. He took a fancy to M—.com, which promised sophisticated personality matching and a money-back guarantee if he didn’t meet someone ‘special’ in six months. Most importantly, it promised more single women than any other site. If Ian knew anything, it was that life was a numbers game.

He dithered over choosing a user name. ‘IanBourne’ didn’t give him the necessary anonymity. ‘BourneBoy’ sounded too boozy and BourneAgain made him sound like a Christian fundamentalist. ‘BalhamIan’ gave too much away about his location, or sounded like a Bohemian, which he most definitely wasn’t. The system told him that ‘Ian’ had been

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used so many times that he would have to have the suffix 832 after it. He typed in 'Forensic' and the system accepted it. He entered his credit card details then rubbed his hands together at the prospect of access to this magical world of available women.

But the system wanted to know a little about him first. Irritated, he put in his date of birth. He rounded up half an inch and put his height at five-eleven. Then he entered his weight from his student days. From a list of body types he selected 'Athletic and Toned', since he'd kept himself in good trim whilst an undergraduate. Hair: Brown, Eyes: Blue, Glasses: No, Smoker: No, Drinker: Occasional (well, he reasoned, he didn't drink that much during the week), Diet: Always Healthy (the microwaved meals were usually low-fat), Kids: None, Want Kids: No.

He hesitated and then changed his answer to Want Kids to 'Maybe'. He didn't want to put anyone off. It wasn't going to go that far without him being able to back out, was it? He clicked Next.

Hobbies and Interests, said the headline.

He stared at the screen. There was a list of everything from martial arts to poetry, gardening to rock-climbing, scuba diving to sky diving, tai chi to feng shui. He estimated the number of rows and multiplied by the three columns. At least sixty hobbies and interests. And he didn't do any of them. Cinema? He'd not been in years – renting the DVD a few months later was cheaper. Reading? He managed to get most of the way through a doorstop-sized airport thriller once a year on a Greek island.

He stared into the vacuous abyss of his empty life and felt very, very sorry for himself.

Sarah could have filled in any number of things: tennis, running, reading, aerobics – even the occasional horse ride, or a bit of water skiing on holiday.

Greek island beach holidays once a year. That surely qualified him to tick 'Travel'. He looked again. 'Pubs' and 'Eating out' came to his rescue. Then he thought about what sort of

woman he'd meet. He didn't want someone who just ate out, went to pubs and travelled. She'd be expensive, for one thing. And she'd not have quite as good a body as Sarah. Or be as interesting. Nina was right: he had to make up his mind. What the hell *did* he want?

He saved his entry, logged out of the site and put the laptop aside. He did the only thing that any self-respecting bachelor could do in his situation. He went into the spare bedroom and reached on top of the wardrobe for the one pornographic DVD he'd smuggled back guiltily from a stag weekend in Amsterdam several years ago.

Taking it back to the living room, his blood rose as he savoured the collage of photos on the cover. This DVD was an old friend – his sure-thing date for a lonely but intimate evening when Sarah was away. He hit the eject button on the DVD player and popped open the box. There was a yellow note stuck to the disc:

Found years ago. How long before you resorted to this, you wanker – one day or two?
S.

His mood was now one of defiance: he was determined to enjoy himself. This was the kind of sex he wanted – young and perfectly toned women in athletic positions. And tomorrow he was going to go out and get it. He grabbed a beer, pressed play, settled back in the sofa and loosened his trousers.

Chapter Three

Monday morning: up at seven with a fierce hangover and a tremor in his hands. No morning glory because he'd spent the last of his libido with an American threesome – two college-age girls and an older man – just after eleven o'clock the previous night. A knot tightened in him at breakfast as he realised that he'd be coming home to an empty flat that evening.

The tube felt particularly cramped and he half-expected to see Sarah in his crowded carriage. By breaking the London Law of Commuting and examining his fellow passengers, he noticed how many attractive women there were in his age-range. He set to thinking on what his age-range was. Plus two and minus five, perhaps? So maybe thirty-two at a push, and twenty-four at the lower end. He thought back to the time when even a twenty-four-year-old had seemed mature and unobtainable. As an undergraduate, he'd longed to be taught what one of their number must know about sex. And now one of them would consider him very much the older man. He shuddered. But if he lay in bed with a thirty-two-year-old he'd probably hear her biological clock ticking, and be tricked into fatherhood. He wondered what people think of him if he dated a twenty-year-old – lucky bastard or filthy lecher?

An attractive brunette caught him staring at her a second time. He turned his attention to the posters. This whole dating business was full of pitfalls and he felt ill-equipped. He realised he'd never even started a relationship other than when he was a student. He could appreciate the certainty Sarah had provided: the shelter against a changing and hostile world. He must seek counsel from his peers.

He alighted at Chancery Lane with the other drones; the sullen clump of their shoes beating a Death March to the ticket barriers, which chirruped their greeting and slammed open with a bang that niggled his hangover. He waited his turn and was out: out into the roaring traffic of Holborn and an April shower of November intensity.

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As the rain soaked through his suit he realised that his mistake was not so much to miss the forecast or to forget to bring an umbrella – indeed, an umbrella would have inverted in the squall – but to get out at Chancery Lane at all. He'd been doing it with Sarah every morning for four years, walking her the hundred yards to her office. The fifteen-minute walk from her office to his was the only regular exercise he got. Turning back and taking one stop on the tube would take just as long, and be an admission of defeat. Besides, rain of this intensity never lasted at this time of year, so he pulled his jacket around him, lowered his head and pressed on.

The security man – Ed? Ted? – smoking a cigarette outside Sarah's law firm in St Andrew Street nodded to him as he approached, and he returned the greeting. Ed/Ted thought twice and made a move to say something, but Ian waved and hurried on past against the rain. That was another relationship that would fall by the wayside. Hadn't Ed/Ted wondered why Sarah wasn't with him? She might be inside already. Perhaps the fellow was going to offer him condolences? He was sure news of her newly single status would be emailed around the office before ten o'clock. Doubtless there'd be junior partners with their eyes on a pretty young thing like her. There, he caught himself admitting it: he was still attracted to her. He swore under his breath and upped his pace to near jogging down St Bride Street, its cobbles gleaming in the rain like the skin of a snake.

As he waited to cross the wide expanse of Farringdon Street the rain became a cloudburst so heavy that the pavement disappeared beneath an effervescent layer of splashes. The wind gusted in from the exposed river-end of the street and blew his jacket open, soaking him to the skin. He clutched his jacket tight about him with his left arm and shielded his eyes from the deluge with his right. The last two hundred yards to the bottom of Queen Victoria Street afforded no protection at all. Every pedestrian light was against him so he chanced his life with the traffic in a bloody-minded dash to escape the angry gods of wind and rain. Cold

water flooded into his shoes. As he passed Blackfriars station he comforted himself with the thought that it would only be a one-minute walk from tube to office from now on. This was the last indignity Sarah could wreak upon him. He was amongst his own people here. The lawyers massed to the west of Farringdon Street, except for the bear-pit of the Old Bailey. This was the outskirts of the City proper: an accountant's sanctuary. Even God was on the money-men's side, residing in St Paul's Cathedral, a couple of alleyways to the north.

The rain eased off in the last few steps to D'Arcy House and the sun burst brilliantly around him. He glanced up at the open bible carved in stone above the entrance by the building's original owners, the British and Foreign Bible Society. *The Word of the Lord Endureth For Ever* was inscribed upon its pages. It lent a certain authority and righteousness to his work, he felt. God in his Heaven kept a ledger on every mortal, but the earthly ledgers belonged to accountants. And not even God could help those who crossed *forensic* accountants.

Flushed and out of breath from the brisk walk, he shook himself off in the polished marble lobby and muttered his good morning to the security guard and receptionist, who hid their amusement well. He could have done with being earlier than ten-to-nine but he certainly wasn't late. Two people from another firm rode with him in the lift, backing away from his dripping clothing. A sideways glance in the mirror told him he looked dishevelled and pathetic. He was thankful there were no client meetings scheduled for that morning.

He got out at the fourth floor and squelched his way to the glass door. Woodcock and Tweed, said the big blue writing. *Forensic Accounting Division* was in smaller white lettering below. The office, just half a dozen people, was too small to have a full-time receptionist. Whilst the separation from Woodcock and Tweed's headquarters was to enhance the illusion of speciality, the reality was an unnecessary complexity to the administration and the development of an 'us and them' attitude. He waved his security tag over the sensor above

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the visitors' bell and went in. He made a desperate bid for the comfort of his desk across the open plan office but was stopped in his tracks by Peterson's voice.

"Ian, my boy! Looked at your diary, booked you in for a client meeting at half-nine."

Peterson's office was situated so that he could monitor all his staff's movements.

He turned to his right, presenting his bedraggled state to Peterson with a pleading, open-handed gesture. "Morning, Donald," he said. "Bit wet out."

"Good God, man! What did you do, jump in the Thames?" Peterson surveyed him over his wire-rimmed spectacles, which perched almost at the tip of his nose.

"Might as bloody well, have. I'll go and sit under the hand-dryer in the gents' for ten minutes."

"Good idea. Don't want you catching a chill. Not our star young buck. Good weekend? See yesterday's rigger?"

Ian filled in a gap from Sunday: his regular mates at the Derbyshire had all been at Twickenham for some rugby match or other – a hospitality freebie he'd declined. He wavered over a response to Peterson, who was an avid rugby bore. It didn't do much for him, though normally he feigned a semi-interest for the sake of his career. But there was an opportunity to work an angle here. "No," he said, walking the few yards to Peterson's doorway and standing in it. He lowered his voice. "Sarah walked out on me on Saturday."

"My dear chap," Peterson raised his skinny frame from his chair, "are you alright? Come in, sit down." Ian flopped down in one of the two chairs. "Was it expected?"

"No. Came back from the pub on Saturday and she was gone. Turns out she'd been moving out all week."

"Bitch! You know what happened with Alice. No discussion, just some papers served on me. Thirty-five years and then *that*."

"It's not like a divorce. We were only living together."

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“Joint mortgage?”

“My place entirely.”

“Good man, that’s something. I’ve told my sons never to marry on any account. ‘Boys, keep your name on everything,’ I tell them.” He scratched his pepper-grey beard. “How long?”

“Living together four years, known each other a bit over seven.”

“You’re – what? – getting on for thirty. So that’s about twenty-five percent of your life. Sixty percent of your adult life.”

This was getting Ian down. He’d wanted Peterson to understand that he’d like some peace and quiet, and preferably not to be wrapped into a client meeting in – he looked at his watch – twenty-five minutes. “Who’s the client and how can we help them?”

“Client? Oh, some group headquartered up in the Grim North. Look, I’m sorry – it’s a bit of auditing work.”

Ian gave a sigh akin to a death rattle. Auditing was for the brain-dead or the young and desperate to please. Besides, he was far too senior now to be going on this sort of thing.

“Now Ian, don’t be like that. It’s a key account for the Auditing division. Their finance director’s an old chum of Messrs Woodcock and Tweed themselves. Needs someone heavyweight to go in there for show, you understand. Timothy Woodcock and Jonathan Tweed have even been known to go up there themselves on occasion. But Hendricks, who was going to go, is off sick and you, unfortunately for yourself, are free. Unless you’re telling me you’ve conjured up a large money-laundering case between half-past five on Friday and nine o’clock this morning?”

“Sadly not. Go on, fill me in.”

“I got the email late on Friday evening, together with PDFs of the accounts. Bit of a hoo-ha over some disappointing results I understand. The client would greatly appreciate it if

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he got some extra value for money by way of some gratis forensic accounting with his audit. Regional office in, let's think now, *Gosforth* is the account contact. Gosforth, now where in God's name is that?"

"Newcastle. Posh bit."

"Does Newcastle have a posh bit?" Peterson's question was genuine. To Ian's knowledge, the only time Peterson had spent outside London was at Oxford University – a move that hadn't even taken him away from Old Father Thames. Few were so provincial as native Londoners in Ian's view.

"Of course," he said. "It has some very posh bits."

"Ah. You were at university there."

"Business school."

"Quite. Old stomping ground, eh? Well, that may come in handy – speaking the lingo and all that. Now look, the chap's due any minute – William Armstrong. Get your jacket off and get yourself under the dryer."

"Just one thing's troubling me."

"Go on."

"Why's he come all the way down here, rather than just brief me at the audit?"

"You're a bit *too* suspicious sometimes, Ian. I think he was down here for the weekend and then got wind that there might be a change of staff, wanted to check you out. You know what millionaires are like, particularly self-made ones. Just watch out for the ego."

"Yes, but rule ES5 says we shouldn't be examining audited accounts that we prepared – another firm of accountants should be hired in."

"I didn't say it was the accounts we'd prepared that were suspect, my boy. You're doing an audit and looking into some suspect figures of his. As I said, it's a key account to Auditing, so it's a fair bit of kudos for thee and me if we can manage it well. You have your

junior partnership to think of. And a chap like Armstrong will have a lot of contacts up there – get this one solved and we could see a lot more business coming our way from the Grim North. Think of your bonus. See you in the conference room in ten. Now get dried out.”

On his way over to the gents’, Ian waved a quick “Good morning” to the rest of his colleagues. This was a rude start to the week: not even a chance to check his email or grab a cup of tea. But there was the tantalising prospect of his entry into the partnership. He did a mental calculation of the percentage increase in his monthly take-home pay and made a quick stab at his first year’s bonus. His heart lifted. He just hoped he wouldn’t end up like Peterson, talking in a version of English which belonged to black and white films and must surely have been outdated long before Messrs Woodcock and Tweed had founded the business. But he supposed the firm’s mock tradition provided some semblance of a brand image, albeit sepia in an age of silicon.

Serving such a small office, the gents’ was cramped: a stall partitioned off one end of the room. To the right was a urinal and on the left was a washbasin with a mirror above it. On the wall adjacent to the washbasin and behind the door was the dryer.

He hung his jacket on the doorknob of the stall, grabbed a few wads of tissue from the dispenser, spread some on the floor under the dryer and stuffed others into his pockets. He took his shoes off and stood on the tissue, to absorb some of the water from his socks. Then he stuffed the tissue from his pockets into his shoes and put them on the floor.

The dryer was an automatic one. Rather than being able to press a button, he would have to ensure that some part of his body was underneath the nozzle. He took off his tie and put it on the top of the dryer to catch some of the heat. He undid a couple of buttons of his shirt, bent his knees and dried the front of it, his face level with the machine. The atmosphere in the small room was beginning to get clammy, even sub-tropical, but he felt much better. His trousers would be next. He undid his belt and the top button to give some slack and leant

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over backwards with his shoulders against the wall next to the basin. His wet socks provided good traction on the floor. He kept one hand under the machine and used the other to hold open the top of his trousers. He undid the zip to let in more air and leaned back a little more, doing the limbo.

The door swung open with considerable force, stubbing against his toes. He let out a yelp of pain and fell onto his bottom, his fall cushioned by his wet shoes. He sat there, his shirt and trousers undone, clutching his bruised toes and letting out gasps as the pain throbbed.

He looked up and saw a bald, stocky, middle-aged man in a dark blue blazer and grey trousers staring down at him. It could only be one person. He scrambled to his feet and offered his right hand. “Ah, Mr Armstrong, I presume.” Ian’s trousers fell around his ankles. “Very pleased to meet you.” He released Armstrong’s hand and pulled his trousers up.

“Surely not *that* pleased to see me, son?” said Armstrong in a Geordie accent. “Mind if I use the loo, or have you got another performance in a minute?”

“Sure, sure! Just let me....” he took his wet jacket off the doorknob of the stall and put the collar of it over a tap on the basin. Armstrong squeezed past awkwardly and went into the stall. Ian mouthed swearwords at himself in the mirror as he fumbled with his trousers, tie and shoes. He grabbed his jacket and left the steaming hell of the gents’ toilets.

He joined Peterson in the conference room next to his office. There was a black attaché case with the initials WGA embossed on it in gold. “Our chap’s here,” said Peterson. “Rose’s bringing some tea and biscuits. They love their tea and biccies up North, don’t they? Told her to bring in a big bowl of sugar, too.”

“I, ah, bumped into Mr Armstrong in the loo. I think your view of Northerners is a little stereotyped, Donald.”

“Five quid says he takes at least two biscuits.”

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“You’re on.”

“Another fiver says he takes sugar in his tea.”

“Done.”

Armstrong hesitated at the door when he saw Ian. “Come in,” said Peterson, motioning him to a chair on the other side of the large blond oak conference table. “This is Ian Bourne. He’s our Bright Young Thing. He’s been in our forensic accounting division about four years now. Keen as mustard. Got his sights on a junior partnership.”

“Aye, nice to see you with your clothes on, son,” said Armstrong and sat down.

Peterson raised his eyebrows at Ian, who smiled back feebly, hoping his boss would assume it was a quaint Northern expression.

Rose, the office manager, came in with a thermos pot of tea and another of coffee, as well as an array of biscuits. She was pretty East End girl in her late twenties who was always smartly dressed – dark blonde with big brown eyes, and a figure that would fill out later in life.

Peterson smiled as Armstrong reached for a chocolate biscuit. “Are you going to be mother, Ian, or shall I pour?” asked Rose.

“I think the lad’s well qualified for the job,” said Armstrong to Rose with a laugh. Confused, she left. Ian poured Armstrong a coffee, proving Peterson wrong at least on that point. Then Armstrong disappointed him by putting two sugars in his coffee and stirring it slowly.

“Good,” beamed Peterson, catching Ian’s eye. “So, tell us what ails you at Armstrong BioDiesel?”

“What *ails* me, as you put it, is that the bastard thing isn’t making the bottom line it should, like.” He opened his attaché case and half-threw a pile of accounts on the table.

“May I?” asked Ian, and reached for them.

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“I had a brief glance at the PDFs this morning. I couldn’t quite grasp your concerns,” said Peterson.

Ian glanced over them whilst he listened to Armstrong give a potted history of his diversified group of companies and the BioDiesel offshoot. The surname Armstrong was common enough in Tyneside. He guessed the middle initial would be George, after the great engineer, and wondered if he was a descendant.

The company had been founded a few years earlier: a pioneer in the green fuels market. Armstrong had seen the change in attitudes and the margin of safety the subsidies and tax breaks would give him. As a bonus, he’d been able to label a lot of his expenses as research and development costs and write them off against tax. He was a shrewd businessman with the good sense to hire an equally shrewd accountant. From the group accounts, Ian saw that another subsidiary in Armstrong’s little empire was a chain of filling stations throughout the North East, which had given him an enviable head start on any competitors. The man had a natural genius for business integration that Ian instantly respected and envied. His own father was in the cutthroat business of printing and had not taken Ian’s advice to enter early into the digital market. Although the Bourne family business was still profitable, his father had missed the opportunity to step it up.

The two older men’s conversation had moved on to rugby. Armstrong had a box at the Newcastle ground, which had long ago replaced Gosforth, and season tickets at Twickenham. It was obvious why the meeting in London had been convenient for him – he could write off most of the weekend’s entertainment against expenses.

Ian cleared his throat. “I’m a little surprised your filling stations aren’t taking more on non-fuel sales,” he ventured. “Low tobacco sales due to competition from counterfeit tabs?” He curled his toes, hoping he’d pitched it right, particularly his use of ‘tabs’ in place of ‘cigarettes’, and the slight touch of his old Bristolian accent to indicate that he, too, was not a

native Londoner.

Armstrong looked at him deadpan for the first time. “Aye, right enough, son. Right enough.” He took a sip of coffee. “But I can’t do much over illegal competition, can I? Tell me what my *real* problem is.”

Ian tensed. “I’m no consultant, but from a marketing perspective I’m surprised account sales aren’t higher on the biodiesel.”

“Aye, good lad,” said Armstrong. He broke another biscuit and munched it slowly. Ian knew to keep quiet when a man of this ilk from Newcastle was quiet: deference was important.

Peterson wasn’t so savvy. “As I say, he’s our Bright Young Thing.”

Armstrong ignored him. “Anything else?”

“I’d expect growth to be better than twenty-something percent.” Armstrong held his eyes. “For the amount you’ve invested in sales and marketing, and from what I understand about fuel trends. Just an opinion.” Ian was conscious of curling his toes again. He was out on a limb on this one, and Peterson clearly hadn’t spotted anything awry – either that or he was testing Ian’s ability.

Armstrong munched the rest of his biscuit and Ian did his best to hide his unease. Peterson blurted, “Of course, Ian’s still very much learning the ropes. You understand it’s only an opinion. Twenty percent’s pretty damned respectable.”

Armstrong locked his eyes on Peterson. “*Never* undermine your own staff, they’re the best asset you have. You have to let them develop their own opinions. As it happens, I agree with the lad.”

“Statutory obligation, you see,” said Peterson. “Opinion only, can’t make judgements. Must issue strong caveats, first glance at the accounts. D’you follow?”

Armstrong ignored Peterson. “I’m off to Spain for a couple of weeks. When I get back

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I'd like you start on the audit. With regards to you adding some extra value by looking for fraud, keep it under wraps, do you understand? I don't want any gung-ho stuff, poncing around in flash cars and attracting attention to yourself. This is just the annual audit as far as any of my staff are concerned. Alright, son?"

"Yes," said Ian. "I'll do as much as I can from here."

"Right, gents. I'll love you and leave you." 'Armstrong took a card from Ian and examined it before pocketing it. He picked up his attaché case and turned to Ian as he reached the conference room door. "Nice meeting you, Ian." He looked him in the eye and gave him a firm handshake. He gave Peterson the briefest of handshakes and made his own way out before they could show him to the exit.

Ian followed Peterson back into the conference room and closed the door.

"What do you make of that?" said Peterson. "Bloody Northerners with their little chips on their shoulders. Still, well done – you obviously speakee el lingo. I just hope you can match his expectations. *Son.*"

"I happen to like the way business is done outside London. Men like him do more for their communities than hedge funds ever did."

"Parochial, paternalistic nonsense. Well spotted though – nothing really stuck out from the page at me, I must say. You winged it pretty well, but for me I'd have preferred to let him come to me with it. I'll buy you lunch off the back of securing that bit of business. However, I'll be expecting a tenner out of you. Two biscuits, plus sugar in his tea."

"We're quits. You said he'd take sugar in his *tea*. He drank coffee."

"Bah," said Peterson. "Thank God you're away from that lawyer girlfriend. I dread to think what your offspring would have been like. Finish up on the Elmer account and help the others if they need it. Make sure you're free for when our Geordie lad gets back from Torremolinos." Ian made for the door. "Oh, look, Ian. About this Sarah stuff. You're putting

on a brave face but if you need any counselling, then we do have facilities. I can have a word with personnel. We have, you know, *counsellors*, on hand for that kind of thing. Touchy-feely stuff. I, um. I found they were quite good. Just between you and me. You know, helped me reframe stuff. Anger and bitterness.”

“Thanks,” said Ian. “Thanks, Donald. I appreciate your concern. See you for lunch.”

The prospect of auditing work was far more likely to drive him to a counsellor than his loss of Sarah.

He felt heavy as he made his way to his desk, which sat in a three-sided cubicle with four-foot walls. He grunted another “Good morning” to his near-neighbours.

“New job?” asked Angela, to his left.

“Armstrong BioDiesel,” said Ian. “Newcastle.”

“Eee, by ’eck! I hope you enjoy your chip butties,” said Angela, another one who’d never ventured out of the South East.

“That was a Yorkshire accent,” said Ian. “Besides, it’s *stotties* they have up there.”

“Someone didn’t have a good weekend.”

“Sarah left me. No warning, no idea where she went.”

“If you want to talk about it...”

“Then I’m sure I will. Thanks, but I’ll be fine.”

As soon as his PC had booted up, he checked his emails. Nothing from Sarah. He logged into his Hotmail account – just a load of junk, and a message from M—.com, addressing him as Forensic, confirming his payment and telling him to complete his registration. He realised what a lousy moniker it was, suggestive more of a serial killer than a Romeo. He resisted the temptation to log in.

What he couldn’t resist was a quick email to Sarah. It was their unwritten rule at work to use company email. It was faster and allowed them to respond from their Blackberrys if

they were off-site.

Just a quickie to check how you are. Hope we can still be friends. Nina and Stu were asking after you yesterday.

He pondered the sign-off before deciding that ‘Take care’ was suitable. He decided on a straight ‘Ian’ as a signature, rather than ‘Ian xx’. He hit Send and opened up an email from Peterson, pointing to a folder on the server for all of the accounts of Armstrong’s group of companies.

A new email came in and his spirits rose. But it was a ‘system undeliverable’. He opened it up. ‘Sarah Conway: address not found. Please check with your system administrator.’ Surely not? He thought back to Ed/Ted that morning outside her building – he’d tried to say something.

He picked up the phone and dialled her number. “Perkins Botham, Karen Goodman speaking,” said a Scottish voice. Karen was a colleague in Sarah’s department.

“Karen, hi. It’s Ian.”

“Oh, hi Ian,” Karen’s her voice pitched lower. “This is a bit of a surprise.”

“Sorry?”

“You know, after Friday.”

His felt a little adrenalin in his blood. “You mean after Saturday. She left me on Saturday.”

“Oh. She left here on Friday.”

“She *left*? She changed jobs?”

“Yeah.”

“Where to?”

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“Ian, I’m really sorry. If she hasn’t told you then I can’t. We have to protect people’s privacy and I’d be liable if anything happened.”

“What? What do you mean? What do you think I’m going to do?”

“Look, Ian. I don’t know what happened between you. But she obviously doesn’t want to have any further contact.”

“Karen, this is *ridiculous*. You’ve been round the flat, for God’s sake. Dozens of times. This is me: Ian.”

“I just can’t. You might want to approach her through her lawyers.”

“She *is* a fucking lawyer.”

“Ian, I’m really sorry, but you have to see it from my angle.”

“Yeah, yeah. Look, tell her I was asking after her. Okay?”

“I will.” She softened her tone. “I’m sorry it ended the way it did, really I am. Try to put it behind you.”

“Sure. Listen, this doesn’t affect business between us, does it?” Karen had referred a handful of cases his way over the years. Perkins Botham – fondly referred to as Perky Bottom by most – was a rich vein of new business for him.

“Of course not – it’s my duty to recommend only the best to my clients.”

“Thank you for saying that, Karen, I appreciate it. The same goes for my clients. Cheers.”

“Thanks, Ian. ’Bye.” She hung up.

He put his head in his hands. He didn’t deserve this level of humiliation, did he? Had sharing her life with him for four years really been so bad that she would cut him off so finally and publicly? Counselling looked like an attractive proposition now.

Lunch with Peterson wasn’t fun, with the older man telling him how lucky he was to be

single and still young. In the afternoon he had a hushed conversation with Rose, who'd heard the news. She was one of those streetwise Cockney girls who seemed born for ancillary jobs in the City: resilient and highly organised, often far more intelligent than the middle-class graduates they tended. With his unstuffy provinciality, he and Rose had always had an affinity. If not exactly a close friendship, then at least a camaraderie. But, with the Blitz-like spirit of her ancestors, she didn't dwell on his change in circumstances. "Me Nan always said that the easiest way to get over a man was to get under another one," she said.

None of his colleagues were up for a beer or a meal that evening – too close to the weekend. He stuck his head round the door of the Derbyshire on the way back, but after the strains of the previous day's corporate hospitality at Twickenham no one was in that he knew.

After dinner he logged in to M—.com and looked at the profile he'd saved. He changed his body type to 'Normal', though he kept his weight the same. Perhaps he should lose some – thirty was looming large and he didn't want to end up a fat, middle-aged executive. He decided he'd have a night off the booze and finish off his profile. It looked like a lot of hard work.

About Yourself was the next prompt. '2,000 characters maximum,' it said. Words failed him so he clicked on the Help icon. 'Be sincere. Tell your date what interests you, what you're passionate about. What's your favourite food, or the wildest, wackiest thing you've ever done? How do you relax? What do you do at weekends? Show them what an interesting and inspiring person you are!'

He felt a sliver of fear stab his soul. No wonder she'd left him: even he didn't find himself interesting. What was there in his life but an endless succession of weekends at the Derbyshire? Even his favourite food would be the Sunday roast there. How did he relax? Jerking off to porn was hardly an answer, and with just the one DVD, he was neither a collector nor an aficionado. He opened up a Word document and typed:

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Half-hearted British male professional. Not interested in anything other than money and casual but unadventurous sex. No commitment given, none expected in return.

That was at least honest. Now, how could he improve on it?

Easy-going guy. Dependable. Professional and ambitious. Sociable. Seeking to widen interests. Seeks similar female.

That was more like it. Five minutes later he'd worked it up to:

I'm an easy-going south London professional who enjoys the good things in life. I have a full social life but would like to meet a special someone who will widen my interests. I'm loyal and dependable with a good sense of humour.

He was happy with that and clicked Next.

About Your Date. His heart sank. The Help button told him to be very specific about who he was looking for. Right back to Nina's question. There was a series of multiple-choice questions, like the ones he'd filled in on himself. He set her academic standards high, and a minimum salary a few thousand below his. The age he set at 24-32, which he thought was reasonable. But after the last multiple-choice question there was a text field waiting to be filled. After a couple of minutes' thought he wrote:

Must have a good sense of humour and no hang-ups.

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He clicked Next and got a patronising ‘Congratulations!’ message. ‘Now upload a photograph – people with photographs get seven times more hits’ it added in the small print. But he’d waited long enough for this moment: he wanted to see inside the gift box he’d bought. He clicked through and hit Search against the criteria he’d set. A list of contact names and photographs appeared, from as far away as Aberdeen and Torquay. He narrowed the geographic search to London and tried again.

He couldn’t believe his luck – over 150 women, ranked by percentage match to his profile. And the first one – 83% – looked very attractive, too. Heartened, he clicked to view her profile.

He had no chance. She played sport 3-4 times a week, took holidays in exotic, named destinations from Machu Picchu to Marrakech, where she climbed mountains and used her fluency in three foreign languages to meet locals on their own spiritual plane.

Telling himself it was a fluke, he clicked on his number two match. If anything, she was slightly more attractive. She was short on words: ‘I want a partner who can meet me on my own territory’. That territory extended from the bottom of the Red Sea, which was her favourite scuba diving destination, to the skies above Colorado for her paragliding.

Number three listed her most fun activity in the last year as having helped out at a shelter for the homeless on Christmas Day.

He hit the Next Page button several times to move down to the region of his 100-120th best matches, with 50% matching – whatever that was based on. There were few pictures here, which raised his suspicions, but he told himself not to be so shallow. After all, he had his own reservations about being seen here. He thought that one through a little. If he was seen, it would only be by someone else who’d subscribed, wouldn’t it? And he could hardly be ridiculed for internet dating, could he?

He clicked on a match at random. Nothing inspiring, but nothing threatening either. A

graduate his own age from south London. ‘Looking for Mr Right to sweep me off my feet. Must be dependable and want to start a family soon.’

Nope.

Let them come to him, he decided. There were some digital photos on the hard drive from last summer’s holiday. He had a quick look through. They were mostly of Sarah. He’d forgotten how good she’d looked back then. She always lost a few pounds for the beach and tanned beautifully. And he loved the way her hair lightened to blonde after a couple of days of sun. He reminisced about the leisurely sex they’d enjoyed at sunset one particular evening before heading out for a meal of fresh seafood.

There was one photo of him. More accurately, it was him and her. They’d taken a day-cruise to an island covered with ruins and another couple had taken a photo of them, his arm over her shoulder. His sunglasses went against the guidance in the Help menu. Nevertheless, he cropped the photo so that there was just the smallest piece of her outfit blowing in the breeze across the left of his body. Of course, his left arm was missing, cut off at the shoulder. Still, people would realise he wasn’t an amputee, wouldn’t they?

He clicked on the upload button. ‘Thank you. Your photo will take up to 72 hours to approve.’ He looked at his watch. This was no use to him at all. So much for the internet’s promise of instant gratification and his visions of a date that weekend. He wondered how long it would take to manoeuvre someone into a first meeting, and to bed from there. He must be looking at weeks.

Dejected, he took a beer from the fridge and put the DVD back in the player.

He was just undoing his fly when the phone rang. He juggled his thoughts for a few seconds – should he let the answering machine take it and just get on with his entertainment? What if it was Sarah, and she was downstairs? He felt sufficiently lonely to be happy to talk to anyone. He turned the DVD player off, picked up the cordless phone and stabbed the

button.

“Hello?”

“Hello darling, it’s your mummy,” his heart sank. He took back his generalisation about being happy to talk to anyone – this would not be an easy call.

“Hello, Mum. How are you?”

“Oh, we were just wondering how you were. Didn’t hear from you at the weekend and then we remembered it was Stu and Nina’s wedding anniversary, wasn’t it? Did you see them and little Jeremy?”

“Yes, I saw them yesterday and they’re fine. They asked me to send you their love.”

“Oh, that’s lovely, please give them mine. And how’s Nina’s baby?”

“Strangely enough, the foetus wasn’t saying much.” He turned the DVD back on and hit the ‘mute’ button. He could at least use the time to get past the compulsory copyright notice.

“Oh, don’t be like that. You know what I mean.”

“Nina’s just fine. Everyone’s fine. How’s Dad?”

“Oh, he’s fine.”

“Good.” He tried not to let the irritation creep into his voice. “Then that’s fine.”

“Your sister’s got a date fixed for Hannah and Natasha’s christening in June.” In his mother’s habits, lack of an ‘Oh’ at the beginning of a sentence signalled the beginning of the real conversation.

Naked bodies had begun writing on the screen. Even though he’d watched the DVD countless times, it still had a hold over his imagination. “Date?”

“You know what I’m like with dates. The second Sunday, here at home. I did tell Sarah that might be the date, so I’m sure she’s got it blocked off in the calendar for you.”

He was cornered. “Sorry, what date?”

“Second Sunday in June. I asked Sarah to block it off.”

Appreciating Assets

“Sarah probably can’t come.”

“Oh! Why’s that? Hannah and Natasha love her, and I think Jane even considered her for a godmother.”

“Mum,” there was no anaesthetic for this operation. “Look, Mum. Sarah left me on Saturday.”

“No, it’s on a *Sunday*.”

“Mum, you’re not listening. Sarah left me. Don’t expect her to come to the christening.”

“*What?*”

“She moved out on Saturday. I’m sorry.”

“But *why*, Ian?”

“I think we just drifted apart.” The DVD was reaching one of his favourite moments.

“Look, I’m really upset and I don’t want to talk about it now. Okay?”

“Now I’m worried about you. Where’s she gone?”

“I have no idea. She doesn’t want to talk with me and she’s changed jobs.” He heard her mother sniffing. “Don’t worry about me, I’ll be fine.” He heard the phone being passed over. His heart sank further.

“Hello, son.”

“Hi, Dad.”

“You’ve upset your mother.”

“No I didn’t. Sarah left me, that’s what upset her.”

“You know she adored Sarah.”

“Apparently Sarah didn’t adore the family enough to want to be part of it.”

“Now don’t be like that,” said his father in a stern voice.

“Dad, she left and she seems glad it’s over. End of story. I have my own life to lead.”

“You have to learn to think of people other than yourself, Ian. You’re not getting any

younger and neither are we.” Stu had read Ian’s father all too well. Perhaps they were in cahoots?

“Dad, I’m sorry. I’m really not in the mood. I’ve been put on a really good case at work and I can get stuck into it. If I can get this one under my belt then it’s a junior partnership.” He heard a quick snort from his father: real work was managing businesses, not being a parasitic bean counter. And there was the sensitive topic of succession at the family firm, in which Ian couldn’t even feign an interest.

“Just be there on the tenth for your sister, will you?”

“Of course I will.” His favourite girl in the DVD was fellating another actor, and he loved the scene that followed. “Look, I’ve got to go – I have to mug up on this case for tomorrow.”

“Right. I’ll let you go then. Look after yourself, okay?”

“Thanks, I will. ’Bye.” He didn’t wait for his father’s farewell before terminating the call.

“Fuck!” he shouted, and hammered his fist into the sofa. He turned the volume back on. It took him half an hour to regain a semblance of enthusiasm. Even then, his mood wasn’t quite right and he did no more than go through the motions. He was dreading the tenth of June, but no excuse in the world would be acceptable to escape the christening of his nieces in Bristol.

Warning: later chapters are sexually explicit

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