

Mrs Osbourne Regrets by Karen Mason

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Also by this author

Summerset
Mad About the Boy
Two Become One
Winner Takes It All
The True Tale of Jezebel Cole
Only You

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About the Author

Karen Mason was born in London in 1971 and still resides there. She has been writing since childhood and won her first accolade aged seven when she came second in the Blue Peter ‘Write a Limerick for Goldie the Dog’ competition. Fifteen years later she came second in the now defunct *Me! Magazine*, ‘Write a Blockbuster’ competition with an early novel called *Violet’s Children*. She first published her novel *Summerset* in 2008 and has gone on to release *Mad About the Boy* and *Two Become One* and *Winner Takes it All* – the sequel to *Summerset*. She is now working on the final drafts of *Only You*, set for release at the end of 2010.

Karen is also a part-time music journalist, writing for website Never Enough Notes

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August 1958

My life began to unravel on the day my daughter announced her engagement. I’d had no idea things would turn out so dreadful when, over breakfast, Daphne asked if she could invite Duncan to tea that afternoon. Not wishing to appear eager or intrusive, I did not ask my daughter what the occasion was, but secretly hoped the young man she’d met last year during her Season had asked her to become his wife. While my own life had become somewhat stagnant in recent years, my daughter becoming a debutante had enlivened our home once more. Every other day she enthralled me with her tales of the balls and charity events she’d attended. Duncan Wilkinson was the son of Horace Wilkinson, MP for Reading and his mother was Lady Clare Fenton. Clare was the only living child of the Duke of Berkshire, which meant, as Duncan was the only son, one day my daughter would enter into the aristocracy. Something most mothers could only dream of.

It was good to know one of my daughters was behaving in a respectable manner. Natalie, my youngest served to be nothing but an embarrassment with each passing day. At just sixteen, she considered herself grown up enough to decide the path she wanted to take in life without intervention from her father or myself. On the last day of term she’d declared she was leaving St Bennett’s and was going to art school in Paddington. I could have tolerated that, had it not been accompanied by her friendships with inappropriate young men she met on the Kings Road -

longhaired beatniks who smoked strangely coloured cigarettes and quoted French writers. It was becoming a common occurrence at coffee mornings to be taken to one side by a friend who would quietly inform me they'd seen my daughter kissing a man twice her age in broad daylight. Frankly I could not wait for her to move into the flat in Notting Hill she was going to rent with one of her unsuitable female friends. I was her mother and would love her forever, but I had a position in society and could not bear for my own offspring to jeopardise all I had worked for.

I was thankful that today she was out and I could entertain Duncan and Daphne in peace. I was hoping Charles would be home in time to join us but as usual he was caught up in parliamentary business. My husband was the MP for Hardwell - some little hamlet in Lancashire but thankfully his visits there were limited to once a fortnight when he held his surgeries. The thought of moving north filled me with dread and horror and I was glad we could remain in Eaton Square.

By the time Mrs Laine, the housekeeper, served tea, there was no sign of Charles and I realised I had to give up on my husband being here to witness our child's happy day. Duncan was such a lovely young man; well-connected, polite and not handsome in any way. I had no worries of him every becoming a ladies man, cheating on my daughter and causing social embarrassment. He was a solid, dependable fellow and I knew he would make Daphne nothing but happy.

'This really is a super angel cake Mrs Osbourne,' he said.

'Call me Diana,' I said. 'We're practically family after all.'

'Mummy!' Daphne scolded, blushing into her tea cup with a playful smile.

'W-Well, yes,' Duncan stammered, his expression becoming most earnest. 'That was the reason why we wanted tea with you this afternoon Mrs....Diana. I've approached your husband about the subject and he was most supportive and so I've asked Daphne if she will become my wife.'

'And I said yes!' Daphne beamed.

'Oh my darling,' I smiled, clasping my hands together in delight. 'Congratulations. I wish your father were here now. Have you any dates in mind?'

'We thought next summer,' Daphne said. 'And we'd like to have the wedding in Frimlington. I know it breaks with tradition to marry in the groom's village, but Frimlington Hall is so much more suitable for a reception.'

‘Darling you don’t have to try and convince me,’ I replied with a reassuring wave of the hand. ‘Whatever makes you happy.’

‘Thank you mummy,’ she smiled warmly, her pretty face lighting up. ‘I don’t deserve you.’

The doorbell rang and I left it for Mrs Laine to attend to. Occasionally people had the audacity to drop by and request Charles’ time, as though by being an MP it made him public property and there to solve the most trivial problems at the drop of a hat.

‘I was thinking of making Natalie a bridesmaid,’ Daphne continued. ‘Perhaps if she had something like a wedding to focus on then she wouldn’t behave so badly for you and daddy.’

I glanced at Duncan and could see the embarrassment upon his face. This was not the time to be discussing family matters.

‘We’ll see,’ was the only response I gave, drawing a line under the subject.

There was a knock on the door, and before I could even say ‘come in’, it opened. Mrs Laine stood there ashen faced, as though she had seen a ghost.

‘Could you come outside please Mrs Osbourne?’ she asked quietly.

‘Who is it?’ I replied, letting her hear the irritation in my voice.

‘It’s the police,’ she answered.

‘The police? What do they want?’

‘To speak to you.’

I apologised to my daughter and her fiancé and left the room, closing the door behind me.

‘They’re in the dining room,’ Mrs Laine said, gesturing to the room at the back of the house.

I thanked my housekeeper for her assistance and went into the dining room to be greeted by two men, one a young PC in uniform; the other, I presumed to be a detective – a burly man with dark hair and a raincoat, looking like something from a cheap B-Movie.

‘Mrs Diana Osbourne?’ he asked, his voice gruff and almost disrespectful, like his being here was a nuisance to him.

‘Yes,’ I replied.

‘I’m Detective Sergeant Hall, this is PC Jones. I’m sorry to inform you that your husband The Right Honourable Charles Osbourne was arrested this afternoon and is currently being held at Mornington Grove Police station.’

‘Arrested?’ I uttered. ‘Charles? What has he done?’

The detective cleared his throat and the young PC looked to the ground, a blush coming to his cheeks.

‘Your husband was arrested along with a number of other men in a public lavatory in Regents Park.’

‘I don’t understand,’ I replied, wondering why anyone would be arrested for using a public lavatory.

The detective rocked back on his heels, squared his shoulders and looked me in the eye and for the first time I could see how painful this was for him. His abruptness was rooted in embarrassment, not contempt.

‘Your husband was caught performing indecent acts with another man.’

At that moment all time stood still and I became convinced I was dreaming. This was so far-fetched it couldn’t possibly be true and in a moment I would awake and find I’d dozed off in my armchair, awaiting Duncan and Daphne’s arrival. Why on earth would my *husband* want to commit indecent acts with another man? He wasn’t queer. How could he be queer? We’d been married for twenty-one years.

‘I’m sorry to have to tell you this madam,’ Hall said. ‘I also feel it my duty to warn you that as he was being brought to the station, a reporter from the Daily Sketch was there and I’m afraid it’s likely to be in the newspapers tomorrow.’

This struck me as an even bigger blow than to think my husband was some sort of pervert. Tomorrow everyone I knew would read of how Charles had been mistakenly arrested and accused of being some sort of dirty queer who hangs around public toilets. I slumped down onto a dining chair and the young PC asked if I wanted a glass of water. I declined, saying all I wanted was for them to leave.

‘Your husband will be up before Central London Magistrates tomorrow morning,’ Hall said as he made to go. ‘I’m sure he’ll get bail and be home with you by the afternoon.’

‘You mean he’s not coming home tonight?’

‘No, we need to question him I’m afraid.’

‘If he’s found guilty, will he go to prison?’

‘Let’s not jump the gun eh?’ Hall said but his patronising tone just enflamed me more.

‘I want the truth!’ I snapped.

‘Yes Mrs Osbourne,’ he replied flatly. ‘Your husband could be looking at up to five years imprisonment.’

I felt faint and it must have showed as the PC repeated his offer to fetch me a glass of water and this time I accepted. He left the room and Hall seemed to take this as an opportunity to approach me once more. He sat down on the chair next to me and rubbed his weary brow with a meaty hand.

‘I’ve got four other wives to go and visit after you,’ he sighed. ‘Not a pleasant job.’

‘Four! How many men were there? What were they doing? One hears such dreadful stories of public toilets and what goes on there. I thought it was some sort of myth; are you telling me it’s true?’

‘I’m afraid it is madam. I’m not going to go into details because you’re a lady but let’s just say there are young men who make it their job to entrap gentlemen like your husband and it was with such a fellow he was caught. I must say he was taking rather a chance doing it in broad daylight.’

‘I’ve never been so ashamed in my life,’ I cried, although too shocked for any tears to come.

‘You have nothing to be ashamed of. It’s your husband who’s done wrong. But I’ll leave it for him to explain it all to you tomorrow.’

‘Can you do anything to stop the newspapers reporting it?’

‘My hands are tied I’m afraid Mrs Osbourne. Just sit tight. It might not be all that bad.’

The young officer returned with my glass of water and I tried to drink but found my throat was closed. My heart was racing and my palms clammy and I was starting to shake so violently I was afraid I was going to suffer some sort of seizure.

‘Will you be alright Mrs Osbourne?’ Hall asked and I could only nod in reply. He got up and with a tilt of the head, indicated to the PC it was time to leave.

‘We’ll show ourselves out,’ he said. ‘Goodbye Mrs Osbourne.’

‘I-I’m forgetting my manners,’ I whispered, rising to my feet but feeling the floor tip beneath me. Steadying myself I showed the two officers out to the front door and was glad to see no reporters hanging around outside with their flashbulbs. Perhaps something more interesting was happening in the world rather than my poor husband being caught up in some sort of mistaken arrest.

I closed the door and paused while I decided what I was going to say to Daphne and Duncan. I couldn't possibly reveal the truth to them but at the same time I felt unable to continue with our tea. I needed to lie down in a dark room to contemplate what my future held.

Taking a deep breath and putting on my best smile, I opened the drawing room door and was greeted by the concerned faces of my daughter and her fiancé.

'Mummy what is it?' Daphne asked.

'A silly matter,' I replied with a dismissive shake of the head. 'Your father and his friends have got caught up in some nonsense. I'm not remotely interested.'

'He hasn't been arrested has he?'

'Don't be silly.'

I gripped my head, emphasising my distress.

'I have the most dreadful headache,' I said. 'Would the pair of you mind awfully if I went up to bed?'

'Would you like me to leave Mrs....Diana?' Duncan asked.

'No don't be silly,' I scoffed. 'You two enjoy the rest of Mrs Laine's cake. Once again, congratulations to you both.'

I went up to the bedroom I had shared with my husband for the entire duration of our married life and drew the curtains. I lay upon the bed and even though I tried to nap, I couldn't help but replay the events that had just passed. I could not even begin to contemplate what Charles thought he was doing. Most women in my position expect infidelity from our husbands; after all, our unions are rarely based upon lust or even sometimes love. Charles and I had always shared an affection for one another and we seemed a good match as our fathers were business associates; but I had never expected him to seek excitement in the arms of another man.

Had this been going on the whole time we'd been married? After Natalie's birth, relations between us had dwindled and I could not recall the last time my husband had touched me, but surely this was normal. I never spoke of such things with my women friends, but I could guess their husbands didn't paw them like amorous teenagers any more.

I tried not to think about it any longer, and remained convinced Charles was the victim of some elaborate sting. No doubt he was just using the public lavatory when these depravities were going on and was caught up in the nonsense. I hoped the magistrate tomorrow was someone we knew and he would see sense and throw the whole silly thing out of court.

My mind a little more at rest, I dozed off to sleep. I had no idea for how long, but when I was awoken, the room was dark. My eyes opened and the first thing I saw was the silhouette of my daughter standing beside my bed.

‘Daphne?’

‘Mummy what is going on?’ she snapped.

I sat up, a little too hastily as the room swam around me.

‘What’s the matter darling?’

‘Duncan has just left the house and there are men out there with flashbulbs. They were shouting questions at him...about daddy.’

My blood ran cold. I could tell by the way Daphne had said those two words that these salacious reporters who were now camped outside my door had no doubt shouted something about the circumstances of my husband’s arrest. I reached over and switched on the bedside lamp and patted the covers, indicating I wanted my daughter to sit beside me. She did so, and the look of petulance upon her face frightened me. She had been embarrassed before her fiancé and I knew she wouldn’t forgive Charles for bringing this upon her.

‘Don’t treat me like a child mummy,’ she said. ‘I want the truth.’

‘Your father was arrested this afternoon,’ I said. ‘He was mistakenly caught up in a police operation and it will all be sorted out tomorrow.’

‘Those reporters outside, they were saying awful things. I could have sworn one of them asked if it was true my father is queer.’

‘They’re just stupid reporters with the wrong end of the stick. Even I don’t know why daddy was arrested and he’s certainly not queer is he? He’s married to me.’

‘Well when is he coming home?’

‘Tomorrow, after he’s been up before the magistrate. Don’t worry about it darling. It’s all a silly nonsense that will blow over.’

‘I’ll die if daddy brings any sort of scandal upon us. Not when I’m about to marry Duncan.’

‘Daddy is going to do no such thing. Why don’t you get to bed? Like I said, it will all be over by tomorrow.’

I hoped I had placated my daughter enough to keep her going and when she left the room I switched off the light and tried to rest again. However I was disturbed once more by a knock upon the door.

‘Mrs Osbourne?’ It was Mrs Laine.

‘What is it?’ I asked.

‘Telephone for you.’

‘Who is it?’

‘Mrs Crawford.’

I groaned inwardly. Angela Crawford was probably my least favourite person in our circle. Her husband was MP for Attington, the neighbouring village to Hardwell and because the two men were friends, somehow it was expected of us wives to get on. She was a former Tiller girl who had married well but no amount of money or elocution lessons could hide her crassness and need to boast. I hoped and prayed she hadn’t found out about Charles’ arrest and had called to find out all the gossip. She was the last person I wanted to speak to.

‘Thank you Mrs Laine,’ I said. ‘I will be down in a moment.’

The telephone was in the hall and I wondered if I had time to pop into the dining room and fix myself a gin and tonic, I needed some Dutch courage before speaking to this vile woman.

Deciding against it, I took the phone from Mrs Laine and braced myself.

‘Angela,’ I cooed with a sincerity I didn’t feel.

‘Jerry and Charles have been arrested,’ the woman declared.

‘Jerry!’ I exclaimed.

‘The police came here and told me, and just after that Archie Daniels called. He just happened to be at Mornington Grove seeing a client when they were all brought in and Charles and Jerry were amongst them.’

I didn’t respond; instead looked around to make sure no one was listening. Thankfully Mrs Laine had retreated to her quarters.

‘Did the police tell you why they were arrested?’ I asked.

‘Yes and I am going to kill the fucking little bastard!’

‘Angela, please,’ I hissed, disgusted by her language. ‘We don’t even know if it’s true.’

‘Of course it’s true. I’ve warned Jerry about this.’

‘You mean it’s happened before?’

‘Yes. Back in fifty-five he was being blackmailed by this little tart that he was screwing in Queensway. Thankfully we paid the creature his money and he was never seen or heard of again. I told Jerry to be more discreet and now he goes and does this.’

‘B-But Charles. Surely not Charles.’

‘Yes, surely Charles. He and my husband are cruising buddies. They go out looking for young meat on a regular basis. I’m surprised you didn’t already know.’

‘How can you tolerate such a thing?’

‘What difference does it make? He either goes and screws little female tarts or visits rent boys. Frankly I don’t care, just as long as he’s discreet. The big difference between the two is that he isn’t looking at a prison sentence for sticking it up some girl.’

Her vulgar language was appalling me and I couldn’t believe the nonchalance she was displaying at this terrible sickness that had afflicted our spouses.

‘What are you going to do?’ I asked.

‘I’m going over to stay with Caroline Villiers. She’s got the builders in at the moment and they’ll soon see off any pesky reporters.’

‘You can’t just leave Jerry. He needs you.’

‘I don’t want to be within twenty feet of Jerry for the next week or so. He got himself into this mess; he can cope with the fall out. Look, why don’t *you* come over to Caroline’s? It’s only a matter of time before the press find out about Charles.’

‘They already have. They’re outside my door.’

‘Well even more of a reason for you to come. There’s plenty of room in that house for the three of us.’

‘No. I want to see my husband tomorrow when he comes home. I’ll get him whatever help he needs.’

‘He isn’t sick Diana. He’s just a pervert. Well, if you change your mind, I’ll be at Caroline’s from tomorrow morning.’

She ended the call without even a ‘goodbye’ and I remained standing, staring at the receiver, wondering just how much worse my life was going to get.

I retired once more, locking the door and hoping no one disturbed me. I undressed, but before I put on my nightgown, I paused and stood in front of the mirror that hung on my wardrobe door. I examined myself, wondering what was so hideous about me that my husband

preferred to have sex with young men. I may have been forty-one, but I was in good shape. I ate less than I desired just to remain slim; my blonde hair had not started to grey or go thin like so many of my peers. I reached up and unclipped it and it tumbled down over my shoulders. With my face partially hidden, I looked young once more, how I must have done when Charles and I were introduced back in 1936. I was an innocent nineteen year old Deb; only able to join in the Season because my mother's grandfather was an Earl. Jimmy Isaac, my father had no class whatsoever – he was the son of a Yorkshire printer who'd made good and by the time my parents married he was the heir to a chain of local newspapers. Charles Osbourne's father and grandfather before him had been MPs, which meant he had good standing. I was too lowly to marry into the aristocracy but no one objected to our union, after all we were both *civilians*.

I ran my hands over my body, my skin was still soft and I had retained my curves. When we were courting, Charles always commented on how petite and yet womanly I was. I, in my naivety, thought he appreciated my full breasts and shapely legs, when all the time I expect he secretly fancied my brother Nigel!

Still partially refusing to believe it was true. I slipped on my nightgown and got into bed. I was used to sleeping alone. Often Charles would stay at the apartment he had in Westminster; even though it was less than half an hour up the road, he claimed he preferred to stay out rather than get in late and wake me. Was that when he was seeing these men? Visiting those disgusting toilets?

The situation was so ridiculous I decided to push it all to the back of my mind until the next day when I could confront Charles myself. No doubt he would tell me it was all a mistake and that Jerry Crawford had probably roped him into being some sort of lookout. You couldn't be married to someone for more than half your life and not know them inside out and I was sure if Charles had harboured these peculiarities, I would have spotted them.

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I was awoken by the doorbell ringing and voices shouting. Blearily, I stumbled out of bed and went to my window, pulling back the curtain. To my horror, the sky lit up with a million flashbulbs and I looked down to find at least thirty men gathered on my doorstep, their cameras pointing in my direction. With a gasp of horror, I closed the curtains and stood for a moment, my

hand clasped over my mouth, wondering what I was going to do. I was a prisoner in my own home.

My door started to rattle and for a moment I was terrified one of these journalist creatures had made it into my home.

‘Mrs Osbourne you must come downstairs,’ Mrs Laine trilled. ‘These people want to speak to you.’

‘Can’t you tell them to go away?’

‘It isn’t working.’

I wrapped my dressing gown around myself and left the room. My housekeeper stood at the top of the stairs with the most distressed look upon her face. What did she have to worry about? It wasn’t her husband being accused of being a deviant.

‘Shall I call the police Mrs Osbourne?’ she asked.

‘No, it’ll just enflame the situation more.’

Natalie’s door opened and she emerged, hair ruffled, wearing her pyjamas. Under normal circumstances I would have asked her what time she’d come home last night - I certainly hadn’t heard her enter the house. But now wasn’t the time.

‘What’s going on?’ she yawned.

‘It’s nothing Natalie,’ I snapped. ‘Just go back to bed.’

Of course she ignored me and soon Daphne’s door opened as well. Naturally my eldest daughter was already dressed, never slovenly like her sister.

‘Mummy is this about daddy?’ she shrieked.

‘What’s daddy done?’ Natalie asked.

‘Will you both shut up and go down to the kitchen? Mrs Laine can you make the girls breakfast?’

‘Yes Mrs Osbourne.’

I turned and went back into my bedroom, knowing I had no choice but to face the vultures gathered at my door. I certainly couldn’t do it looking how I did. I had to prove a point; they had to see my husband had a perfectly attractive wife and therefore had absolutely no reason to go around having sex with boys.

It took me an hour, but by the time I re-emerged, I hoped I looked like a force to be reckoned with. After much deliberation, I’d chosen a green, woollen Hartnell suit that fitted me

perfectly, showing my womanly figure. I'd clipped my hair up into an immaculate style and applied the sort of make up normally reserved for special occasions. I usually preferred a more natural look, but desperate times called for desperate measures.

I approached the front door and took one final deep breath before opening it. The world went mad and for a moment I wanted to scream and run back inside as various young men tried to clamber up the stairs into my house.

'Is it true Mrs Osbourne?'

'Has your husband been attending sex parties?'

'Is he going to resign?'

Their voices came all at once and I wanted them to be quiet. Raising my hands, I was rather surprised when they hushed slightly. Maybe there was still a little respect in this world.

'I have no comment to make,' I almost shouted, rather embarrassed that my neighbours would be party to this circus. 'Except that I strongly believe my husband is innocent and this unfortunate matter will be resolved soon.'

I then closed the door and stood behind it for a while, stupidly hoping they would now go away but when I looked through the spyhole I saw them still hovering. Would I be trapped here forever? Being in the middle of a terrace we didn't even have a tradesman's entrance – this was the only way I could leave the house.

There was a creak on the stairs and I looked up to find Natalie walking down. She looked too chubby in those black ski pants and off the shoulder top. She needed to lose at least a couple of stone and the way she dyed her hair that awful jet black spoiled her face. Her natural colour was dark blonde and it matched her blue eyes; this dark hair made her look hard and accentuated her pale skin. Physically she took after Charles, where Daphne had favoured me. I couldn't help but wonder if my youngest daughter's promiscuity was inherited from her father too.

'What is going on?' she asked.

Despite her only being sixteen, somehow, because of her nature, I found the prospect of explaining things to Natalie easier than Daphne. Maybe it was because she didn't have such high standards.

'Come into the drawing room.'

Shutting the door behind me, I sat beside my daughter on the sofa and realised I could still hear those wretched pressmen outside my door. Didn't they ever tire of this bullying?

‘Your father has been arrested,’ I said to Natalie. ‘He and Jerry Crawford were accused of improper acts and taken to Mornington Grove Police Station.’

‘What sort of improper acts?’

‘You don’t have to worry yourself about that,’ I snapped. ‘He’s up before the magistrate this morning and he’ll be home afterwards.’

‘Is daddy queer?’

‘Natalie!’ I cried, shocked my daughter even knew of such things. ‘What on earth made you ask that?’

‘There was a girl at school, Susan Roberts. Her father’s the actor Frank Roberts. He got arrested for improper acts and it turned out he was queer. There was a terrible scandal. She had to leave school and everything.’

‘Your father’s no such thing,’ I replied, although my conviction to this was becoming lessened with each passing moment. ‘If you ask me, Jerry’s the one to blame, he probably got daddy into this trouble.’

‘Is there anything Daff and I can do?’

‘No. Just stay here and don’t talk to the press. Once daddy’s home we’ll know what we’re doing.’

‘Well don’t let daddy give you any excuses. Demand to know the truth.’

‘I think I know how to handle my own marriage Natalie. Now why don’t you go and see how Daphne’s coping. I think she’s taken this very badly.’

‘All Daff cares about is what effect it’s going to have on her engagement to the twerp.’

‘Don’t be so spiteful. Go to your room Natalie, I’m not in the mood for your backchat.’

Without argument, she got up and left the room and didn’t even slam the door – something she did quite often these days.

I was aware the telephone was ringing incessantly but I left it up to Mrs Laine to fend off the gossipmongers. It turned my stomach to think this morning my friends would be reading about my husband’s private life - no doubt wondering what was so wrong with me that I had driven him to commit such acts.

The doorbell rang and I also relied on my housekeeper to answer that. I had said all I wanted to say to the press and had no further comment. I was rather alarmed when the door opened and Mrs Laine entered.

‘It’s Mr Leyton,’ she said. ‘Can I show him in?’

‘Yes of course.’

Peter Leyton was Charles’ oldest friend and the family solicitor. No doubt my husband would have called him when he was arrested. He entered the room, a grave expression upon his weathered, hawk-like features. He always wore black and seemed to swoop into a room like a bird of prey. He bade me good morning and accepted my offer of tea, which I instructed Mrs Laine to make.

‘How are you coping Diana?’ he asked. ‘Such a dreadful thing to happen.’

‘Where is Charles now?’

‘He’s at Dicky Standish’s flat in Mayfair. He’s going to hide out there until it’s all blown over.’

‘Dicky Standish?’ I frowned. ‘Why has he gone to his flat? Why hasn’t he come home?’

‘Because he knew the press would be camped outside....as they are. He couldn’t face it.’

‘But *I* can face it. My daughters can be kept like prisoners in their own home because of his depravity.’

‘Now don’t become hysterical Diana, it’s not going to solve anything. Charles wants to see you and explain everything.’

‘Oh he does does he? I have to go to him I suppose.’

‘It would be easier.’

‘Is it true Peter? Did he do those terrible things?’

The solicitor looked down at his lap and his silence told me everything. It was true. My husband was a monster.

‘Has he always been like it?’

‘I think that’s up to him to explain,’ Peter said, finally making eye contact with me. ‘He’s a broken man and there’s nothing he would like better than to be with you and the girls, but that’s impossible. This truly is a terrible situation.’

After a hurried cup of tea, Peter and I set off. I instructed Mrs Laine not to let the girls out until I returned. Trying to keep two teenaged girls in would not prove an easy feat although I guessed at this present time they probably didn’t feel much like socialising anyway. I doubted even the brazen Natalie could withstand the abuse she would receive for having a queer father.

With his arm around my shoulder, Peter charged headlong into the scrum of reporters and pushed them out the way. He helped me into his car and before the pressmen could pounce, we were spirited away. I clenched my fists and gritted my teeth and tried to quell my anger before I was confronted with my husband. Right at that moment I could have clawed his eyes out for his sheer selfishness, leaving his daughters and me to cope with the aftermath of his arrest. We were innocent in this and yet he was the one who had escaped to Dicky Standish's place.

I thought he could have picked someone more respectable to lean upon. Dicky Standish was a terrible playboy who'd never had a steady job *or* steady relationship. His life was filled with loose women, gambling, nightclubs and becoming involved with unsuitable people. I was perfectly aware that a couple of years ago he'd been beaten to a pulp by some East End thug he'd got on the wrong side of. Now my husband was seeking sanctuary at his place. Was he mad? He had to keep as far away from scandal as possible.

Dicky lived in a flat in Mayfair left to him by his father. The outside of the Edwardian block looked impressive but the inside had been re-built after the war due to some internal damage that had been done in the Blitz. There was something quite cold and clinical about the metal fronted lifts and stone steps; the concierge's desk made from some cheap looking wood. To me it looked how I imagined some awful Soviet hospital rather than a prestigious block in the middle of central London.

Peter and I took the lift up to the fourth floor and Dicky's flat was at the end of a long, narrow corridor. The door was ajar and as we walked through, Dicky Standish stumbled out of the kitchen, clearly still drunk from the night before.

'Diana,' he slurred. 'You look as beautiful as ever. The defendant's in the living room.'

Not even bothering to respond to him, I headed for the living room and found my husband seated upon a sofa, looking so different to his normal, dapper self. His grey hair was dishevelled and he was unshaven – something Charles hated being. Dicky could have at least lent him a razor.

'Darling,' he said, rising to greet me. I suddenly realised how Angela Crawford felt when she said she didn't want Jerry anywhere near her. I couldn't stand the thought of my husband touching me; not after being in a filthy police cell all night. Not after doing God only knew what with young men probably no older than our children. I recoiled from his embrace and sat upon the other sofa while Peter Leyton made drinks.

‘So what happened?’ I asked.

‘I have to go to the Crown Court later in the year. I’ll be sentenced then.’

‘No, I mean what happened last night?’

Charles remained silent, just glanced at Peter, who realised what he wanted.

‘I’ll just go and see if Dicky wants some coffee to help him sober up,’ he said and he left the room, closing the door behind him.

Charles looked at me and for the first time I saw the redness in his eyes. He had been crying. I had never seen my husband cry - not when we married or when our children were born or even when his parents died.

‘Diana I can’t lie to you any longer. I’ve deceived you throughout our entire marriage and it has torn me apart every day. You deserve so much better than me.’

‘Oh stop feeling sorry for yourself,’ I snapped. ‘So you are queer then?’

‘Yes.’

That simple one syllable three letter word came like a blow to my stomach and rendered me speechless. So it was true. My husband was a deviant and I had lived a lie for twenty-one years. Not only that, he was likely to be going to prison. Right then I wanted to die.

‘It started when I was at Eton and it’s never gone away. I thought by marrying you and having our wonderful girls I’d somehow straighten out, become normal, but it never happened. I’m so sorry Diana.’

‘And have you been carrying on all this time?’

‘Yes,’ he practically whispered.

A flash came into my mind. Of the times we had made love, his hands touching me after touching young men paid to provide pleasure in public toilets. When he held our newborn daughters for the first time. What had he been doing beforehand? Was he diseased? Could he have given something to me? These thoughts caused my stomach to turn and I knew I was going to be sick. I ran from the room, finding the bathroom and vomiting into the sink until my body shook and there was nothing left to bring up. I washed my face and composed myself, turning around to find Charles standing in the doorway.

‘Please don’t say you’re going to leave me darling?’ he pleaded. ‘I’m going to lose everything as it is.’

‘You don’t need to lose anything,’ I said, pushing past him and returning to the living room. I poured myself a tonic water – something to take the taste of sick away. ‘You will plead not guilty and we’ll say it was all a mistake.’

‘I’ve already pleaded guilty Diana. I’m tired of living a lie.’

I turned round to face him, almost spilling my drink in fury.

‘And how do you propose you’re going to live? Have you seen how they treat queers? Even if you don’t go to prison you’re not going to be able to live like a normal man. You’ll be hunted and hounded like an animal. And what about me and the girls? What are we supposed to do?’

‘We can just carry on as before? We’re a good team you and I.’

‘You expect me to continue a sham of a marriage so you can hang onto a shred of respectability.’

‘Our marriage isn’t a sham. I love you and I adore the girls. Nature made me this way and I can’t fight what I am but I don’t want to lose what I’ve got.’

‘Nature! Nature! You speak as if what you were doing is normal. Why were you having sex with young men in public toilets? Why can’t you go somewhere private?’

‘It’s part of the thrill. I’ve always been so discreet but it was Jerry’s idea to go to Regents Park in the middle of the day. He assured me it’s normally a safe place but the police are getting stricter. I blame Wolfenden. Since he’s made it almost acceptable to carry on indoors, suddenly the police are doing all they can to round up those of us who still cottage.’

‘Cottage?’

‘It’s a colloquialism, a reference to the shape of the buildings. That doesn’t matter. What does matter is that we’ve got to find some way of moving forward.’

‘We can’t just *move forward*. Daphne and Duncan got engaged yesterday. You were too busy fiddling with young boys to come home and celebrate with her. How on earth can the grandson of the Duke of Berkshire marry a girl whose father is a deviant?’

‘My behaviour has nothing to do with Daphne.’

‘Oh don’t be so naïve Charles. I’m going to be the laughing stock of all my friends. They’re going to look at me and blame me for your failings. *Oh look there’s Diana Osbourne, she’s so hideous her husband was forced to fuck little boys.*’

I shocked myself at my profanity. I never swore and I hated Charles even more for driving me to use such a word.

‘Why don’t we go away for a while?’ he suggested. ‘Somewhere in the country?’

For a moment I was tempted but I had to think about it. No matter where Charles went the press would eventually find him and we would become prisoners once more. But I couldn’t face remaining in that house, too scared to leave because reporters were gathered outside. I needed to get away – from my home and from my husband.

‘No,’ I replied. ‘I don’t want to be near you until I’ve decided what I’m going to do.’

‘But I need your support Diana.’

‘You’ve had my support for the past twenty one years and you’ve repaid me like this. I’m going home to collect the girls and I’m taking them to Caroline Villiers’ place in Hampstead.’

‘Why don’t we both go?’ I suggested.

‘No, the press will find you there. I need some time alone Charles. Please respect that. Now can you call me a taxi please? I want to go home?’

I arrived home to find a lot of the reporters had gone, but a few still lurked around my front steps like an infestation of rats. As I emerged from the taxi, I didn’t even bother to shield my face or try to hide from them, but I still refused to answer their questions.

‘Is it true your husband has pleaded guilty Mrs Osbourne?’

‘Has he been remanded?’

‘Will he be stepping down?’

I simply put my key in the door and stepped in to find myself in the middle of a maelstrom. My two daughters were stood at the bottom of the stairs screaming at one another, Daphne in floods of tears - what had Natalie said to upset her?

‘Tell me it isn’t true mummy?’ Daphne cried, running into my arms. ‘Tell me she’s lying.’

‘What have you been saying to your sister?’ I asked Natalie who stood with her hand upon her rounded hip, that smug expression on her face. I so longed to smack it away. How certain you were at sixteen, sure you knew all the answers, when in truth you knew nothing.

‘I just told her that I thought daddy was queer, like Susan Roberts’ father.’

Daphne looked up at me, tears streaming down her elfin face.

‘Please tell me it isn’t true mummy. I’ll die.’

I couldn't lie. What was the point when my husband had so selfishly pleaded guilty? I eased Daphne away and passed her a handkerchief to wipe away her tears.

'Girls could you both come into the drawing room? I need to speak to you.'

I led my daughters into the drawing room to do probably the most difficult thing I had ever done. How does one tell their children that their father is a homosexual? Did they even understand the full implications of this?

They sat either side of me, just how they had when they were small and I would read them stories. Seeing them on the brink of womanhood frightened me. Soon they would be away from me and I would be left alone with my feckless and devious husband.

'Darlings, daddy's not very well. What those men out there are shouting...well, it's true to an extent but your father's going to get better from this.'

'Mummy people don't get better from being queer; it's just how they are.'

Trust Natalie to come out with some smart response.

'Penny Jacobs phoned me today,' Daphne sniffed. 'She was laughing because apparently daddy was caught in a public lavatory. Oh my God, this is the worst day of my life,' she started to sob once more and I pulled her to me.

'Daddy has pleaded guilty to his crimes and we've got to accept there is a chance he may go to prison. Because of the men outside, he can't come home and I think we should leave too, so I'm going to take you both to Caroline Villiers' house.'

Daphne pulled away and looked up at me, her brow furrowed in confusion.

'You're doing what? If we run away it looks as though we're guilty of something.'

'We're not guilty of anything, but we must face facts. Your father is a high profile man and this is just the sort of sordid story the newspapers love. Daddy's going to stay with Dicky Standish and we'll remain in Hampstead.'

'You can't leave daddy alone to face this,' she cried. 'We must appear united as a family.'

'That isn't possible at the moment darling, the press are going to follow him wherever he goes.'

'I can't believe how selfish you're being! Don't you see by running away it makes the whole thing worse? If I'm going to hang onto Duncan I need to remain as normal as possible, let his family think it's just a storm in a teacup.'

‘You talk about mummy being selfish, but what about you?’ Natalie snapped and for once I couldn’t argue with my youngest daughter. ‘We’re trapped in here. We can’t go out; the phone rings incessantly, poor Mrs Laine is exhausted from answering it. Why should we suffer because daddy’s been an idiot?’

‘For once I agree with Natalie,’ I said. ‘If Duncan truly loves you, he will understand none of this is your fault.’

‘Oh don’t be so ridiculous mummy,’ Daphne snapped, getting off the sofa and marching to the fireplace. ‘He’s the heir to the Duke of Berkshire. They’re not going to want to risk our children maybe taking after daddy and being perverts.’

‘You can’t say that for sure. Now go upstairs and pack your suitcase Daphne, I’ll telephone Caroline and let her know we’re on our way.’

‘No. I’m not going. I’m staying here.’

‘You’re doing no such thing young lady,’ I said, standing up so I could match her in height. ‘I’m ordering Mrs Laine to go and stay with her sister and I’m shutting this house up until further notice.’

‘Okay then, well I’m going to go down to Nice. Betty Morse said I could join them down there if I wanted and that’s where I’m going.’

‘What about Duncan?’

‘If he loves me, he’ll follow me. If not, well I blame you and daddy.’

‘Me? What have I done?’

‘If you’d been a better wife, daddy might not have done the things he did.’

Her words wounded me. Hurt me more than anything that had gone before. Daphne. My darling daughter who I’d treasured since the moment she was born hated me because she saw this horrid thing as somehow being my fault. Tears came to my eyes, but I swallowed them back, determined my children were never going to see me cry.

‘If that’s how you feel then you must go. What about you Natalie? What do you want to do?’

‘I’m happy to go to Hampstead,’ she replied with a shrug. ‘It’ll be nice just to be able to step outside my front door again.’

I arrived at Caroline Villiers' beautiful white mansion feeling like some sort of refugee. I think the taxi driver must have recognised who I was because with a snort, he declared it wasn't his job to carry bags; as if I was somehow tainted with my husband's bad blood and if he touched anything relating to him, he might end up homosexual too. It was all this ignorant man could do to dump our suitcases onto Caroline's drive and then retreat into his cab, scuttling off.

For a moment Natalie and I stood looking up at our temporary new home - a huge mansion on the edge of the Heath. The West wing was covered in scaffolding and tarpaulin as Caroline was having the whole thing renovated. Caroline was the only one in our circle that wasn't married. Her father was the author Patrick Villiers and upon his death the house and his vast fortune had gone to his daughter. Officially Caroline was a spinster, but everyone knew she'd been having an affair with a lower ranking member of the Royal family since before the war. She'd never revealed his identity and we'd all given up wondering.

Picking up a suitcase each, Natalie and I trudged across the gravel towards the front door. Suddenly there was the sound of footsteps coming towards us, and I looked up to find a workman heading for us. A big, burly man in overalls and for a moment I felt a little frightened he was going to try and eject us from the property.

'What do you think you're doing there Miss?' he asked in a strong Irish accent. 'You'll strain your back. Allow me.'

In a swift movement, he snatched both cases from my daughter and myself and turned on his heels, heading across the gravel, carrying them with ease. I hoped his hands weren't dirty or covered in paint; those suitcases were worth a fortune. Natalie and I followed the tall, strapping man to the front door where he laid the cases and rang the bell. As he stood up and looked briefly at me, I was taken for a moment with how handsome he was - his dark hair in a loose quiff, his face angular and somewhat weathered and yet as his blue eyes met mine, they seemed to twinkle with mischief and I found myself blushing, angry at his impudence.

'Thank you,' I snapped. 'You can be on your way now.'

'Very good ma'am,' he replied, almost jokingly, giving a little bow and he made off back towards the building site. Natalie looked at me and smiled.

'He was a bit of a dish wasn't he?' she said.

'Natalie I will tolerate you chasing boys who think they're poets and musicians, but I draw the line at builders.'

‘He was far too old for me! I meant for you. Perhaps you should play daddy at his own game.’

‘You really go too far sometimes Natalie,’ I replied, wishing it had been Daphne who’d accompanied me. I just knew Natalie would do nothing but serve to embarrass me.

The door finally opened and Walsh, Caroline’s butler stood there. His elderly, frail body seemingly not strong enough to carry our heavy cases.

‘Mrs Osbourne. Miss Osbourne,’ he said. ‘Let me take your cases. Madam is in the conservatory.’

We walked into the grand house and even from here the sound of drilling could be heard. I hoped it wasn’t a constant thing; it would do nothing but bring on my headaches.

The conservatory was at the back of the house; an opulent room where Caroline liked to grow lilies and other exotic plants whose names I did not know. She was tending to some tiger lilies when we arrived, looking wonderfully eccentric in her wide brimmed hat, her Chanel skirt finished off with a pair of Wellington boots. She spotted us and put down her watering can.

‘Darlings,’ she cooed, rushing to us and kissing us both upon the cheek. ‘How are you both?’

‘Exhausted,’ I replied. ‘I feel as though I’ve been through the mill.’

‘Any pesky reporters follow you here?’

‘No, they scuttled off as soon as the taxi left Eaton Square.’

‘Super. Well it’s a beautiful summer’s day, why don’t the pair of you go into the garden? I’ll get Mrs Barnaby to bring us some lemonade and sandwiches. Have you eaten?’

‘No, thank you. Where’s Angela?’

‘Off to meet a *friend*,’ Caroline replied and the intonation in her voice implied Angela had some sort of man on the side.

‘Talking of which,’ Natalie said. ‘Please can I phone my friend Lucy? We were supposed to be meeting this evening but I don’t know if she’ll want to be seen with me now.’

‘Of course darling,’ Caroline replied. ‘The telephone’s in the hall.’

While Caroline changed out of her gardening clothes and got us some lunch, I ventured out into the magnificent gardens at the back of the house. It was hard to believe this was still in London; it was as elaborate and ornate as the gardens at Frimington Hall where I still hoped my daughter would one day live. Best of all was the secret garden tucked away at the back; it

was only accessible by a little gateway and shrouded by hedges, so no one could see you from the house.

I sat at the wrought iron table in the centre and as I waited, I listened to the distant sounds of the workmen whistling and shouting at each other. I wondered if they were all Irish like the one who'd brought our cases in and I wasn't entirely happy at the thought of such brutish men being in close proximity to my young daughter. She may have considered herself a woman of the world but she would be no match for some burly builder who took a fancy to her. Natalie was no beauty – plump and at times tomboyish but she was still well bred and a lady compared to the sort of women they were no doubt used to mixing with.

Caroline joined me and looked a different woman; smart shoes replaced the Wellingtons, her bushy blonde hair no longer concealed by the hat. Caroline was what one would call a *handsome* woman. She was taller than average, and broad. Her jaw was strong set, like a man's and yet she had the most beautiful green eyes and her lively personality made her attractive. She set a tray upon the stone table laden with an array of sandwiches and a jug of lemonade. I was struck with a sudden attack of hunger and reached for a salmon and cucumber sandwich.

'You really are kind Caroline,' I said. 'This must be a terrible inconvenience to you.'

'Nonsense, I'm glad of the company. Normally it's just me and the servants rattling round. I get so bored I even end up making cups of tea for the builders.'

'You talk to them?'

'Yes,' she laughed. 'They're okay once you get to know them. Most of them aren't going to win any prizes for their brains, but George, the main man is a lively fellow, always has some story to tell, you know what the Irish are like.'

'Is he very tall, dark hair, sort of battered looking?'

'That's the one. Met him have you?'

'He brought our cases in. The taxi driver refused to touch them. I think he was worried he'd end up queer like Charles if he touched anything belonging to him.'

'What a beastly fellow. So it is true about Charles then? Like it is about Jerry Crawford?'

'I'm afraid so,' I sighed. 'I feel as though my life is over. Everyone knows now that my husband prefers men. How does that make me look?'

'Like the victim in my book old girl. What was he thinking?'

‘I wouldn’t even know where to start to find out. Perhaps I could get him some medical help, there must be someone out there who can cure him.’

‘Cousin of mine went in for *the cure* – electric shock treatment mainly. Left him so brain damaged it took away his whole sense of reason and he went from meeting men in park lavatories to trying to molest teenage boys on the train home. He had to go away in the end, I don’t think they’ll ever release him.’

‘Daphne blames me. She thinks if I’d been a better wife, Charles wouldn’t have sought solace elsewhere.’

‘Nonsense. If you ask me it all starts when they’re at school. It’s not normal, all those young men on the threshold of life, alone in a dormitory at night. Well it’s inevitable shenanigans are going to go on isn’t it? Some of them get the taste for it and can’t stop.’

‘So you’re saying that working men are never queer.’

‘Well I’ve never met one that is, have you?’

‘I’ve never known one well enough to find out.’

‘So what’s your plan of action?’

‘To lie low for now, see how things go and probably move back home. I’ve nowhere else to go after all.’

‘You can stay here as long as you want.’

I reached out and grasped Caroline’s broad, rather manly hand.

‘Bless you but you’ve enough coping with Angela Crawford. That’s woman’s intolerable.’

‘She’s rather good fun when you get to know her properly.’

Our conversation was interrupted by Natalie finally deciding to join us. I hoped she hadn’t been on the phone for all this time; it was bad enough at home, let alone at the charity of an acquaintance. She sat down beside Caroline, pouring herself some lemonade and piling her plate with sandwiches.

‘Well Lucy still wants to know me,’ she chirped. ‘We’re going to this jazz club in Notting Hill this evening.’

‘I want you home by ten.’

‘Oh let the girl have some fun,’ Caroline scoffed. ‘It’s so easy for one to forget what it’s like to be sixteen.’

I had not forgotten. I recalled being sixteen as if it were yesterday. Counting down the days until my eighteenth birthday, when I could enter society and find myself a husband – and look what I ended up with.

‘I want the two of you to treat this as a home from home. I have a library stacked full of books for you to read Diana, and Natalie, if you wish to bring friends back that’s fine by me.’

‘Wow!’ Natalie laughed and when she smiled, she looked like a child again. ‘I think I’m going to like it here.’

4

It was only the next day when I awoke that I realised it was Stella Pourtnoy’s coffee morning. This was a monthly ritual I had to endure as you were only considered socially important if you were invited to one of Stella’s soirees. Stella Pourtnoy was one of my least favourite people. She had only achieved her status by marrying Lord Pourtnoy. Like Angela Crawford, she had no taste or breeding. But unlike Angela who had a sort of hackneyed charm about her, Stella was crass, bombastic and had completely forgotten she was no more than the daughter of a greengrocer who had done well.

Somehow this woman had risen through the ranks to become leader of our social circle. She had a flair for organising parties and charity auctions and her dinner parties were legendary; mainly because she had no idea how to handle staff and they were so terrified of her, they ensured they cooked the most exquisite food just to prevent her from flying off the handle. Each month we were expected to go to her house in Kensington for coffee and a general catch up. I hated it, especially now Natalie was behaving so badly. I would have to sit and listen to my friends regaling everyone with tales of how their daughter had snared some Lord or foreign prince knowing full well my youngest child had been seen kissing some beatnik in the middle of the street.

I often cancelled, but today I had special reason to attend. No doubt I was the subject of the most terrible gossip amongst these women and I wanted to go with my head held high. I had nothing to be ashamed of. I daresay if most of them cared to look a bit deeper they would discover *their* husbands were leading some kind of double life. Men were never satisfied with what they had at home.

I was brought breakfast in bed by one of the young maids and I asked if she would request Walsh to order a taxi for me. While I ate, I deliberated on what I was going to wear. I didn't want to look drab or dowdy or unattractive in anyway. If I turned up with so much as a hair out of place or the wrong colour lipstick they would somehow blame me for my husband's infidelities.

The door was opened without the person even knocking so I assumed it was Natalie. I received a shock to find it was Angela. She looked dreadful; her auburn hair un-brushed and frizzy hanging loose around her face. She wore a scruffy pair of men's pyjamas and her face was pale and pinched, dark circles beneath her eyes.

'Angela are you ill?' I asked.

'If you call hung over ill,' she replied with a sleepy smile, sitting upon the bed. 'I didn't get in until three. The evening just whizzed past me.'

'Did you go anywhere nice?'

'The Ritz. I had a very nice time with Woody Baines. We drank too much champagne then screwed like rabbits until the early morning.'

'Angela! Who on earth is Woody Baines? You know that cheating on Jerry isn't going to solve anything.'

'Jerry's known about Woody for years. He has his little tarts and I have my lover. It's worked well up until now. The stupid fool has brought shame upon us with his public displays.'

'People like you make a mockery of marriage.'

'What like yours you mean?'

'That was uncalled for. Charles is unwell and once the press lose interest in him and leave us alone I'm going to get him help.'

'There is no help for them,' she scoffed. 'They're not ill. They fancy men like some men fancy brunettes and others blondes.'

'You sound like Natalie, that's how she talks.'

'She's right. Anyway, I was wondering if you fancied having a liquid lunch today. There's a lovely bar on the High Street and I could do with a hair of the dog.'

'Aren't you going to Stella's?'

‘That old dragon?’ she replied, wrinkling up her nose. ‘All she’ll do is gloat about how her Giles is the most perfect husband in the world and how we’re married to a couple of deviants.’

‘Well I’m going. I’ve nothing to be ashamed of.’

In a rare display of tenderness, Angela reached out and grasped my arm, the concern on her face genuine.

‘Oh darling do you think you should? Those bitches will eat you alive.’

‘Yes, I must. My husband is the criminal, not me. I’m not losing my position in society by hiding away, especially if we’re to cling to any hope of Duncan still marrying Daphne.’

‘Don’t say I didn’t warn you,’ she sighed. ‘It will be like walking into a lion’s den.’ Arriving at Stella’s house in Kensington Gore was probably one of the most nerve-wracking things I had ever done in my life. I knew I looked perfectly acceptable; I’d opted for a blue two-piece by Givenchy. Caroline had helped me roll my hair into a perfect style and I had spent ages on my make up. I would not normally make such an effort just to attend a coffee morning, but I knew all eyes would be on me.

Mounting the steps to the front door, my heart trembled with anticipation and I only hoped one of my friends had a story far more interesting than mine and that they would be the centre of attention not me.

I rung the bell and the door was swiftly opened by Prior, the head maid. The haggard faced woman appeared nervous to see me and didn’t even open the door fully.

‘M-Mrs Osbourne,’ she mumbled.

‘Can I come in Prior?’ I asked.

‘Er, the Missus told me to tell you that there’s no coffee today.’

I could clearly hear the shrill voices of my friends coming from the drawing room and wondered what on earth had got into this rather simple woman.

‘Just let me in Prior. I know they’re all here.’

‘I’ll just go and get the Missus,’ she twittered and scuttled back into the house, leaving me on the doorstep. A moment later Stella appeared, overly dressed as usual in her pearls and lace.

‘Hello Diana,’ she said, pushing the simpering maid out of the way. ‘How are you?’

‘I’m fine. Can I come in?’

‘I don’t think that’s a very good idea,’ she replied uncomfortably. ‘It’s probably best if you stay away for a while.’

‘Why? What have I done?’

She went to answer, then noticed Prior was still hovering.

‘Haven’t you got dishes to clear away Prior?’ she snapped, sending the woman running off. She then ushered me into the hall, pulling the door to so the outside world could not hear our conversation.

‘There’s a lot of scandal attached to you at the moment Diana,’ she said. ‘We all feel it’s best if you keep away. If we’re seen mixing with you, well, it looks as though we approve of what Charles did.’

‘What Charles did has nothing to do with me!’ I cried, ashamed that I could feel tears welling in my eyes.

‘Yes but our husbands are all friends. We don’t want people thinking we’re married to men who are....well, have problems.’

In a bright flash I saw my future ahead of me. For the rest of my life I would live in some sort of Purdah because of the mistakes my husband had made. When my girls were gone, I would be left a lonely old woman.

Without saying another word, I left the house and stumbled onto Kensington Gore, wondering what I was going to do with myself. Right at that moment I felt like catching a taxi and going over to Mayfair to kill my husband. He had bought this upon me and the shame was unbearable. Angela had been so right, she’d warned me this would happen and I chose to ignore her. I felt such a fool.

I bypassed Mayfair and took a cab back to Hampstead, hoping no one would be around to see me – I hated the thought of explaining my sudden return. I opened the door to the sound of laughter and rock and roll music playing. I couldn’t imagine Caroline being an Elvis Presley fan and could only guess Natalie had a friend over and was probably using the record player without asking permission.

As I passed the drawing room, I was shocked to see that the laughter was coming from Angela and my daughter. Angela was still dressed in her pyjamas and she and Natalie were dancing around like six year olds. They were unaware of me watching them, but I stood transfixed. Angela and I were the same age but she seemed so much younger - as if she had

embraced the new mood that was sweeping the western world. Suddenly everyone seemed to pursue nothing but fun and frivolity. *Her* husband had betrayed her exactly the same as mine, but she was not letting it destroy her.

But what broke my heart more was the look of sheer joy on Natalie's face as she fooled around. I confess I preferred Daphne because she was like me – old fashioned, moral with no burning ambitions. I felt comfortable around my eldest daughter and couldn't cope with Natalie and her rebellious ways. But who was it that was here with me now in my darkest hour? Natalie. I owed her so much and at that moment, I wished I could be like Angela, then she might have fun with me as well.

Feeling like a failure, tears started to well up once more and I ran away. I made it through the house and into the garden but by the time I reached the lawns I was sobbing, embarrassed that the builders nearby might be able to hear me. I ducked into the secret garden and threw myself down upon a chair, burying my head in my hands and letting out all the pain and despair that had racked me from the moment I discovered my husband's deception. I asked God what I'd done that was so bad I was being punished in this way, I had done nothing but lead a good life and yet this awful thing had ruined everything I'd worked so hard to achieve.

I jumped out of my skin when I realised I was not alone.

'Now what would a lovely lady like yourself be crying for?'

I froze. George McNamara the builder was here in the secret garden with me. My cheeks burned with shame. I never wanted anyone to see me cry, let alone a workman.

'Can you leave me?' I asked, not lifting my head to look at him.

When I heard footsteps I thought he'd done as I asked, but instead, to my mortification, he pulled up a chair beside me and sat down. His big, physical presence caused a shadow to be cast upon me and to my alarm I found this somehow exciting. He was a proper man; he worked with his hands and used his brute strength. Strangely, I longed for him to wrap those big arms around me and hold me tight, making the world feel like safe place once more.

'You'll probably tell me it ain't me place,' he pressed on. 'But I've seen the papers and there's a story splashed all over about a man who's got himself into a bit of trouble and his name happens to be Osbourne and he has a wife and young daughters. It got me wondering if this gentleman was anything to do with you.'

I wanted to tell him it wasn't his place to ask but I longed to talk to someone; someone who didn't know me or would judge me. I dared to nod.

'Well well well. No wonder you're hiding out here.'

'I'm so ashamed,' I cried, still not daring to look at him.

'What have you got to be ashamed of?' he asked. 'You've done nothing wrong?'

I finally managed to raise my head, wiping my tears away. The first thing I saw was his handsome, sympathetic face and it made me want to cry once again. I didn't deserve sympathy. I was a bad wife and a bad mother.

'Why are you out here?' I asked.

'I like to come here for a smoke. The lads are good company, but they're all talk of football and their latest conquests. For an old man like meself it can get a bit tiresome.'

I laughed for the first time that day.

'You're not old. I bet you're not a day over forty.'

'My God did you kiss the blarney stone at some point in your life Mrs Osbourne?!' he chuckled. 'I'll be forty five on me next birthday.'

'Well you don't look it.'

I suddenly felt very foolish. Sitting here with a stranger, tears streaming down my face, my make-up no doubt smeared everywhere. What must he have thought of me?

'I'm sorry,' I said quietly.

'What are you apologising for? You've been dealt a painful blow and that's for sure. It's only natural you'd cry.'

'I was supposed to be meeting with friends this morning, just an informal coffee morning I've been going to for years. When I turned up I was told I wasn't welcome because of what Charles did.'

'How can that be your fault?'

'Our husbands are all friends and they're frightened that if they're seen mixing with me, people will think their husbands are the same way.'

'Well if they're like that then you don't need them as friends.'

'They're the only friends I have. Since I was twenty years old I've built my life around Charles. All my friends are his friends too and now I've been cast aside.'

'So what are you going to do?'

‘I don’t know. I can’t hide here forever. I don’t even know if Charles will be able to stay in office, added to that, my eldest daughter might be jilted by her fiancé because she’s going to bring shame upon his family.’

‘Makes me feel glad to be a simple builder from Limerick.’

And that was what he was and I had sat here and told him my personal business and it was most improper. I couldn’t allow my loneliness to let me start behaving out of character. Not if I was going to cling onto any form of respectability.

‘Don’t let me keep you from your work George,’ I said, trying to regain the voice of a mistress once more. ‘You must be very busy.’

‘Aye it can wait. What sort of gentleman would I be to leave a lady in distress?’

‘I’m fine, thank you.’

‘Okay, if you wish.’ He got up and a part of me was glad he was leaving, the other part of me regretful – I’d so enjoyed having someone to talk to.

‘You don’t have to answer me now. But just to say there’s a nice little pub next to the tube station called The Red Lion. I usually pop in there after work for a quick pint. I’ll be in there from about five o’clock this evening if you fancy a chat.’

With that he left and I felt rather shell-shocked. A builder had asked me for a drink! My father would turn in his grave to think all the money he’d invested in making me a lady had created nothing better than a woman who attracted homosexuals and workmen. I couldn’t possibly entertain the notion of joining George for a drink; as kind an offer as it was.

I returned to the house to find the rock and roll had stopped and Natalie was in the kitchen eating toast - that girl ate like a gannet and it reflected on her figure.

‘How long have you been in the garden?’ she asked me, reaching for another slice of bread.

‘Natalie do you have to eat so much?’ I complained. ‘What are you? A size fourteen?’

‘Mummy I thought you’d have more important things to worry about than the size of my waist.’

‘You’re my child and you’ll always be my priority. How are you ever going to attract a decent husband looking as you do?’

Natalie rolled her eyes to the ceiling and proceeded to place another thick slice of bread under the grill.

‘How many times to I have to tell you? I don’t want to get married. I’m going to be an artist. I’m not becoming a Deb and I’m *not* looking for a husband.’

‘Well thank you Natalie,’ I snapped. ‘My life is unravelling around me. My husband is a pervert, my eldest daughter’s ashamed of me and is hiding away in a different country and as usual you remain selfish, not even once thinking of me.’

To my utter mortification, those tears started to spill again and I broke my most important rule – I started to cry in front of my child. I was expecting her to run out in embarrassment, but instead she came to me and like she was my mother, wrapped her arms around me and pulled me into an embrace. Horrified as I was that I was relying on my daughter for comfort, there was something so warm and welcoming about her rounded body that I clung to her.

‘Why aren’t you at Stella Pourtnoy’s?’ she asked.

‘She turned me away,’ I cried. ‘Stella turned me away saying I wasn’t welcome.’

‘She always was a dragon. You’re better off without her.’

Why was she being so nice to me? I was always so beastly to her, making my preference for Daphne obvious. I didn’t deserve her kindness. I didn’t deserve anyone’s kindness.

I pulled away, reaching in my pocket for my handkerchief, drying my eyes.

‘I’m sorry Natalie. You shouldn’t have seen me cry like that.’

‘Mummy stop behaving like a robot. You’re a human being who’s just been dealt a terrible blow. Do you want me to get Daff to come home?’

‘She won’t come home, she hates me. She blames me for your father’s shortcomings.’

‘She’ll come round. Look, I’ve got to go, we’re measuring up for the flat but let’s do something tomorrow. There’s a milk bar on the High Street, we could go there and maybe afterwards we could go and buy some material for curtains. Perhaps you could help me make them.’

I went to refuse - Natalie and I never did things together. But maybe it was time that changed. I owed her for her loyalty.

‘That would be lovely darling,’ I smiled, stroking her chubby cheek. ‘Let’s do that.’

We were interrupted by Walsh entering the kitchen; he looked rather embarrassed to see me obviously recovering from weeping.

‘There is a telephone call for you Mrs Osbourne,’ he announced. ‘It’s Mr Osbourne.’

I thanked him and made my way to the telephone in the hall, wondering what Charles wanted. Perhaps he'd decided it was time we went home and faced this together as a family.

'Hello Charles,' I said, once Walsh was out of earshot.

'How are things Diana?'

'Dreadful if you want to know the truth. I was turned away from Stella Pourtnoy's today. I'm now a social pariah and it's all thanks to you.'

'Stella Pourtnoy is a hysterical woman who'll calm down eventually. I'm calling you to let you know I'm stepping down.'

'And who's decision is this?'

'Top of the shop I'm afraid. I've brought the government into disrepute and Harold's insisting I go. They'll be calling a bi-election in Hardwell as soon as possible.'

'Well what are you going to do now?'

'Dicky's starting a travel company, organising trips to North Africa. I'm probably going to go into partnership with him. That's assuming I don't go to prison.'

'Dicky Standish! The man's not much more than a crook.'

'He's been a good friend to me since all this nonsense started.'

'Oh do whatever you like Charles,' I sighed. 'I'm too tired to argue.'

'There is just one other thing. I need to raise some money for this venture, so I'll probably sell the house. Daphne will be married soon and Natalie's moving out. We could move into a little apartment somewhere.'

'So you expect me to lose my home as well as my dignity. Well thank you Charles.'

I slammed the phone down upon him and stood for a moment, catching my breath, realising I was practically panting. Charles had always been a selfish and somewhat distant man but I'd never realised just how little he cared for his daughters or me. I could just imagine the likes of Stella Pourtnoy and the other witches crowing over my misfortune; how I was not only married to a homosexual but I was also going to be forced to live in some dingy flat while he played travel agents with a semi-professional crook!

I stormed up to my room and like a petulant young girl, threw myself upon my bed, half crying, half raging. I clawed at the covers, imagining they were Charles and I was inflicting real pain. I gradually tired myself out and ended up falling asleep. When I awoke, for a moment I

forgot my misfortune, then it all came rushing up to hit me in the face and disappointment knocked me out once more.

With a feeling of helplessness engulfing me, I wanted to run away and be reckless and disappear into the horizon. Would anyone even notice I'd gone? Daphne would soon be marrying; Natalie had her studies and her new flat, and Charles...well even if he didn't go to prison he would be spending all his time in North Africa do doubt. Where did that leave poor old Diana?

I don't know what came over me, but I suddenly decided I was going to go and meet George McNamara for a drink. I'd worried for so long about keeping up appearances and doing the right thing, and where had it got me? Where was I now? Alone in a bed that belonged to a friend; relying on her charity to provide me with a shelter away from the madness that was my home. George was a kind, handsome, interesting man and why shouldn't I enjoy his company? It wasn't as though anyone would be following me. I was invisible now.

The Red Lion was a large public house close to Hampstead Underground Station. It filled me with trepidation to be entering such an establishment alone. I wondered if I looked okay; it was a hot day and I'd opted for a simple red shift dress and white shoes. I didn't know what ladies wore to go the pub, not that ladies really went to pubs. But I didn't care. For tonight I was being reckless.

Opening the doors, the first thing that hit me was the smell of cigarette smoke. The air was filled with the sound of chatter and glasses clinking and I had no idea what I should do or where I should go. Then I looked to the long bar at the other side of the room and to my relief found George sitting there. He was talking to another man and I hesitated before moving towards him. Maybe he'd just invited me out of politeness, not thinking I'd ever turn up.

He spotted me and gave me a cheery wave. Realising I was welcome, I made my way across the pub, noticing the various men in there throwing me glances, probably wondering who this stuck up cow was.

'Mrs Osbourne,' George laughed as I joined him. The other man tipped his cap and moved away, allowing me to sit upon his seat.

'Hello George,' I replied. 'I hope I wasn't interrupting you.'

'Nonsense, I was watching the door hoping you'd come in. May I say you look lovely? Or would that be speaking out of turn?'

‘Tonight you can say whatever you like,’ I replied, that feeling of recklessness not leaving me. ‘And in here it’s Diana.’

‘Diana,’ he nodded. ‘*Oh please stay by me Diana,*’ he sang, a song I remembered hearing Natalie play. I giggled like a schoolgirl and George called the barman over, ordering a pint for himself and a gin and tonic for me. In his cheap suit and scuffed shoes he was a world away from the suave Charles, but I had to admit I found him wildly exciting. Charles was the only man I’d never known, and relations between us had always been functionary rather than passionate. I assumed this was normal, but now, knowing George, I felt like a teenager again; before that first kiss, when you lay awake at night dreaming of some matinee idol taking you in his strong arms and embracing you, making you feel weak and yielding. I wondered what it would be like to be kissed by George then checked myself for behaving like a young girl.

I drank my gin and tonic rather too quickly; I needed something to steady my nerves although to George I must have appeared as some sort of lush.

‘Are you married George?’ I asked, hoping I sounded conversational rather than curious – although I was.

‘Widowed,’ he replied. ‘The Lord took Bridie four years ago.’

‘I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have asked.’

‘Don’t be silly, you wasn’t to know.’

‘Have you children?’

‘We were never blessed,’ he said with a shake of the head. ‘There’s no one to pass the business down to.’

‘Children are nothing but a worry anyway,’ I sighed. ‘My eldest is treating me like a leper and Natalie’s become a beatnik.’

‘But you wouldn’t be without them,’ he smiled wisely.

‘You’re right,’ I relented. ‘If I didn’t have my daughters, my entire marriage to Charles would have been a complete waste of time.’

‘If you don’t mind me asking, but did you have any idea he was.....that he had problems?’

‘None at all. Charles is the most boring, unassuming man you could wish to meet. If I was a different kind of woman, I’d have gone out of my mind craving excitement but instead I was content with my lot. It seems he wasn’t.’

‘Well I can’t speak for his kind of problem, but if he’d gone off with some girl, I’d have said he must have been mad, having a fine woman as yourself at home.’

‘You flatter me,’ I blushed.

‘No, I just see you as a lady needing a bit of attention and some fun. Can I get you another drink?’

‘A G and T would be lovely, thank you.’

We got another round of drinks and found a booth in the snug. George offered me a Weight and I accepted, smoking for the first time since I was a girl. Charles couldn’t abide the smell of cigarettes and so I’d shunned them. Sometimes I’d go into Natalie’s bedroom and breathe in the smell of nicotine just to get a fix. She was only allowed to smoke in her own room and it permeated every surface. The smell was quite foul but there was something intoxicating about it.

The gin started to warm me, loosening all those muscles that had been knotted for so long. I was aware of my voice; I was laughing too loudly at George’s jokes. At one point, when I was speaking, to emphasise my point, I placed my hand upon his meaty forearm, feeling his strength through the thin fabric of his suit. I would have liked nothing more than to take him back to the house and let him share my bed. To be wrapped in those strong arms and made love to, then held until I fell asleep. But I knew when morning came and I sobered up, the shame would kill me. That was no slur on George, nothing to do with his social standing. Just that it would be immoral for me to repay my husband by being unfaithful. It would only serve to deepen the problem, not solve it.

I realised it was probably time I went home. The gin was making me drunk and George was so attractive, with his battered face and dancing blue eyes I was convinced I was falling in love with him.

‘Thank you for keeping me company,’ I said, gathering my things together. ‘It’s been a lovely evening.’

‘It doesn’t have to end here,’ he replied. ‘We could go for dinner somewhere.’

‘That would be lovely but I’m very tired.’

‘Well let me walk you back to the house.’

I hesitated, wondering what Caroline, Angela and the staff would say if they saw me escorted back to the house with George the builder. But when I stood up and my legs wobbled a little I realised that walking back may prove a little difficult by myself.

‘Thank you,’ I answered. ‘That would be lovely.’

We left the pub and headed back to the house. I allowed George to hold my arm because I felt if I went unsupported I might just fall. He walked me all the way to the front door and remained with me while we waited for Walsh to answer it. As soon as the butler saw me, the expression upon his face became grave.

‘Mrs Osbourne, the police have been here. It’s your daughter.’

‘Daphne?’

‘No Miss Natalie. She’s been taken to hospital.’

I suddenly sobered up.

‘Oh my God. What is wrong with her?’

‘It appears she was in some sort of accident madam.’

‘Well which hospital is she in?’

‘St Mary’s in Paddington. Would you like me to call you a taxi?’

‘Yes, please.’

I stepped into the hall and only then realised George was still with me. I felt embarrassed at his being involved in my family drama.

‘I’ll be fine George,’ I said. ‘You can go.’

‘Nonsense. You’ll need some support. I’ll come to the hospital with you. Besides, it’s only down the road from my home.’

‘I hope she hasn’t got drunk and injured herself. She’s such a silly girl.’

‘It’s probably nothing to worry about. She’s probably just tripped over and twisted her ankle. You know what these girls are like for their high heels.’

Walsh returned from the telephone.

‘A taxi will be here any moment now.’

‘Where is Miss Villiers?’ I asked.

‘Out madam, not sure when she’ll be back.’

‘And Mrs Crawford.’

‘Likewise.’

The butler gave a polite nod and went to walk off, but I stopped him.

‘Did the police say what sort of accident Natalie had?’ I asked.

He turned around.

‘It seems there has been some sort of riot in Notting Hill and Miss Natalie got caught up in it. I think she’s received an injury to her eye.’

I gasped and without thinking, turned and buried my face against George’s chest. My poor Natalie. She had her heart set on becoming an artist. If she lost her sight, what would she do? It would be hard to even persuade her to marry – not many men would want a blind wife anyway.

‘Don’t worry lass,’ George said softly, rubbing my back. ‘I’m sure she’ll be fine. It’s probably something and nothing.’

5

By the time we got to the hospital I had reached a state of panic I thought I was never going to recover from. Even though Natalie drove me mad and I often found it hard to understand her, the thought of something terrible happening to her was more than I could bear. We made our way to the Accident and Emergency Department and were met by a young doctor who asked if we were Natalie’s parents and I quickly added that George was a friend. Tactfully he said he’d wait in the reception area while I tended to my daughter.

She was in a room on her own and I felt so guilty that while my child had been lying here injured I’d been out enjoying the company of a man who wasn’t even her father. She looked such a sorry sight, her left eye covered in a white bandage, a couple of tiny cuts upon her chin.

‘M-Mummy,’ she uttered, sounding so young and so frightened.

‘My darling,’ I cried, rushing to her bedside. ‘Oh my darling I’m sorry it’s taken me so long to come here. What happened?’

‘There’s been some trouble around Notting Hill recently – fights between Teddy boys and West Indian boys. Lucy and I left the flat to go home and suddenly it all erupted from out of nowhere. A broken bottle hit me in my eye and I must have passed out because the next thing I knew, I was in the back of an ambulance.’

‘What do they say is wrong with your eye?’

‘They don’t know. I have to see a specialist in the morning. Fortunately there’s no glass in it.’

‘I’ll stay here with you tonight.’

‘Don’t be silly, go home.’

‘I’ll do no such thing. I’ll just go and call your father, let him know what’s happened.’

I walked back out to the reception area where George was waiting patiently; reading that night’s *Evening Standard*. Indeed on the front was a report of the fights happening in Notting Hill. I should have been aware of them; I should have stopped Natalie from moving there. I’d been so wrapped up in my own troubles.

On spotting me, George put the paper down.

‘How is she?’ he asked.

‘She’s conscious but we won’t know anything else until the morning,’ I replied. ‘You can go home George, I’m going to stay the night.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Of course. You’ve been more than helpful, thank you so much.’

He stood up, grasping my shaking hands within his big, reassuring fingers.

‘That’s what friends are for Diana,’ he replied. ‘I shall see you when you and that young lady come home.’

Without thinking, I reached up and kissed him upon the cheek, immediately regretting it. Fortunately he didn’t take advantage of my affection and merely touched my arm and left. Composing myself, I fumbled in my bag for some change and headed for the public telephones in the reception. Luckily I had my address book with me and could call Charles. Flicking through, I found Dicky Standish’s number and rang. I was rather alarmed when it was picked up and I was greeted with the sound of music playing.

‘Hello,’ a young, male voice said.

‘Oh hello, have I got the right number? I wanted Dicky Standish’s place?’

‘This is it,’ the well-spoken young man replied. ‘Shall I fetch him?’

‘No, I’d like to speak to Mr Osbourne is he there?’

‘Yes, hold on.’

I heard a muffled thud and guessed the receiver had been put down upon the table. I was positive I then heard the young man say -

‘Charlie darling, there’s a call for you.’

My stomach turned, imagining Charles in the midst of some party populated by pretty boys who were paid to find him attractive and attend to his every whim. When he answered the phone with a slurred ‘hello’ I immediately realised he was drunk.

‘I’m sorry to interrupt your party,’ I snapped. ‘But I thought you’d like to know your daughter is in hospital.’

‘Which one?’

‘Natalie. She could be blinded in one eye. She was caught up in some trouble in Notting Hill. She’s at St Mary’s.’

‘Send her my love,’ he said with absolutely no emotion in his voice, as if we were talking about some distant aunt rather than his child.

‘I was rather hoping you would come and see her. She’ll be here overnight and is seeing a specialist in the morning.’

‘I won’t be any use to her till then will I? I’ll come and see her first thing tomorrow morning.’

I slammed the phone down upon him took a moment to calm down. I was furious with Charles and just a little frightened. He’d sounded so distant, as though he was caring less and less about the girls and me. Did this mean he was thinking of divorcing me? After all, he was being stripped of his seat – as an ordinary man he could afford the scandal being divorced would bring. It wasn’t as if his newfound friends would care; it would be our daughters and me who would be forced to live with the stigma of failure.

I wondered if I should call Walsh and ask him to arrange a telegram to be sent to Daphne in Nice but I decided against it. It made more sense to let her know the situation tomorrow morning once Natalie had seen the specialist.

Returning to Natalie’s room, I discovered she was asleep. I sat beside the bed and reached across the covers, taking hold of her plump little hand. I said a silent prayer to God that my daughter wouldn’t be blinded permanently. If we were going to be cast aside by her father, we would need every asset going for us. If she couldn’t go to art college, then we would have to set about finding her a husband - someone who didn’t mind a less than perfect wife and would look after her. Perhaps I could even persuade her to lose a little weight, make herself more

desirable. She was a pretty girl underneath the puppy fat. Like Daphne, she had my round, blue eyes and if she washed that black dye out, grew her hair longer, she'd be even more attractive.

I suddenly stopped myself and asked what I was doing. Natalie wasn't a toy, a doll for me to mould into my own image. She was a separate human being with a mind of her own. My own mother had done all she could to ensure I was a younger version of her, determined I would snare the best possible husband. Everyone had thought Charles was it, but how wrong they were. I reflected upon the night gone by, for those couple of hours with George I had let my guard down and allowed myself to relax, not caring about my usual set of social rules and regulations. This was how Natalie chose to live all the time. Maybe deep down I resented her, felt more comfortable with Daphne because I knew she was headed for the same lifetime of frustration I'd endured. Natalie was doing all the things I'd never allowed myself to dream and for that I was always angry with her.

I was spared the discomfort of sleeping in a chair by a kindly nurse who found me a spare room to stay in. It was a little anteroom designated for the parents of small children who had to remain overnight. Fortunately for me no little ones had been bought in so I could enjoy a night's sleep in a proper bed - albeit a single iron bed in a Spartan room.

The next morning, I freshened up in the tiny en suite bathroom and rejoined Natalie. She was already with the specialist, a surprisingly young, handsome man who was shining a light into her now un-bandaged eye. I winced when I saw it blackened and swollen; her cheek sticking out at a right angle. She looked dreadful.

I sat beside the bed and looked up at the doctor.

'How is she?' I asked.

'I would say the eye is badly bruised,' he said, switching the light off. 'The pupils are reacting correctly so I don't think there has been any nerve damage.'

'But I can't see properly,' Natalie whimpered unable to hide the fright in her voice. 'Why can't I see properly?'

The doctor smiled reassuringly.

'The tiny blood vessels in your eye have burst. That's why it's blurry. They'll heal in time and your vision will return to normal.'

'I'm supposed to be starting Art College in two weeks time. What am I going to do?'

The doctor chuckled, putting his light into his top pocket.

‘What’s the vision like in your other eye?’ he asked.

‘Perfect.’

‘Well there’s nothing stopping you from going to college is there?’

‘So she isn’t going to be left blind?’ I had to ask, just to be sure.

‘No. I will give her a prescription for some painkillers though because a blow like that is likely to cause headaches. Otherwise, she’s as fit as a fiddle.’

‘Thank you doctor,’ I cried, ashamed that it had taken something as dreadful as this for me to realise how much I loved and treasured my youngest child. To know she was healthy was the greatest gift anyone could give me. ‘Can I take her home?’

‘Yes, but I want you to rest young lady. You could still have concussion. I don’t want to see you in here again.’

I called the house and asked Caroline if I could borrow Perkins, her driver to come and collect us and she readily agreed. Natalie was hungry and I bought her a chocolate bar from the hospital shop. When I returned to the waiting room and passed it to her, she gasped in shock.

‘Mummy! You normally want me to live on carrots.’

‘I’m too critical of you Natalie and it’s not fair. You’re a lovely girl and all I’ve done is try and mould you into a replica of Daphne. You’ve stuck by me through this terrible crisis and I don’t deserve your loyalty.’

‘Oh don’t be silly. I know I can be difficult at times.’

‘You’re finding your way that’s all. I do have one stipulation though; I don’t want you moving to Notting Hill. It’s too dangerous.’

‘But mummy it’s so close to the college.’

‘I don’t care. It’s not safe. We’ll find you somewhere else.’

It was almost midday by the time Natalie was ready to leave, and there was still no sign of my husband. It was likely he’d forgotten my phone-call the previous night informing him of his child’s injury, no doubt swept up in alcohol and sexual delights. It struck me when Charles was in this place all thoughts of his family were erased from his mind.

We were greeted by Angela and Caroline who both kissed Natalie upon the cheek and welcomed her home. I helped her up to her bedroom and Caroline headed for the kitchen, promising she would ask cook to rustle up a full English breakfast for the patient. While Natalie

showered and changed into her pyjamas, I tidied the sheets upon her bed and plumped up her pillows. Back home I'd have left that sort of thing to Mrs Laine - and there were plenty of maids here who would willingly do it for me, but I felt duty bound to do something motherly for my daughter. I'd done so little for her since she'd grown up.

I left her with her breakfast and asked if she wanted any magazines. She asked if I could get her the *New Musical Express* and I assured her I'd go out and fetch it. I also enquired if she wanted me to telegram Daphne and she said no. There was nothing seriously wrong with her and she guessed Daphne would probably object to being disturbed.

I fetched my purse and headed back out again, wondering what the newsagent would think of a middle aged woman buying a paper aimed at music loving teenagers. But what was a little embarrassment compared to making Natalie happy?

Before I'd even made it half way across the drive, there was a shout from high above me. 'How's the casualty?'

I turned and looked up to find George peering over the top of the scaffolding, looking far more at home in his scruffy overalls.

'A lot better,' I called in return. 'She'll make a full recovery.'

'Glad to hear it!' he answered.

'I'm just off to buy a paper for her. I'll see you later.'

I turned and walked off, aware my heart was racing. I couldn't deny I had feelings for George and now I knew Natalie would be okay, I was almost grateful for the distraction her accident had brought. Being with George last night had left me confused and a knotted feeling sat in the middle of my chest. Almost like the sensation one gets before crying. But I didn't want to cry, indeed I felt more alive than I'd done in a long time. George liked me and showed me attention which was something I hadn't been on the receiving end of since I was Daphne's age and looking for a husband. Even then, none of the chinless wonders who'd tried to court me caused this feeling of raw excitement within me.

I put my temporary lapse in sanity down to Charles' rejection and knew once I returned home to normality I would soon forget my handsome Irish builder. As lovely as George was, and whatever ambitions he had for his company, there was no way he would ever earn enough to keep me in the manner I'd become accustomed to.

The newsagent gave me a queer look when I bought the *New Musical Express* and I quickly explained it was for my daughter. I hoped he didn't think me some sort of hopeless old woman trying to cling onto her youth. I left the shop and got the shock of my life to discover George standing there, reading the adverts people had placed in the window. He spotted me out the corner of his eye and turned round to greet me.

'I'm glad I didn't miss you,' he said. 'I ran all the way here.'

'You shouldn't have,' I blushed. 'You could have spoken to me at the house.'

We began walking together and I had to admit to myself how much I liked being protected by this big brute of a man. He walked on the outside of me, shielding me from the traffic and I found this so chivalrous – Charles had never done such a thing.

'I thought you wouldn't want to talk where people can hear us,' he said. 'I wanted to thank you for keeping me company last night. I had a grand time.'

'So did I,' I replied. 'It was very nice.'

'I was wondering if you'd like to accompany me to the Locarno Dance Hall on Friday.'

'Dance Hall!' I laughed incredulously. 'Why on earth do you want to go dancing?'

'It's a favour to me mate, Reg Chisholm. He's a part time band leader and they like to get a big crowd in. I've been promising to go for ages and I'd love to turn up accompanied by a beautiful young lady.'

'I don't know what to say,' I uttered. 'I've not been dancing since I was a girl.'

'Of course, if you don't want to be seen with me.....'

'Don't be silly. Last night should have proved to you that I don't mind being seen with you. Okay, why not? It should be fun.'

George seemed genuinely surprised that I'd agreed to go and I have to be honest I surprised myself. Where was all this leading? Surely George would realise we couldn't have some sort of affair. I enjoyed his friendship and in a different world I'd have allowed him to take me to bed. But I wasn't Angela Crawford; I couldn't have an illicit affair and treat my marriage like a mockery, even if Charles did.

We walked back to the house and when I spotted the black Morgan on the drive, I realised I had a visitor. Charles had finally remembered us it seemed.

'My husband is here,' I said to George. 'I'd better go and speak to him.'

'Of course,' George replied. 'I shall go back to me roof and dream of Friday.'

‘What shall I wear?’ I suddenly asked, more to myself than George. ‘I’ve nothing to wear to go dancing.’

He dared to touch me, grasping my shoulders and turning me to face him. I hoped no one was watching but as he looked down at me with those kind blue eyes, I melted. No one had ever looked at me with such affection.

‘Whatever you wear, you’ll look lovely,’ he said. ‘I’ll speak to you later in the week and we can make arrangements.’

‘Yes,’ I gasped. ‘Yes, that would be lovely.’

He strode off and I watched him go, wishing things could be different. Wishing *I* could be different and not so bound up by the moral code by which I lived my life.

I could hear Charles’ voice the moment Walsh let me in. I was expecting to find him upstairs with Natalie, but instead he was in the drawing room with Caroline. It was only a couple of weeks since I’d seen him last, but in that time he’d aged. He appeared gaunt, his complexion a deathly pallor and dark circles sat beneath his eyes. The stress of it all had obviously started to get to him. I felt no sympathy. He had brought it all upon himself.

‘I’ll leave the two of you to talk,’ Caroline said, standing up. ‘It was lovely to see you Charles.’

‘You too Caroline,’ he replied. ‘Thank you for the drink.’

It was only then I realised he was clutching a tumbler of whisky. Caroline left the room and I sat beside Charles, keeping my distance, still feeling repulsed by him.

‘Have you been up to see Natalie?’ I asked.

‘Not yet, I thought I’d speak to you first. How is she?’

‘Bearing up. The doctor says she won’t lose the sight in the eye, thankfully.’

‘Well that’s good news,’ he said without any conviction in his voice.

‘It sounded like quite a party last night,’ I replied bitterly. ‘Friend of yours was that?’

‘Don’t start all that again Diana,’ he sighed. ‘Does it matter?’

‘Well, whoever he was, he was obviously far more interesting than your sick child.’

‘Dicky invited a few young people to the flat for a party, that’s all. I will not have you accusing me of being a bad father. Natalie was asleep in hospital, what could I do? I’ve come over this morning haven’t I?’

‘Oh how big of you.’

‘I don’t want us to argue Diana. Regardless of what you think, I’ve never felt anything but affection for you. You’ve been a wonderful wife and mother and I’ve been truly blessed. But I do think it’s time we moved on.’

‘What do you mean move on?’

‘I’ve given it a lot of consideration and seeing as Peter now thinks I’ll get away with a fine rather than prison; I can forge ahead with these new business plans. It’ll mean a lot of travelling back and forth to North Africa and well, I don’t expect you to be uprooted all the time too.’

‘What are you proposing Charles?’

‘I think we should separate.’

‘Separate!’ I cried, probably loud enough for all the servants to hear.

‘Yes. I don’t want a divorce. I will support Daphne until she marries Duncan and Natalie until she marries and you will receive an allowance so you can afford an apartment and a car and living expenses.’

‘You want to cast me aside so you can see your little boys without worrying about rushing home to the wife?’

He leaned forward, pinching the top of his nose between his forefinger and thumb - an act he always did when he was tired.

‘I’m sick of leading a double life Diana,’ he sighed. ‘Always pretending to be something I’m not. I want to be able to be the man I truly am, though I doubt I’ll ever be able to have a proper relationship with anyone. Old Wolfenden’s made many a recommendation but I doubt if any of them will come to fruition in my lifetime. But behind closed doors I can probably just about get away with it.’

I was rendered speechless, not sure how I felt about all this. My life had been built around this man and now I was surplus to requirements. Somewhere deep within me I felt like a butterfly, trapped within someone’s cupped hands, just managing to glimpse the sunlight through their fingers and knowing any minute now I would be set free. I then chastised myself. I was forty-one years old. What sort of life could *I* possibly hope to make for myself? My friends had all deserted me and soon my daughters would be off my hands. I saw my future as nothing but a future a lonely old woman, probably drinking herself to death.

‘You’re still a beautiful woman,’ he said, half pleadingly. ‘You could make a whole new life for yourself. If you met a man you wanted to marry I’d willingly divorce you.’

‘On what grounds Charles?’ I snapped. ‘*Your* adultery with teenage boys?’

‘We could sort that out at the time. I don’t want to hurt you Diana, I love you and I always will. But can’t you see what all this deception has done to me?’

‘I will never be accepted back into society after this. I may as well be a divorcee.’

‘Well make a fresh start. I’ll buy you a flat anywhere you want to go. You could even get some sort of job. There must be a call for women to help with Debs. Look how beautifully you did with Daphne.’

‘She’s my daughter. It doesn’t mean I’d want to do it for money.’

‘Well whatever. Please say you’ll accept this separation Diana. For both our sakes.’

‘It looks as though I haven’t much choice in the matter doesn’t it?’

6

A couple of mornings later I was awoken by a knocking upon my door. I wondered if it was Natalie. She and I had spent a lot of time chatting since her accident and I presumed she’d come to me for advice or to ask if she could venture out to see one of her friends. I was rather shocked when the door opened and Angela walked in; already dressed in her tweed suit, her fox fur thrown over her shoulder.

‘Hello darling,’ she smiled sheepishly. ‘Sorry to wake you. I just thought I’d let you know I’m moving out today.’

‘Back to Jerry?’ I asked.

‘Sort of.’ She sat upon my bed and fiddled with the marquise brooch upon her lapel. ‘He’s buying me a house in Chelsea and while it’s going to be his official address, he’s actually going to be shackled up with Tristan, a little queen he’s met. So, I get the run of a beautiful house in Onslow Gardens, servants on tap and an expense account in Harrods and old Jerry’s going to be living in a poky flat in Hammersmith.’

‘Charles and I have come to a similar arrangement. We’re separating. He’s going to stay with Dicky Standish and he’s going to buy me a flat.’

‘Wonderful,’ she cooed. ‘So we’ve both benefited from their perversions. Now all you need to do is get yourself a lover.’

To my absolute horror I thought of George, and I blushed to my very core. I hoped Angela wouldn’t notice, but she did, gasping and reaching out to take my hand.

‘You’ve got a man,’ she purred. ‘Who is he?’

‘I haven’t got a man,’ I replied, finding myself giggling girlishly. ‘He’s just a friend.’

‘Who is it?’

‘I can’t tell you.’

‘Go on, you know you want to.’

‘Okay, it’s George the builder.’

‘The builder!’ she screeched.

‘Will you keep your voice down?’

‘Which one is he?’

‘The big Irish one with the dark hair.’

‘The one who looks like a heavyweight boxer?’

‘Yes.’

‘Fabulous. What a dish. A proper bit of rough.’

‘Don’t put it like that Angela. We’re going dancing, that’s all.’

‘You’re going dancing?’

‘Yes. Like I said, we’re friends.’

‘How did you become friends with a builder?’

‘We just got chatting around the place and we went for a drink last week.’

‘Netty Hawkins had a thing with a builder once, reckoned he threw her around the bedroom.’

‘I doubt George is like that for a second.’ I was blushing so deeply I thought my skin was going to melt into my bones.

‘She fucking well loved it,’ Angela laughed heartily. ‘Oh my goodness Diana, what *are* you going to wear?’

‘I don’t know. I haven’t given it any thought.’

‘Well you must. Hold on.’

She got off the bed and darted out the room and I immediately regretted telling her about George. Angela could be a terrible gossip and if just one of our circle found out about my friendship with him, I could definitely rule out any chance of ever being accepted back into the fold. Netty Hawkins' lust-filled romp with a builder was one thing, but I saw George as more than that. I enjoyed our chats; he made me feel interesting and intelligent and attractive and I appreciated him for that. But where I came from, it was hardly acceptable to form a relationship someone who worked with their hands.

The door opened once more and Angela returned with a something green draped over her arm.

'Ta dah!' she fizzed, holding the garment out. It was an emerald green halter neck dress with a full skirt. It was beautiful but hardly something I would wear.

'It would be more suited to Daphne,' I said.

'Don't be ridiculous,' she scoffed. 'You've got the figure of a woman half your age and with that beautiful blonde hair, it'll look as though it was made for you.'

'I can't expect you to lend me clothes,' I said.

'I'm not lending. I'm giving it to you. I've got far too many clothes and well, Jerry's feeling so guilty, he'd give me the moon if he could buy it. Please, Diana, take it as a thank you for your friendship over the past few weeks.'

I'd seen another side to Angela Crawford since living with her. Like me she was now on the edge of society and would never be looked at in the same way again. She'd worked hard to get where she was and yet her feckless husband had ruined it. We were a couple of lepers together and I intended to keep in touch.

'In that case I accept,' I smiled.

'Fantastic!' she gasped. 'That George won't be able to keep his hands off you when he sees you in it.'

The day of the dance came and I was still in two minds about going. I tried to tell myself I deserved some fun after the hellish few weeks I'd suffered but at the same time my natural tendency to build things up took over and I started to ask myself what I would do if George made a pass at me. As desirable as he was, when I took my vows to Charles all those years ago, I never envisaged I'd have sex with another man. I was brought up to believe a woman saved herself for her husband and he would be the only man she'd ever know. I'd brought my girls up

to be the same and I was sure Daphne was still a virgin; I wasn't sure about Natalie. She was so modern and I could see a time coming when all girls slept with the first boy who offered, but I wasn't from that world.

Summer was starting to fade and rain was forecast for the evening. I decided to make the most of the last dregs of sunshine by sitting in the secret garden and reading Caroline's very old edition of *Wuthering Heights*. It was my favourite novel and although I'd read it about a hundred times, it still enthralled me. So spellbound was I, that I didn't notice George enter the garden.

'All set for tonight?' he asked.

I jumped out of my skin, clutching my chest and putting the book down.

'Yes,' I replied, trying to smile, although I suddenly felt terrified.

'Would you like to go from here or would it be too embarrassing for you?' he asked.

'That makes me sound awfully shallow George,' I complained, although he was actually right. 'But to save the servants gossiping, why don't I meet you at the Underground Station?'

'It's a date. Shall we say half seven?'

'I'll be there.'

He smiled that lazy, lopsided smile and a part of my petrified heart melted.

'I'm looking forward to it Diana.'

With that he turned and strode back towards the house. Just as I found myself wondering what I was going to tell Natalie, I looked up and found her heading towards me. She still looked a sorry sight with that eye patch on but she'd discarded the pyjamas and was back in her fashionable clothes.

'What were you and George conspiring about?' she asked as she entered the garden.

'We er...' How did I tell my daughter something like this? 'We're going for a drink and maybe a dance tonight.'

'You're kidding?' she gasped, that chubby face lighting up for the first time since her accident. 'You and dishy George are going on a date?'

'It's nothing like that,' I replied, trying to hide my blushes. 'We're going to see a friend of his who's appearing with his band at a dancehall. George just wanted some company.'

'That's fantastic. George is lovely. Well done mummy.'

I looked at my daughter in astonishment.

'You're actually applauding me for being unfaithful to your father.'

‘Daddy’s been unfaithful to you all this time. He doesn’t want to know us, why shouldn’t you have some fun?’

‘He still wants to know you and Daphne.’

‘Do you know what he said to me the other day? That he’ll have no time to see me now until Christmas and maybe I could spend New Year with him and Dicky Standish.’

‘I’m so sorry Natalie, I had no idea.’

‘He’s casting us aside mummy. So if you want to go out with a lovely man like George just do it.’

How come it took a sixteen year old to put everything into perspective? She was right. It was only a dance after all and how long had it been since I’d had a night out that consisted of just fun and not helping Charles in his career?

‘Okay,’ I smiled. ‘And promise me you’ll let Caroline know if you need anything.’

‘Caroline’s already agreed that Sylvia can come over for a sleepover, so she’ll be here with me.’

‘Okay. Well don’t make too much noise, this isn’t your house remember.’

‘Stop worrying mummy,’ she sighed playfully. ‘Just concentrate on tonight and having fun.’

I spent ages making myself look nice. Angela’s dress revealed more flesh than I’d ever shown in my life and I felt very self-conscious with my shoulders on full view. I rolled my hair up, setting it with the diamante pin Charles had given me for my fortieth birthday. My hands were so unsteady I had to ask Natalie to help me with my make up. I felt nervous, putting myself at the mercy of a teenager, but she did my face beautifully. The blue eye-shadow she chose complimented my eyes and instead of putting bright red lipstick on, she went for a far more subtle pink. By the time she was finished, I looked ten years younger than my true age and I’d started to get used to seeing my shoulders!

Remembering the forecast for rain, and looking out of the window and seeing the dark grey clouds gathering in the sky, I chose a black box jacket to put on over the dress. My heart raced to know that somewhere else in this huge house, George too was changing and preparing himself for his night out. I wondered what was going through his mind. Was he nervous? Had he been out with many women since his wife died? I guessed a man as handsome as he would have had plenty of offers, but there was no guarantee he’d accepted them.

As I walked to the Underground Station, I couldn't help but notice men looking at me as I passed them. At first I panicked, thinking I had made some dreadful error with my outfit. Then when one tipped his hat to me, I realised they were *admiring* me and this made me as giddy as a schoolgirl on her first outing alone. I guessed that men had probably looked at me all along, but I'd been so wrapped up in being Charles' wife I hadn't noticed. This was a whole new world to me and I felt scared; especially seeing as Charles was the one who was pushing me out into it.

George was waiting for me as promised. He looked so handsome - clean shaven, his dark hair swept back in that loose quiff; he wore his favourite dark suit and had even put a tie on. He greeted me with a chaste kiss upon the cheek and we entered the Underground. I confessed to George that I hadn't travelled on a tube train since I was a young girl and felt rather nervous to be going underground – something I hadn't done since the War and I found the smells and the noise overwhelming. George responded by gripping onto my hand and guiding me through the maze of tunnels and onto the tiny, packed train.

The Locarno was on the Edgware Road, not far from where George lived in Kilburn. I felt some trepidation entering such a working class area - most of Kilburn's population were Irish and poor and I silently thanked God I hadn't worn any expensive jewellery. As a VIP's wife, I was used to getting into places without waiting, so was a little put out when George and I joined a very long queue leading into the huge dance hall. Everyone seemed to be in couples except for a few young girls at the front of the queue. They were Daphne and Natalie's ages, huddled nervously; giggling amongst themselves about the coming night, wondering if some young man would sweep them off their feet. What I'd give to be that age again and live a little before marrying. I didn't regret having my children, but I did regret committing myself to a man so early on and getting myself into this awful rut.

'So when did you last go dancin'?' George asked with that playful twinkle in his eye.

'Far too long ago,' I replied. 'Charles isn't one for dancing. There was a party for him when he was first elected MP for Hardwell and we were expected to dance. He ended up treading on my toes!'

'Well I promise not to do that to you,' he said with a little bow. 'I've been known for me fancy footwork in the past.'

'I'll hold you to that.'

The place was packed to the rafters. It was lavishly decorated, with plush red velvet chairs, deep carpets and twinkling chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. There seemed to be a bar in every corner and all around me I could hear the chattering of working class girls and Irish lads. I guessed they all probably worked in shops or on building sites and this dance hall was their only glimpse of luxury.

‘We’ve got a table close to the stage,’ George explained, putting his hand in the small of my back and guiding me through the crowds. I supposed I should have told him not to touch me, but I thought it rude after he’d gone to so much trouble to arrange this night out for me.

On stage a band was playing - the singer a tall, skinny man singing *Every Time We Say Goodbye*. They all wore turquoise jackets and on the signs in front of the orchestra were the initials ‘RCO’ for the ‘Reg Chisholm Orchestra’. George informed me the singer was indeed Reg and despite his slim frame, he was actually a hod carrier.

We had been allocated a table close to the edge of the stage. Like a gentleman, George held out my chair for me while I sat down. It was only then I realised there was a bottle of champagne chilling in a silver bucket in the middle of the table.

‘Is that for us?’ I gasped.

‘Well,’ he laughed, sitting beside me and pouring me a glass. ‘I couldn’t expect a lady as yourself to drink the knocked off vodka they sell in there.’

I sipped the champagne and realised it too was probably ‘knocked off’. It was bitter and over fizzy, but I didn’t care. George had made an effort for me and I was so grateful. I sat and watched the young couples on the dancefloor, holding each other tightly and swaying to the music. Young girls with stars in their eyes; dreaming of love and romance, still blissfully unaware of the reality of relationships. I wondered if any of these boys were like Charles - homosexuals desperate to appear normal and so building up the hopes of some dumb girl to create a cover for themselves.

‘Would you like to join them?’ George asked, laying his hand upon mine.

‘Why not?’ I answered. ‘It would be strange to come to a dancehall and not dance.’

He led me through the couples into the centre of the floor. For an awkward moment, neither of us knew where to put our hands. In the end George tentatively placed his hand on my back and held my other hand out and we danced quite formally, keeping a distance between our bodies. It was easy to be led by George and it amazed me how quickly it all came back to me.

We stuck it for a couple of other dances, but then the band started to play a fast number and we decided to duck out the way of the jiving youngsters. Thirsty from dancing, I gulped my champagne rather too quickly and before I knew it, the bottle was finished and George was beckoning a waiter over to bring us another. I knew I was tipsy because I couldn't seem to sit up straight and thought nothing of leaning against George.

'You know you shouldn't spend all this money on me,' I said. 'I'm not a destitute divorcee yet.'

'He's divorcing yer?!' he gasped.

'No but he may as well be. We're separating and he's going off to bugger young boys in North Africa.'

George laughed and lit a cigarette.

'I think we'd better get you some water, that champagne's loosening your tongue.'

'Good,' I giggled, a part of my brain perfectly aware I was behaving inappropriately, but I didn't care. I was having fun. There had been so little of that in my life.

By the time we got halfway through the next bottle of champagne I was drunk. My limbs felt loose and floppy; I was laughing far too loudly, stealing George's cigarettes and flirting with him with the clumsiness of a fifteen year old. I pulled him onto the dancefloor and this time made sure we danced properly, arms around each other. Through my drunkenness I was aware of how close I was to George and realised how nice it was to have my cheek against his barrel chest, feeling his big strong arms around me and the way his body swayed against mine. I wished I could have met him twenty odd years ago. My parents would have disowned me if I'd run off with a poor, Irish builder, but at least I might have been happy.

At midnight, the band came off-stage and the house-band took over. Suddenly our table became over-populated with various people. I was the only woman seated amongst a dozen men and my head swam with excitement. More champagne was ordered and I complimented Reg on his performance and he thanked me by giving me a kiss on the hand. I recalled giggling hysterically at this with no thought of how I was being perceived.

People broke off into groups of their own and I found myself chatting to Clint, the trombone player. He was a strange little man; I estimated him to be my own age, and yet he had the complexion of someone half his age. I could see his hair was fixed with hairspray and found this quite alarming in a man. But all this did not matter, he was awfully funny; heckling the band

that was now on stage, threatening to come and show them how it was done. He drank champagne like it was going out of fashion and even snatched my glass off me when George discreetly brought me over some water, realising I was a little too tipsy.

‘So how long have you known George?’ Clint asked, waving his glass at me.

‘Not long,’ I replied, glancing over at George who was now deep in conversation with Reg. ‘He’s building at the house I’m staying at.’

‘You’re very posh aren’t you? Roughing it are we?’

‘No! George and I are just friends, we get on very well.’

‘So he doesn’t worry about this then?’ With a perfectly manicured finger, he tapped my wedding ring.

‘Oh that,’ I spat. ‘I ought to take that off.’

‘Ooh, tell me more.’

‘My husband is getting rid of me,’ I slurred, realising I should shut up there and then but there was something about Clint - he was so interested in me, so few people ever were. Besides, he was on the road to becoming very drunk and wouldn’t be able to remember anything I told him tomorrow morning anyway.

‘Found a younger woman has he?’ Clint asked, refilling my empty water glass with more champagne.

‘Oh no, not a young woman. My husband doesn’t like young women. My husband is a dirty prevent who hangs around public toilets picking up boys.’

‘Don’t knock it till you’ve tried it love,’ Clint said, sipping his drink.

‘You’re not queer are you?’

‘Dear it’s so long since anyone fancied me, I’m not sure I’m anything.’

‘I’ll never understand why he’s like it. I hate to think what he’s been doing all the time we’ve been married. It’s disgusting.’

‘I expect he didn’t have much choice in the matter,’ Clint sighed. ‘In this business I’ve come across a lot of blokes like your husband, covering up their secrets by getting married.’

‘But I think I could cope with the whole queer thing if I found out he’d been seeing another man all the time we’d been married. But it’s the toilets thing. I don’t understand it. It’s so sordid, why do they do it?’

Clint looked out at the remaining couples on the dancefloor.

‘How many married men do you think there are here tonight?’ he asked. ‘Half of them have got wives waiting for them at home, but they come here week after week and pick up young girls, taking them round the alley at the back for a knee trembler. Well for the likes of your hubby there aren’t places like this for him to go to, so he has to resort to cottages. Maybe if the law was different.....’

‘So you’re saying it’s not his fault?’

‘I suppose so dear. But that’s not to say I don’t feel sorry for you too,’ he laid his hand upon mine. ‘But you’re a beautiful woman and George is obviously mad for you. You can start again.’

‘If only it were that simple,’ I replied, the water starting to sober me up a little. ‘All my friends would disown me if I started seeing a builder. Not to mention my oldest daughter.’

‘Sounds like a right little madam. Why doesn’t she want you to be happy?’

‘She’s just got engaged to a very aristocratic young man and she can’t have a mother in a relationship with a navvy.’

‘So it’s okay for daughter dear to marry and leave you, but you’re not supposed to have a life of your own? Sorry to say it dear, but she sounds a selfish little bitch.’

I ought to have berated him for being so rude about my own flesh and blood but I couldn’t deny that what he was saying was true. Daphne had not called me once to see how I was getting on, and if I was honest, I was disappointed in her.

‘All I’m saying is that you’re the lucky one. You can fall in love again and make a life for yourself. Poor old hubby is just looking forward to a lonely life hiding away in dark corners.’

‘I suppose you’re right,’ I replied. ‘It’s just when I got married, I built my life around Charles. I never thought one day I’d be cast aside. If he’d died I would have sympathy but because of this, I’m treated as some sort of leper too.’

‘It’ll all turn out fine Diana,’ he said, patting my hand. ‘And if you ever want a shoulder to cry on, you come and talk to your Uncle Clint.’

‘You’re very kind,’ I smiled, admiring him. He wore his homosexuality like a brightly coloured coat – what he was doing was illegal and yet he wasn’t ashamed or hiding behind some sort of respectability. I wish Charles could have been like this; I wouldn’t have been duped into marrying him then.

By the time we left I had sobered up somewhat. It was almost three o'clock in the morning and I knew my only chance of getting home was by taxi. I'd brought no money with me and felt apprehensive about asking George to lend me some; I could only hope the taxi driver would wait for me to go in and fetch my purse when I got back to Hampstead.

Edgware Road was deserted save for a few drunks stumbling along, shouting. I was glad I had George to protect me.

'So how are you getting home?' George asked, throwing his spent cigarette onto the ground.

'I'll find a taxi,' I replied, not telling him I felt saddened at the thought of being parted from him. I'd had such a wonderful evening.

'I was wonderin' if you'd like my bed,' he said. 'I've got a very acceptable settee I could squat on.'

I had to think quickly. What would Caroline say about me turning up tomorrow morning? Then again, she didn't know where I'd been and it wasn't any of her business anyway. I was so tired; all I could think about was a nice, comfortable bed.

'If you're sure,' I said. 'I don't want to put you to any inconvenience.'

'Don't be silly,' he replied. 'You've been such a fantastic companion tonight it's the least I can do.' I was shocked to discover George lived in rather respectable mansion block off the Kilburn High Road. It was hardly chic but for some reason – in my snobbery I suppose – I'd expected him to live in some tatty place above a shop or something. His flat was on the top floor and I groaned at the prospect of walking up so many flights of stairs.

'I can't do it,' I moaned playfully. 'My poor old feet aren't used to dancing and they hurt too much to walk up these stairs.'

'Well there's only one thing for it then,' he said and to my utter surprise, he suddenly hoisted me up into his arms. I laughed far too loudly, as he carried me up the six flights of stairs.

'You rich women,' he joked. 'You're so damn lazy.'

'That's because we have people like you to do things for us,' I giggled.

We finally reached the top of the stairs and George lowered me onto the ground. My ankle gave way and I fell into him. He laughed and eased me away.

'Steady there Mrs Osbourne,' he said.

Maybe it was the altitude or perhaps it was the last dregs of alcohol circulating in my system but I was suddenly gripped with the desire to kiss him. I felt so absolutely blessed to have this handsome, kind and funny man in my life and I wanted to repay him.

As he fumbled for his keys, I reached up, stroking the side of his face.

‘You know you’re very good looking,’ I said.

‘And you’re still drunk,’ he replied, moving my hand away. ‘A cup of tea and a night’s sleep and you’ll be fine.’

He seemed almost shy as he opened the door and let me into the flat; it was as though my display of affection had somehow unsettled him. He directed me to the living room, which was at the end of a long corridor. Switching on the light, I found it to be a cosy room, quite cluttered and the furniture a little old fashioned. I sat upon a small, tapestry sofa while George headed off to the kitchen, which was next door.

‘How do you take your tea?’ he asked.

‘White, no sugar,’ I replied, kicking off my shoes and feeling the relief flood my body. I looked around George’s front room; he had very few photographs, but there was one upon the mantelpiece of a young couple on their wedding day. It was easy to recognise him, although it must have been taken twenty years before. He stood proud in his suit, next to him his diminutive bride in her white lace dress. I could just imagine their simple Irish wedding, no doubt followed by a raucous party, and then thought back to my own wedding to Charles. A formal church service followed by a sit down meal at the hotel my uncle owned. It had been rather stuffy but I was a happy bride, feeling I had finally achieved something.

George returned clutching two mugs of tea and sat beside me. I winced somewhat, on seeing it was over-brewed. I wasn’t rude enough to criticise, so just sipped it lightly. Even though it just tasted of tannin, it was strangely refreshing. I looked at George, he was clearly tired; there was a sadness around those normally twinkling blue eyes and his skin looked sallow. Instead of my Knight in shining armour, he just looked like a forty-odd year old man who’d overdone it.

‘What’s the matter George?’ I asked, worried I’d done something to upset him.

‘I’m tired,’ he said. ‘It’s been a long day.’

‘Well don’t let me keep you up. If you show me where the bedroom is.....’

‘Drink your tea,’ he smiled. ‘It’ll help you sleep.’

I couldn't resist laying my head upon his shoulder. I wondered if I was doing the right thing. There was something in his manner that was telling me he was regretting asking me out this evening. But he didn't push me away and I was thankful for that.

'So I suppose you'll be moving out of the house soon,' he said, sipping his tea.

'I don't know,' I mused. 'I wish I could stay forever. But I suppose I must put down roots somewhere.'

'And your old mate George will be long forgotten.'

I looked up at him, suddenly realised what had brought about this melancholy mood. He was under the illusion I wouldn't want to see him again. I felt rather flattered that the thought of this upset him.

'I was rather hoping we could remain friends,' I said. I meant every word.

He looked at me.

'Are you serious?'

'Something struck me tonight. Being with you and your friends, and having interesting conversations and fun. I realised there is a world out there for me that doesn't involve Charles. I don't need the likes of Stella Pourtnoy to make me feel worthwhile. There are people out there who are interested in *me*, not just how powerful my husband is and how well connected we are. I had never met Clint before and yet he listened to me and gave me advice and there was no ulterior motive for him. I've never experienced that before and it's all thanks to you.'

'Hah you flatter me,' he laughed, that playfulness returning to his face. 'I bet you've met far more interesting people.'

'No not really. I can't remember the last time I felt so happy and relaxed George. I'd love to do it all again.'

He smiled and tapped the end of my nose.

'I bet you'll feel different in the morning when the champagne's worn off.'

I was so tired and content I wished never to awake from this stupor. I hated the thought of another night alone in a cold bed. Even though Charles and I never touched, at least I was used to the warmth of his body. I didn't care about how I'd feel in the morning; I just wanted to live for the moment.

'You know you don't have to sleep on here,' I whispered, running my finger along his jaw, stroking the hairs that had started to sprout in abundance. 'You can sleep with me.'

‘Now would that be a good idea?’ he asked, trying to keep his voice light. I could sense he was nervous and this made me want him more. I’d seen a vulnerability about George tonight and his being three-dimensional made him more attractive. Like a potential partner.

‘I’m so lonely George,’ I said. ‘Hold me just for tonight. Please.’

I could see him wrestling with his conscience. He was a good Catholic boy and to sleep with a married woman was a mortal sin. But he had started this way back when he struck up our friendship. He made me fall for him, whether he’d wanted it to happen or not.

More daring than I’d ever been in my life, I reached up and brushed my lips against his. He froze somewhat, looking at me with bewilderment. I kissed him again and he responded this time. I felt so foolish; forty-one and yet this was only the second set of lips I’d ever kissed. Claspings with his big hands, he pulled my body upwards, pressing me against him and for a moment I wondered what I had started as he became lost in the moment.

He eased me away and stood up, once again lifting me up. I fizzed with excitement as this big, rough man carried me with ease to his bedroom. Laying me upon the bed, he switched on the lamp beside it, and lay down next to me, for a moment just surveying me in the dull light.

‘You’re beautiful,’ he said softly. I didn’t argue, because for the first time in my life, that was exactly how I felt.

George made love to me with a tenderness Charles never showed. Surprising given that Charles was homosexual, one would somehow expect him to be gentler than the average man and yet more often than not he treated me like a piece of meat. I remembered lying there feeling as though I was at the dentist or having some minor operation, wishing the physical discomfort could be over so I could get on with my life. Looking back I suppose Charles felt the same way. We must have done it a handful of times after Natalie’s birth – he wanted a son, but when it didn’t look like happening he just gave up.

I wasn’t allowed to remain motionless with George; he whispered to me and made me laugh and kissed me. I had never experienced anything like this and at that moment, grasped to him, our naked, sweaty bodies pressed together, I never wanted to be away from him again.

I awoke to the sound of whistling. Opening my eyes, I discovered George at the foot of the bed already in his shirt and trousers, pulling up his braces. Last night came back to me and to my surprise, I felt no shame, just a longing for him to come back to bed so we could do it again.

‘Good morning Mrs O,’ George chirped.

‘Good morning Mr M,’ I laughed. ‘How are you today?’

‘Tired.’

‘Why don’t you come back to bed then?’ I said, patting the covers.

He laughed and sat down next to me, picking up a lock of my hair and twirling it in his fingers.

‘You don’t regret it then?’

I reached out, stroking his freshly shaven face.

‘My only regret is not meeting you twenty years ago.’

‘You wouldn’t have your girls then,’ he said, trying to sound sensible. ‘Anyway, we’re not old. We can have some fun now.’

‘Can I come over tonight?’ I asked.

‘I think that can be arranged,’ he chuckled.

‘I suppose I’d better be getting home. My daughter will be wondering where I’ve got to.’

‘Where will you tell her you’re going tonight?’

‘I’ll think of something. Then again, where Natalie’s concerned, I could tell her the truth and she wouldn’t think any the less of me.’

‘She’s a diamond that girl. You should be proud of her.’

‘I am,’ I replied. ‘It took all this to happen for me to appreciate her, but I think we can be good friends.’

7

I took a taxi back to Hampstead and hoped I wouldn’t bump into Caroline – how would I explain coming home wearing the same clothes I had left in last night? A part of me didn’t care; I suddenly saw why Angela Crawford enjoyed being a scarlet woman. Perhaps she shared with Woody Baines the same passion I’d experienced last night with George. I should have had an affair years ago; it would have made my stifling marriage to Charles far more enjoyable.

Any hopes I had of sneaking in were dashed by a concerned looking Walsh suddenly emerging from his quarters the moment I stepped through the door.

‘Mrs Osbourne,’ he said. ‘You have a visitor.’

‘Who is it?’

‘A Mr Wilkinson.’

Duncan! Of all the mornings for my daughter’s fiancé to come here!

‘Where is he?’

‘In the drawing room,’ his bug eyes surveyed me and I knew exactly what he was thinking. ‘Perhaps you would like me to tell him to wait while you...ahem, freshen up?’

‘Yes, of course,’ I replied. ‘I’ll be five minutes. Get Adams to fetch him some tea.’

‘Yes madam.’

I rushed up to my room, flinging off my dress, grateful I’d bathed at George’s house, so at least I smelled fresh. I slipped on a pencil skirt and twin set, undoing the basic ponytail I’d fixed my hair into this morning and pinned it into a chignon. I had no time to reapply my make-up; Duncan was marrying my daughter, he had no desire to see her mother looking like some sort of dolly bird.

Switching ‘Mrs Osbourne’ back on, I glided down the stairs, trying all I could to wipe the self-satisfied smile off my face. I entered the drawing room and Duncan stood up.

‘Hello Diana,’ he said politely, kissing me briefly upon the cheek. ‘I’m sorry to interrupt you like this.’

‘Don’t be silly,’ I replied, sitting down. ‘I stayed at a friend’s house last night, I had no idea you’d be coming.’

He sat upon the sofa and leaned towards me, the earnest expression upon his face alarming me somewhat. I had a feeling he was going to ask something of me.

‘Diana, Daphne has spoken to her father about his plans for the future and I have to say she is heartbroken.’

‘She hasn’t even contacted me,’ I replied. ‘I don’t know how she feels.’

‘She’s trying to come to terms with your separation. Is it really necessary?’

‘You should ask Charles,’ I couldn’t help but snap. ‘It was his decision.’

‘Well it’s created a slight problem,’ he said, trying to sound firm. ‘My mother was horrified when the scandal first broke. She pressurised me to end my engagement with Daphne. Mummy’s a rather old fashioned woman and she considers Charles’ problem to be a mental disorder. As you can imagine, she was frightened any children Daphne may have could suffer from the same affliction. But I got a doctor friend to speak to her and reassure her that homosexuality is a perversion; a lifestyle choice rather than an illness and that Daphne’s children

ran no risk. But this separation has just tipped mummy over the edge. She cannot possibly allow me to marry a girl with separated parents.'

'Excuse me Duncan,' I said, feeling a boldness I'd never experienced before. 'But are you not a grown man? Isn't it up to you to decide whom you marry?'

'Of course, I can marry whomever I like. But if my mother disowns me I'm afraid your daughter will be living in poverty.'

'Your mother will disown you if you marry Daphne? But none of this is her fault.'

'She doesn't look at it that way. I have my family name to uphold and I cannot marry the daughter of two people living degenerate lives.'

'Duncan please!' I exclaimed. 'Don't include me in this tirade. I'm a victim in all of this as well. Have you spoken to Charles?'

'I'm going to see him after I've left here. If you overlook your differences and get back together Daphne and I can marry as arranged but I'm afraid if you continue this separation I have no choice but to call off the engagement.'

'I thought you loved my daughter, I was obviously wrong.'

'I do love Daphne but I've also got a responsibility to my family.'

If ever I needed something to bring me back down to earth then this was it. Just this morning I'd awoken with a new hope in my heart, thinking I had a chance to escape the shackles of my old life and embrace a new one but now reality was slapping me in the face. My duty as a mother was to ensure my daughter's happiness and I knew how much she cared for Duncan. To be cast aside by him because of her father and me would result in her never speaking to me again and I could not bear that.

He stood up, looking down at me with what could only be described as a smug expression. He knew he had me cornered and I felt quite sick to be compromised so.

'I'm sure you understand I have no other choice in this matter Diana,' he said. 'And I'm sure all you want is Daphne's happiness.'

With that he walked out of the room, leaving me stunned. I wondered what Charles would say to all this. Like me, he wanted a new life, one where he could live as he desired, albeit discreetly. If he was to denounce his previous indiscretions and return to respectability, he would have no choice but to go back to sneaking around public toilets and risking arrest. As I was slowly learning, Charles would never be able to change his sexual preferences and after last

night, with George, I had come to realise how strong desire can be when it grips you. George made me so happy, I was almost willing to forgive Charles, thank him even for setting me free and allowing me to build a whole new life. But it wasn't to be.

I retired to my room and lay upon my bed, weeping quietly. Before me I could see my old life unfurling - Stella Pourtnoy's coffee mornings; having to attend stuffy dinners; following a strict moral code and to save face I would have to return to criticising Natalie and her wild ways. Added to this, I would now live with the fear that one day there would be another knock on the door, another policeman informing me of my husband's arrest. I wondered what Duncan would do if Charles went to prison. I guessed it wouldn't matter as long as I stood beside him keeping up my role as loyal and obedient wife.

I must have cried myself to sleep because the next thing I knew, I was being rocked; a hand upon my shoulder was moving me and a soft voice was saying;

‘Mummy? Mummy wake up.’

I opened my eyes, the lashes crusted with tears. I focused and saw Natalie sitting beside me.

‘Are you okay mummy?’ she replied. ‘Have you been crying?’

‘No, not at all,’ I lied, sitting up and rubbing my eyes. ‘I had a late night last night. I’m tired that’s all.’

‘Well you missed George’s phone call,’ Natalie smiled. ‘I’ve just been chatting to him.’

‘Oh yes, what did he have to say for himself?’

‘He was telling me about a flat he’s heard about in Maida Vale. It belongs to a friend of his and he’s renting it out. He was wondering if I’d like it.’

‘And what did you say?’

‘Well, I said I’d speak to you. I was wondering if you’d like to share it with me.’

‘Me? I thought you were going to live with one of your friends.’

‘Well with this separation thing you’re going to need somewhere to live and I thought maybe we could live together.’

I let out an audible choke. This just added to my heartbreak; there was nothing I wanted more than to get to know Natalie, to spend time with her; and if she lived with me I would be able to keep an eye on her and make sure she concentrated on her studies and kept out of mischief.

‘Mummy what’s wrong?’ she asked. ‘Is the thought of living with me that horrible?’

‘There isn’t going to be a separation,’ I said quietly. ‘Your father and I will be getting back together.’

She furrowed her brow as best she could with her poorly eye.

‘I don’t understand.’

‘Duncan’s just been here. If Charles and I don’t get back together he’s going to break off the engagement.’

‘Why will he do that?’

‘Because it’ll bring shame upon his family if he marries a girl with parents like us. Your father’s as good as admitted he’s a homosexual and I’d be living the life of a single woman. It’s not acceptable and the only way his mother will allow him to marry Daphne is by us getting back together.’

‘What does daddy have to say about this?’

‘Duncan’s talking to him right now. I don’t know what he’ll say but he’ll probably feel the same way as I do, that Daphne’s happiness is the most important thing.’

‘So you’ll be moving back to Eaton Square?’ she frowned.

‘I suppose so. But why don’t you speak to George about that flat? Maida Vale sounds like a much more respectable area to live. I’m sure you’ll find a friend to share.’

‘So I’m being pushed aside again.’

‘No darling,’ I said, grasping her hand. ‘I want us to stay friends. But you’ve got a future; you don’t have to rely on daddy and me. Daphne does and it’s the only solution.’

Natalie got up off the bed, clearly unhappy about this latest development. She wasn’t the only one, but I couldn’t express my feelings.

‘If Duncan loved her he’d marry her no matter what. They’re just going to end up like you and daddy.’

She stormed out of the room and for the first time in ages, she slammed the door.

They say out of the mouths of babes and sucklings and in this case it was true. Natalie’s statement got me thinking. She was right. What sort of young man was Duncan to be bullied by his mother into trying to get my husband and me to reunite just to save face? If he truly loved my daughter he would tell his mother he was marrying her no matter what and would face the consequences. Would I be subjecting her to a life like mine? I had no idea if Duncan had

homosexual tendencies, but even if he didn't, would he be like the husbands of my friends, unfaithful and feckless?

I needed to talk to someone and the person I wanted to speak to was George. I knew this was completely unsuitable - if I was to reunite with Charles, I wouldn't be able to see George again. But I longed to be with him. I asked Walsh to call a taxi for me and I bathed, changing into a simple shift dress. I had no desire to go out dancing or eating, I just wanted some company.

Just as I was about to leave, Walsh informed me there was an international call for me and I knew it was Daphne. What was I going to say to her? I hadn't made my mind up about returning to Charles, but I knew if I heard her voice I would crumble. But what could I do? She had gone to the bother of calling me from France and I couldn't ignore her.

'How are you darling?' I asked, sitting down on the seat beside the telephone.

'Has Duncan been to visit you?' she asked, no enquiry as to mine or her sister's welfare.

'Yes.'

'Are you and daddy going to get back together?'

'We haven't spoken about it yet darling.'

'But you must. It's my only chance to marry Duncan.'

'I do think it's rather unfair his mother is going to disown him if he marries you.'

'Can you blame her? His grandfather is the Duke of Berkshire. He can't be seen to be marrying the daughter of separated parents.'

'Your father has his heart set on a new life, working with Dicky Standish, travelling to North Africa...'

'And you can go with him. It's not exactly like you do anything for a living mummy.'

'I suppose you're right.'

'I just want to be happy mummy. Is that a lot to ask for?'

'No of course not. I'll speak to daddy tomorrow and see we get back together.'

'Oh thank you mummy!' she gasped. 'Thank you so much.'

I wondered if I should cancel the taxi and return to my room to pack my suitcase. I got as far as half way up the stairs and stopped, turning back round. I wanted to see George once more before I went back to my old life. As the cab took me over to Kilburn, I did all I could to stifle my sobs. I felt so cheated, so unhappy that I wanted to die.

By the time I reached George's apartment I could not hold back my tears. As he welcomed me in, I collapsed into his arms, sobbing. Leading me to the front room, he poured me a glass of brandy and sat with me while I told him everything. I hated telling him I could never see him again, that I had to return to my staid former life. I felt like an animal being put back into its cage.

Gradually my sobs turned into whimpers. George pulled me to him and we sat together, my head against his chest as he stroked my hair, my body still shaking slightly.

'So are Daphne and this Duncan fellow going to be living with you and Charles when they get married?'

'No,' I sniffed. 'They'll probably move into his family's home in Berkshire.'

'So this daughter who's holding you to ransom won't even be around.'

'That's irrelevant. We all move in the same social circles and we need to be seen to be a united front.'

'And you think old Charlie will be able to resist the temptation of visiting public lavatories?'

'I can only hope he'll be more discreet this time. I've no choice in this George. I'm Daphne's mother, I have to sacrifice my own happiness for hers.'

'Will she be happy though? Married to a man who only wants her if certain conditions are met? It doesn't sound like a love-match to me.'

'In our world love doesn't come into it. I was never in love with Charles. When we were together, I never felt for him....well, how I felt with you last night. Love, passion, none of it matters. A marriage to us is little more than a business arrangement. That's why people have affairs.'

He lifted my chin, raising my face so our eyes met. I couldn't look at him, it made me want to cry for all I was giving up.

'We can still see each other,' he said. 'I don't care whether you're with Charles or not.'

'Well I do,' I whispered. 'If I can't have you properly, then I don't want you at all. You're a lovely man and I don't want to hold you back from someone who can be with you all the time.'

'I'd rather have a share of you than a whole of anyone else.'

He kissed me and I knew I couldn't go back to Caroline's tonight. This would be the last time George and I would be together but I wanted to stay with him. To know what passionate love was like before I closed the door on it forever.

8

I arrived home the following day to more scornful looks from Walsh and a message from Charles requesting I meet him at La Mer in Knightsbridge for lunch. It was his favourite restaurant and he no doubt wanted to discuss our reunion. I thanked Walsh for the message and asked him to fetch my suitcases. He took them up to my room and I opened them on the bed, ready to start packing for my return home.

I found Natalie in the bathroom. She had removed the eye-patch and I could see the redness was starting to fade.

'How's the vision?' I asked, perching on the edge of the bath.

'Blurry,' she replied, peering at herself in the mirror. 'But better than it was.'

'Darling I'll be going home to your father later today, but if you want to stay on here you can. George also says you can go and see the flat whenever you want. Whatever the rent is, daddy and I will pay it.'

Natalie sighed and sat next to me on the bath. She took my hand within her chubby fingers and squeezed them tightly.

'Did you spend the night with George?' she asked.

'Natalie that's none of your business,' I snapped.

'Why are you doing this to yourself mummy? George is a lovely man and I can tell you really like him. Why are you going back to daddy just so Daphne can get her own way?'

'Maybe one day when you have children you'll understand,' I signed. 'You'll do anything to make them happy.'

'Well I'm your child and it would make me happy to see you leave daddy.'

'That's different,' I smiled, brushing her unruly hair off her forehead. 'You'll be going to college and making a whole new life for yourself. Daphne's like me, all she's ever going to be is a wife, and we need to find her the best husband.'

‘Well I think Duncan’s an utter prig and nothing’s going to change my opinion about him.’

Le Mer was a seafood restaurant often visited by MPs and various other dignitaries. Phillipe, the matire d’ recognised me immediately and led me to Mr Osbourne’s table. As I walked through the busy restaurant, I spotted my husband and could only think how flabby and insignificant he looked compared to the big, burly, handsome George. How could I share a bed with him after knowing Heaven with another man? I would have to stipulate we slept in separate rooms.

‘Hello Diana,’ he said, standing up briefly to kiss me. ‘Thanks for coming.’

I sat opposite him and he poured me a glass of white wine.

‘You look lovely,’ he remarked, glancing at me. ‘Have you done something to yourself?’

‘No, I suppose it’s just where I’ve had so much rest and relaxation at Caroline’s.’

‘Well it’s done you the world of good. How is Natalie’s eye?’

‘Much improved thank you. She’s getting her sight back.’

We were like a couple of strangers who’d been put together at the only spare table in the restaurant. I felt so choked, I didn’t know what to say to him without bursting into tears. We were distracted briefly by the waiter taking our order, then it was back to uncomfortable silence.

‘I take it Duncan came to see you,’ I said, breaking the deadlock.

‘Yes,’ he replied. ‘It came as a bit of a bombshell, I have to say.’

‘I think Clare Wilkinson is being most unfair,’ I spat. ‘It’s not Daphne’s fault things have turned out the way they have.’

‘I know. My first temptation was to tell him where to stick his ultimatum until I realised after all I’d done, Daphne deserved me to do something for her.’

My heart sank. A part of me had been hoping he wouldn’t agree to Duncan’s demands.

‘I’ve packed my suitcase,’ I said. ‘I’m ready to come back to Eaton Square tonight.’

He squirmed somewhat in his chair.

‘It’s not that simple Diana. We can’t go back to how things were. I can’t change and while I’m in London I run the risk of being found out again. Thankfully it looks as though I will be escaping prison this time; next time I might not be so lucky.’

‘So you’re suggesting we move away?’

‘Yes. Dicky and I have given it great consideration and we’ve decided it’s a good idea if one of us is permanently based in Morocco. Then the business can be run from both ends. Dicky and I have an acquaintance out there - Tommo Hunt; he runs a hotel in Marrakech with his wife Sally. I think you and Sally will become great chums.’

‘You want us to go to Morocco?’ I uttered, quite positive I was hallucinating.

‘Yes. Things...laws are different out there. I’ll be able to relax and as I said, you and Sally will become great chums. Apparently there are quite a few ex-pats in Marrakech. I could see you building quite a social circle.’

I was rendered speechless. My husband was proposing we move thousands of miles away so he could bugger young boys without fear of repercussion while I forged fake friendships with women who lived in ignorant bliss of what their husbands were getting up to. Was this really all I was worth?

‘But what about the girls?’

‘Daphne will be getting married and Natalie can look after herself.’

‘She’s sixteen years old. She’ll need me around.’

‘Nonsense. You and Natalie cannot stand each other.’

‘That’s changed,’ I uttered, to my embarrassment, I started to cry. ‘She’s the only member of this family who’s shown me any kindness or compassion over these past few weeks.’

‘Stop getting hysterical Diana. People are looking.’

I couldn’t do this. I couldn’t commit myself to another thirty years of being shackled to this selfish man. It would be bad enough to live in London surrounded by everyone we knew gossiping behind our backs. But he was expecting me to give up my whole life and emigrate with him. George and Natalie were right. Duncan Wilkinson was a selfish cad and I knew Daphne would hate me for stopping her wedding. But one day when she met someone she really loved she would thank me. Then maybe we could become friends again.

‘You can go to Morocco,’ I said, throwing my napkin onto the table. ‘I’m staying in London.’

‘You can’t possibly,’ he uttered. ‘What about Daphne?’

‘Daphne is a big girl and she’s got to learn she can’t always get what she wants.’

‘She’ll never forgive you.’

‘Maybe not but I’d rather live with my daughter’s scorn, knowing she’d been freed from a selfish cad who wanted to trap her in an unhappy marriage. I don’t want her to end up like me.’

I stood up and looked down at him, realising I would probably never see my husband again.

‘I want a divorce,’ I said.

‘Well you won’t get a penny,’ he fumed. ‘I’ll support my children, but I’ll leave you penniless.’

I was aware of the people around us watching, but I didn’t care. For the first time ever I wanted to have my say.

‘I’ll get by,’ I said. ‘I’ll sell all the diamond rings you gave me. You know the ones I mean Charles. The ones you loved to surprise me with; no doubt when you were feeling guilty for hanging around public lavatories picking up young men.’

With that, I turned on my heels and marched out of the restaurant, getting into the first taxi that passed by.

I returned to the house and asked Walsh to put in for an international call. While I waited for him to get through, I looked for Natalie. I found her in the secret garden with Caroline, playing chess and eating sandwiches.

‘You’re back early mummy,’ she said as I sat beside her. ‘Where’s daddy?’

‘Weeping into his wine I would imagine,’ I laughed. ‘I just turned down his offer to go to Morocco.’

‘Morocco!’ exclaimed Caroline. ‘On holiday?’

‘No, to live. I was supposed to spend my days with some ex-pat called Sally Hunt while Charles went out having fun with her husband Tommo. I wasn’t prepared to do this, so I told him I wanted a divorce.’

‘A divorce!’ my friend cried. ‘It will cause a terrible scandal.’

‘Even worse than the one Charles caused? I don’t think so.’

‘Well you know you can stay here as long as you like.’

‘Thank you but I think it’s time we were leaving. Natalie, how would you like to move to Maida Vale?’

‘Do you mean it mummy?’ she beamed.

‘Yes. Let’s go over to George and tell him.’

Walsh called from the French windows that my phone call was ready and I excused myself. I knew I faced Daphne's wrath, she was going to hate me for a very long time but I just hoped one day she would realise why I'd done this.

'Well?' she asked as soon as I said hello. 'Are you and daddy getting back together?'

'No. We're getting a divorce Daphne.'

She let out a strangled laugh, obviously convinced I was joking.

'Seriously. When are you going home?'

'Your father's moving to Morocco. I'm moving into a flat in Maida Vale with your sister.'

'Have you gone mad?' she screeched. 'Duncan will ditch me.'

'If Duncan was worth having it wouldn't matter to him whether your parents were divorced or living in sin. He'd risk being disowned by his mother just so he could be with you.'

'I hate you,' she sobbed. 'I'm never going to find a husband now. I hate you so much. I'm going to Morocco with daddy.'

'Maybe you should,' I replied coolly, although her words had cut me to the quick. 'He'll need someone to keep an eye on him.'

I put the receiver down and took a deep breath. It broke my heart to know that there was every chance she would never forgive me, but at least she was free of Duncan and his ultimatums.

Caroline drove us over to Kilburn herself. I didn't tell her I'd started a relationship with George, but I think she guessed. When we arrived at George's apartment block, she unloaded the suitcases onto the pavement and kissed us both farewell.

'Remember, if the flat falls through, you can come back to me anytime,' she smiled warmly.

'You've been a wonderful friend Caroline,' I replied. 'I'll never forget your kindness.'

She climbed back into her car and drove off. Natalie reached down and took my hand.

'I'm sorry you've fallen out with Daff,' she said.

'She'll come round,' I replied, leaning in and kissing the top of her head. 'At least I've got you.'

The door opened and George stood there. At first he appeared a little alarmed - taking in me, my daughter *and* our suitcases. Then a broad smile broke out over that battered, Irish face.

‘You’re not going back to him?’ he asked.

‘No,’ I replied. ‘I was rather hoping you could put us up until our flat in Maida Vale is ready.’

‘With pleasure,’ he smiled, pulling me to him and kissing me upon the lips. He then eased me away and looked at the cases lying upon the pavement.

‘I hope you’ve no idea of carrying those Miss,’ he said to Natalie. ‘You’ll strain your back. Allow me.’

The End

Also by Karen Mason

SUMMERSET

A tale of forbidden love and a quest for revenge against a backdrop of social change. When London teenager Lou O’Connell comes to the Sussex village of Summerset after World War II, her life changes forever. As the daughter of the local publican, she becomes the belle of the village, pursued by most of the local young men. Her heart, however, belongs to Andrew McDonald, the husband of Briggy Sheridan, daughter of the much hated brewing family who not only own the pub, but most of the village. Lou and Andrew’s passion spans decades, kept secret from everyone around them. Lou becomes a successful writer and rich in her own right, but when she makes a shocking discovery about her own heritage, she becomes hell-bent on seeking revenge and claiming what is rightfully hers.

MAD ABOUT THE BOY

Elizabeth Maine 1950s starlet, 70s sex symbol and 80s US soap queen has been lured out of retirement to star in *Eastwood Avenue*, a British soap opera. What her fans don't know is that Elizabeth's upper class image is a lie; she is really Lizzie Gallagher from Liverpool; a single mother at 15, she was forced to have her baby adopted and was disowned by her family. When her son Christopher, cheats on his fiancée, she asks her journalist mother to write an expose on Lizzie. When the two women meet they reach an understanding but Lizzie feels the time has come for her to confess all. She asks Elaine to write her biography and this means revisiting a painful past littered with addictions, infidelities and mental illness. Lizzie isn't afraid to tell all about her many lovers, battles with alcoholism and the sexual abuse she suffered as a child. What frightens her most is telling Christopher the truth about the baby girl she gave away fifty years ago and the lasting impact she has had on both their lives.

TWO BECOME ONE

Farrah O'Rourke has spent her adult life breaking the law, opening an illegal rave club and marrying a gangster - she likes nothing more than living on the edge. Recently widowed she is struggling to get on with life when a bombshell is dropped upon her - she's the twin sister of Antonia Smedley, the Mayor of London's wife and one of the most loved women in the world. Former supermodel Toni - fashion icon and patron of many causes is catapulted to fame when her husband Jonathan becomes Mayor of London. Adored for her beauty and compassion no one knows her apparently perfect marriage is a sham. At just 38 she is diagnosed with terminal cancer and has one final request - to be reunited with the twin she was separated from as a baby. How did these two identical women end up living such different lives? As Farrah struggles with her sister's legacy, bringing up a family alone and avenging the death of her beloved husband, a face from the past returns to rock her already tumultuous world.

WINNER TAKES IT ALL

The sequel to *Summerset*. Louisa Cusack has died, leaving behind a family struggling to cope without her. Her son Christian has made Sheridans the brewery into a global success, but when he becomes desperately ill, it is up to his daughter Alex to take over the reigns. Meanwhile, Tom Montague, the disowned grandson of the Cusack's nemesis, Sorchia Sheridan D'Arbo, has been accepted back into the family fold with a mission to infiltrate the Cusacks and destroy Sheridans. Will Alex rise to the challenge of running Sheridans and will Tom and his evil cousin Jackson succeed in their plan to gain back what they feel is rightfully theirs?

THE TRUE TALE OF JEZEBEL COLE

World famous novelist, Patty Belleville, has gone missing. Her books about Jezebel Cole, the high-class prostitute have made her a household name, but when she releases *Two Hearts*, a romantic novel that flops, she decides to disappear. Her three daughters, Sasha, Rorie and Dana all have their own theories as to what has caused their mother to run away, but when a face from Patty's past returns, he reveals to Sasha that her mother ran away once before, shortly after writing the original version of *Two Hearts*. Convinced this is more than a publicity stunt, Sasha hires a private investigator to find Patty and along the way uncovers some horrifying secrets about her mother's childhood that may just provide the key to why she has gone missing now.

ONLY YOU

Violet Spencer is a pioneer amongst women. For fifty years she has been the head of House of Valentine - one of the world's biggest cosmetics brands. But in tough economic times, sales are suffering, and Violet is determined to turn House of Valentine's fortunes around, so she can pass her legacy onto her beloved children.

Violet decides to go back to grass-roots and sets about launching 'Valentino' - her new budget brand. She looks back over her life, recalling her rise from the humble Battersea shop-girl working in Boothby's 'the Harrods of the South', who's determined to provide ordinary girls like her with quality cosmetics, to the wealthy matriarch she is today; on the way surviving a sham marriage, family battles, tragic loss, and the painful secret she has kept from her eldest daughter.

Will this magnificent woman overcome the odds once more and restore House of Valentine to its former glory? Or will she, at seventy-seven accept that the time has come to retire.



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