

# **Eddie Shore 4 Jo**

Richard Taylor

2005

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This book was typeset by L<sup>A</sup>T<sub>E</sub>X

This is a work of fiction. I made it up, just for fun. If you recognise anything or anyone in it then that's just a coincidence - these things happen. For instance, do you know how many other Richard Taylors there are in the world? Hundreds. Some of them get in touch from time to time... which is nice.

# Chapter 1

## Paris

Jo wasn't going to be late. She'd set off on time, early if anything, and would easily make it to the restaurant before 9pm. Nevertheless, she was walking fast. As fast as she could walk in her new black heels without risking a humiliating tumble. Her elegant black dress fluttered behind her in the chilly December breeze. The chic black jacket, so welcome when she was ambling along, now started to cling unpleasantly to her naked shoulders. She checked her black watch again. It still wasn't working.

Everything had started so well. No mishaps on the make-up front. Her hair had gone right first time, and was now the shiniest and darkest brown it had ever been. She still liked the new dress, new shoes and the new jacket all at the same time. Even her glasses matched, so she didn't feel self-conscious about not having contacts.

Rather than kick around at home, waiting nervously to set off, she'd come out early and done a bit of window-shopping on the way.

Anxious not to lose track of time she'd checked her watch, her new watch, every few minutes. She felt quite relaxed. As relaxed as could be expected before a 'big date'. Time passed slowly as she peered into windows at things she couldn't afford, and wondered.

In the middle of a particularly outrageous bit of wondering, over a diamond ring, Jo had checked her watch again. Just like the previous time, almost no time seemed to have passed at all. Then it struck her - absolutely no time had passed, according to her watch. Frantically she put the watch to her ear, which was silly because it was battery operated. It made no sound. It had no second hand. Neither of the other hands moved. It had stopped, at about twenty to nine.

So now she was rushing. The Guildhall clock on the High Street showed five to nine, but she didn't trust it. OK, so it had been there since 1683 and had never, ever, been wrong as far as she could remember... but why take a chance. She'd waited years for this date. Nothing was going to steal it from her now.

And then she stopped.

"Big Issue?" asked the man outside Sainsbury's.

As she turned to say "no thank you" to the man, Jo noticed that he was remarkably well dressed for a homeless person. "Maybe that's the point..." she mused, before actually saying "No, thank you."

"Have a good evening Miss." he replied, sincerely.

So sincerely in fact that Jo felt guilty for not buying a copy of the magazine. But, before she could get as far as wondering whether it was acceptable to turn up for a first date with a copy of the Big Issue or, more likely, to buy a copy of the magazine and then subtly dispose of it between here and the restaurant, someone else stepped

in with some cash and she slipped away.

Now she was walking at a gentle, maybe even genteel, pace. It was only a couple of minutes to the restaurant now - down the High Street and along Chapel Street. Her panic at being late was gone. It had been replaced by a nervous panic that she was about to make a complete arse of the evening ahead.

“Oh my God.” she thought, pausing to look at her reflection in a shop window.

“I look flustered... I am flustered.”

Jo paused, took a deep breath, and thought of Eddie.

“He’s probably just around the corner, waiting for me.”

She pictured her man, suave, cool, sophisticated... and wearing slippers for some reason. Then his suit morphed into a dressing gown and he grew a long hermitic beard.

“The late Dent Arthur Dent...’ she muttered, smiling and setting off again.

Rounding the corner into Chapel Street, Jo immediately noticed two men loitering. Both were presumably trying to look like they weren’t waiting for someone who should have been here at least ten minutes ago. The one on the left-hand side of the street was doing a slightly better job than his opposite number: rather than checking his watch every 15 seconds, looking up the street one way, then the other, whilst slowly shifting his weight from one foot to the other, Mr Left was simply motionless, staring blankly into the nearest shop window.

Jo looked carefully at Mr Left. He was smartly dressed, in a dark blue cotton suit. He was taller than Mr Right, meaning... well,

nothing. Brown hair and, puzzlingly, brown suede shoes.

“Brown shoes with a blue suit?” thought Jo.

Not that she was a fashion snob or anything, much. Just then Mr Left turned hopefully towards her and the light from the shop, which was actually a bank, shone on his face. He wore glasses just like hers...

The man scowled slightly and looked at his watch. He wasn't Eddie, not her Eddie anyway. Jo felt compelled to look at her watch too, and did, even though she knew it wasn't working.

On the one hand she was pleased that Mr Fashion Faux Pas wasn't her date, but on the other hand she was worried. Worried for two reasons: firstly, because Eddie wasn't in sight and the restaurant almost was; and secondly because she now had to walk down a dark narrow street between two men who she suddenly didn't like the look of very much.

Since she was still walking forwards there seemed to be very few options open to her. She kept going, trying to look like she wasn't scared, but failing. As she moved towards him, Mr Left twigged that Jo looked a little bit nervous. At the same instant, Mr Right decided to give up on his date and set off towards home... in Jo's direction. He made it two paces and then, seeing Jo and the look of horror leaping upon her, he froze.

“Err, sorry. Please.” he mumbled, stepping aside and waving her by.

Jo didn't have to force the smile. The man sounded quite gallant and somewhat hurt at the same time. She wondered how long he'd been waiting there and why he'd given up. But, since she'd waited

several years for Eddie to notice her and ask her out, it was unlikely that she would understand his apparent impatience.

As it happened both Mr Left and Mr Right had been waiting for over an hour. More bizarrely, in a way they were waiting for each other! Not that they knew it, of course. Both were members of the same over-priced dating club: a shambolic enterprise which somehow survived a litany of disasters solely on the strength of the owner's charming personality and occasional hard work. In this particular cock-up, David and James had been set up on blind dates with the very compatible Susan and Deborah. Both dates were today at 8pm, one in Guildford and one in Woking... I'm sure you can guess where the girls are now? What you wouldn't guess is that Susan and Debs recognised each other as long-lost school friends, gave up on their dates after 10 minutes, had dinner together and a good laugh, went on to a night-club, pulled two great blokes and... well, I don't know the rest; that's their business isn't it!

Oblivious to the minor tragedy she was passing, Jo slipped by and turned her attention to the restaurant which was now just a few dozen yards ahead. She couldn't yet see it because the road curved gently round to the right and like her it was on the right hand side, set back slightly.

In the last few yards she was starting to wonder what to say at the restaurant if, as looked likely now, she was the first to arrive. There was no way she was going to hang around outside in the dark... but she didn't want to be seated first either.

As she reached the entrance she glanced at the poorly lit menu mounted by the door. Of course, she was really trying to look into

the restaurant to see if Eddie was inside. All she could see though was a waiter, the head waiter actually, looking out directly at her.

“Bollocks.” thought Jo.

The waiter frowned, as if he’d heard her. She might have panicked. She normally would have. It was the sort of thing that she did. But this time, she didn’t.

“Hello.” came a soft voice to her left.

“Eddie!”

“Hi. You look great.”

“Thanks.” said Jo, smiling and blushing a little.

Eddie smiled, wondering if he ought to kiss her. There was a pause. A few days ago Eddie would have been squirming inside at this, torturing himself. Instead, now, he leaned forward and kissed her softly on the lips. Both of them closed their eyes briefly.

When Eddie opened his eyes, Jo’s were still closed. For an instant he held himself there, almost touching her, but not quite. Then he straightened up and, seemingly in response, she opened her eyes again. Both of them stood for a moment, regarding each other.

They’d only seen each other a few hours ago, at work. But this was different. This was a first date. A first proper date, anyway. Jo had made a special effort just for Eddie. Eddie had made an effort for Jo which, since he hardly ever made an effort at all, even for himself, must count up there with pretty significant efforts.

In that short time there was no room for words. Emotions bubbled and swirled. Both of them smiled. Jo let the moment linger, Eddie did too. At the back of his mind something stirred.

“Every time I look at her...”

Suddenly both of them became aware of a short dark-haired Frenchman grinning at them through the restaurant door, and the moment was lost.

“Shall we go in?” asked Eddie rhetorically, looking at her and reaching for the door.

Unfortunately, the head waiter had already started to open it. Eddie groped for a handle which wasn't there and looked round to face the now mostly open door.

“Welcome monsieur, madame.” announced the waiter in a pretty convincing French accent, bowing his head slightly.

“Yes.” replied Eddie, slightly flustered and answering a question that hadn't been asked yet.

Placing his right hand gently on Jo's back, Eddie guided her over the threshold by his side. The waiter closed the door behind them and then managed to squeeze himself between them and a fully seated table of four by the window, without bumping anyone.

Before Eddie could say something along the lines of “we booked a table for two at 9pm”, the waiter enquired “Monsieur Shore?”

“Yes.” replied Eddie, again.

“This way please...”

“Shaw?” thought Jo, puzzled, as she followed Eddie through the crowded restaurant.

It soon became clear how the waiter had known which party they were. All the tables but one were full. The sound of a dozen lively conversations filled the room, which was very cosy, red, and bedecked with numerous racks of wines and spirits. It was a little on the dark side for Eddie's liking at first, but he soon changed his mind as he

started to appreciate the atmosphere. Instead he turned to wondering if the ancient bottles of cognac on display actually contained anything he could ever afford to try.

“Madame?” invited the waiter, pulling out a chair for Jo.

“Thank you.” she replied, gliding round the table and sitting.

Eddie pulled out the other chair himself and sat down. He’d hit his head once at school when Paul Smithson had whipped his seat away just as he was sitting down... and had never trusted anyone with a chair since.

“Would you like a drink, while you see the menu?” asked the waiter, notionally to them both but looking directly at Eddie.

“Bugger.” thought Eddie. “I hate it when they do that. Yes, I’d really like a beer. But can I say that? Is beer too unsophisticated?”

Eddie looked at Jo and raised both eyebrows questioningly.

“Shall we just have some wine later?” she offered.

“Yes, I think so.” declared Eddie, relieved.

The waiter picked up two menus from the table and, opening them, handed the first to Jo and the second to Eddie. Then he disappeared for an instant to the small bar which ran from the entrance down part of the left-hand side of the restaurant, returning with a second ‘menu’ which he handed unopened to Eddie.

“The wine list monsieur.”

For an instant Eddie worried that the man was going to stand over him while he selected something, but he simply nodded and left them to it.

“Phew.” thought Eddie, opening the wine list.

“Did he call you Mr Shaw?” asked Jo suddenly.

Eddie looked up and smiled.

“Yes.” he said. “I’ll explain.”

# Chapter 2

## Starters

“Oh, I see.” said Jo, softly.

“But you think it’s a bit dumb?” quizzed Eddie, glancing away as the waiter glided up to their table.

“Are you ready to order?” he said, predictably. The accent wavering, but not enough to distinguish between a very good fake and a real Frenchman who has just lived in the UK for long enough to pick up some habits.

“Yes.” replied Eddie, glancing at Jo for support.

She nodded. Eddie’s instinct was to let Jo go first, but at the same time he didn’t want to come across as a wimp. Also, he was dreading this bit - he loved the food here but was hardly a connoisseur. Once before he’d made a bit of fool of himself by ordering a side-dish of potatoes to go with something which, to his surprise, turned out to be mostly fancy pastry and posh spuds.

And the wine-list? Jesus. Eddie knew he liked Chardonnay,

Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and a few others; but here there was none of that, it was all Maison this or Chateau that. The best he could do was pick on price (not quite the cheapest) and hope to God the waiter didn't say something like "Oh! Surely monsieur would prefer a 1996 to best complement the cuisine."

"I'd like the 'Chèvre rôti au jambon Bayonne' to start, followed by the 'Filet de Boeuf sauce bordelaise'." announced Eddie, in his best Franglaise.

"Very good. And how would you like your steak cooked monsieur?"

"Medium rare, please." stipulated Eddie.

Still scribbling on his pad the waiter turned to Jo.

"Great." thought Eddie, "Bagged it!" unsure whether the waiter's compliment was genuine, just polite or a total piss take, but going with the most positive interpretation. He'd tried his best for God's sake!

"I'll have the scallops." said Jo, nervously, pointing to the line on the menu. "And the breast of Barbary duck." she followed.

"Excellent choice madame!" smirked the waiter, smiling and scribbling again, before looking back at Eddie. "And the wine monsieur?"

"Arse." thought Eddie.

He hadn't chosen any yet. He'd been too busy with Jo and the pronunciation of his other menu selections. Calmly picking up the wine-list, Eddie glanced at Jo. She wore a trusting half smile. The subtle lighting of the restaurant and the small candle at the centre of their table lit her face beautifully.

“Every time I look at her, I see...”

He scanned down the “vin rouge” quickly, stopping at a £30 bottle.

“A Châteauneuf-du-Pape.” said Eddie confidently, closing the list positively and handing it to the waiter.

“Of course, monsieur.” replied the waiter, taking the list and the menus, nodding slightly and heading off to the kitchen.

“Sounds like you’ve been here before?” asked Jo.

“Only a couple of times.”

Should he go for cool or bare honesty. It was a close call...

“Actually, I...” he still hadn’t decided, so he pretended something had caught his eye over her shoulder.

“What?” quizzed Jo, laughing a little nervously and glancing round.

“Stop it Shore!” thought Eddie, “Just be me!”

“Nothing.” said Eddie softly, sighing. “I’m a bit nervous. That’s all.”

“So am I.” admitted Jo, happily.

They both smiled for a moment, then Jo remembered their earlier conversation.

“You didn’t say why you chose Shaw. For your new name. After George Bernard maybe?”

“George Bernard Shaw? Oh, no.” laughed Eddie. “It’s S-H-O-R-E.”

He’d lost her now. Jo looked blank, but in an encouraging sort of way.

“Which, of course, means nothing to most people.” added Eddie

quickly.

“Eddie Shore was a top ice-hockey player in the 1930’s and...”

Suddenly the waiter appeared with a basket of bread and some butter. Tactfully he placed everything quickly and left without a word.

“...my granddad was a big fan of his. He lived in Canada then, you see, where they’re mad about ice-hockey. In fact, I think he named my dad Edward after Eddie Shore. That’s what he said once anyway. Maybe he was joking. Anyway, the name stuck with me.”

“So your dad’s called Edward too. That must be a bit weird.” said Jo.

“He... was, yes. He died years go.”

“Mine too.” added Jo soberly, “In 1989.”

“July.” said Eddie flatly, looking straight at her.

“How did you know?” asked Jo, turning a little pale.

“I didn’t. My dad died on 11th July 1989, the same day as Laurence Olivier.”

As Jo turned whiter still, Eddie knew that something bizarre was happening. This was some kind of special bond, and a weird one. Certainly not the sort of thing you can make light of; not the sort of thing you really want to find yourself talking about on a first date. Barely bloody believable.

They both looked at each other, neither knowing what to say. Lots of different thoughts and memories jostled for attention, but whenever one got near the front it was just shoved away by another which was just as powerful.

An age seemed to pass, in silence. It wasn’t uncomfortable

though, just intense. Eventually Jo's colour returned and she managed a smile, which Eddie mirrored with a sigh. Before either of them could start to worry about what to say, the waiter arrived and spoke instead.

"The scallops?"

"Yes." replied Jo quietly.

The waiter placed a small, but deep, plate in front of Jo and a large square one in front of Eddie. Then he disappeared for a moment before returning with a bottle of wine, which he showed proudly to Eddie.

"Châteauneauf-du-Pape."

"Yes." said Eddie, only then looking at the label to confirm that it was.

The waiter opened the wine very swiftly and poured a small splosh into Eddie's glass for him to taste. Normally Eddie didn't go for this bullshit - he didn't know what the wine was supposed to taste like, and he knew that the waiter knew he didn't know. So normally he would just get them to pour both glasses and be gone... if he ever did get a revolting tasting wine (corked?) then he would haul the waiter back pretty damn swiftly, he was sure.

This time things were different. Eddie picked up the wine glass and put it to his nose. Instead of sniffing it though, he winked at Jo. She smiled, almost laughed. Eddie took a large sip of the wine. He paused a moment.

"Mmmm. Lovely." in his best Oz Clarke voice.

Jo put a hand over her mouth and laughed quietly. The waiter smiled, poured Jo's glass, then Eddie's then left with a "bon appetit".

Eddie had a bold grin on his face. Raising his glass, he waited for Jo to lift hers, then said “Cheers”.

“Cheers.” echoed Jo, chinking glasses.

“Thank you for inviting me.” she added, and they both tucked into their starters.

It was late and they’d both forgotten just how hungry they were. The food was fabulous so, for a few minutes, they both ate in silence.

“How are the scallops?” asked Eddie, finally.

“Mmmm. Lovely.” replied Jo.

They both laughed.

“Really melt-in-the-mouth. The wine’s lovely too; really warming. Is it one of your favourites?” she added.

“Er, well, I must confess that I’d never heard of it before tonight.” he admitted, picking up the bottle to look at the label.

It was a 1996. Was that a good year? Eddie had no idea whatsoever and what’s more, he couldn’t care less. The label was very pretty though... it almost looked like it had been hand-painted on very old paper and stuck on very carefully by some highly skilled peasant.

“It is very nice though. I’ll try and remember the name... I’ve always felt that wine was one of those things that I really ought to know about, but never got round to because there are so many other things to know about.”

“Did you do French at school?” asked Jo, digressing slightly.

“God, yes. With Mrs Rousseau. She was a total dragon! Oh, you went to George Abbot didn’t you? Was she still there?”

“Still there? I had her too - for 5 years!”

Eddie almost said something about them seeming to share numerous misfortunes, but thought better of it and just laughed instead.

“That woman must have put more kids off France than snails and frogs legs combined...”

Just then the waiter appeared.

“Is everything all right monsieur?”

“Yes thanks.” replied Eddie. Jo nodded.

The waiter picked up the wine bottle and poured some into Eddie’s glass. He went to pour some into Jo’s too, but she’d only drunk a little bit so he didn’t bother. As the waiter left, Eddie looked at Jo and shrugged.

“I think he likes to do the pouring.” she whispered.

“OK.” whispered Eddie back. “I’ll try not to touch the bottle again.”

They both laughed, at ease with everything. Any pretensions were being washed away pretty quickly and they seemed to be understanding each other.

For a moment the comfortableness of it all threw Eddie off a bit. He was used to situations like this going wrong at every turn, to fire-fighting, to clinging onto the edge, teetering on the brink, staring into the abyss and, almost always, falling over the edge on fire into the abyss...

Eddie wanted to know everything about Jo. How should he start? There seemed to be so much about her that he didn’t know. What to say without coming across as an interrogator. He was rubbish at this sort of thing. Instead of the right questions, the start of a poem drifted at him again.

“Every time I look at her, I see a different face.”

Eddie had pretty much finished his starter now, just a few leaves remained. He looked up at Jo, who was looking at him and smiling. What was she thinking, he wondered. Eddie parked his knife and fork, took a sip of his wine and stepped up to the brink.

“Why didn’t we do this years ago?” he asked.

Jo opened her mouth briefly, but didn’t say anything.

“This is more like it.” thought Eddie, ironically.

“Because I’ve been blind.” he declared, softly. “Wanted to be blind.”

From across the restaurant the waiter set off toward Eddie and Jo’s table, to collect their empty plates. However, he immediately spotted a table of six people with virtually empty wine glasses and diverted to rescue them.

Jo wanted to say “That’s all in the past now.” but didn’t.

“I mean.” he paused for a long time, looking down at his empty plate, then continued. “I’ve been hurt, badly, before. And since then I’ve always felt that I needed to be something that I’m not. To pretend always. And in the end that just hurts more.”

Eddie paused again, and then looked straight at Jo. She looked understandingly at him. He had to get this out. She had to know it all, and he had to see how she reacted.

“But I’ve always been myself with you, Jo. It’s always seemed... right, I guess. I just hope you’re not expecting me to be...”

Eddie had been doing so well, but he’d dried up. He didn’t quite know what he wanted to say - “more that I can be” or something, but that sounded too negative. For a moment his heart sank. He’d

tried to pour his heart out, but maybe the time was wrong.

Jo reached across the table and touched his hand.

“I know what you mean.” she said simply. “I worry too.”

They looked at each other, and said nothing. The waiter had finished pouring and set off again but a chap in a blazer with a ridiculously large moustache had caught his eye and was asking for his bill.

“I think we’re doing fine so far, don’t you?” asked Jo.

“Yes.” replied Eddie, smiling, confidence returning.

“We might just be all right.” he added, as the waiter finally arrived.

“Monsieur, madame, how was it?” picking up the plates.

“Very good.” said Eddie.

“Yes, wonderful.” added Jo as the waiter left.

“Wonderful.” she repeated quietly, looking at Eddie and blushing.

# Chapter 3

## Mains

Jo had now achieved two personal bests on this one date. Firstly she had spent the most money ever on new clothes and accessories, and secondly she had experienced a man talking genuinely about his feelings. Well, actually that second one was more of a ‘first’ than a ‘best’.

She was so happy she could have cried. And so relieved that the frustrations of the last few months might be over that she very nearly did cry.

“Are you OK?” asked Eddie.

“Yes, fine. It’s just that... I’ve been messed about by so many blokes who were nice on the surface but complete jerks underneath. I was starting to think that all men were like that. My friend Sarah says they are, except for...” she paused.

“What?” quietly.

“For your soul mate. She says everyone has a soul mate... you

just have to find them.”

Jo felt more than a little embarrassed. All this outpouring seemed a little bit much for a first date. But then, this wasn't an ordinary first date - they had known each other for years - and Eddie had started the deep stuff... so shouldn't she encourage him? As long as she didn't scare him off!

“I thought once that I'd found the one.” sighed Eddie. “But I was so wrong. Looking back it should have been so obvious, but I just couldn't see it.”

Jo's heart prepared to sink. He was going to say “so let's not get carried away” wasn't he, or “let's take it one step at a time.”

“I don't want to get carried away...”

“See, told you!” she thought.

“...but this is totally different, in so many ways.”

“I...” she started but didn't know where to go.

“I know it sounds corny, but I just want you to know that.” added Eddie.

“Shall we get married tomorrow or the week after?” asked Jo, laughing.

“Married? We ought to decided how many kids we want first!” laughed Eddie.

Jo rocked her head from side to side, as if she was counting.

“Three or four, I think.”

“Really?”

“Too many, or not enough?”

“Er. Probably about right.”

Jo grinned. Deal done. They hadn't even got their main courses

yet and they'd already agreed, in principle, to get hitched and pop out a respectable number of children. So, what was going to go wrong? It was all just a joke wasn't it - playful banter. Irony. No, it was real - they were both talking from the heart, expressing what they really felt, the best they could. It was just all so much and so fast.

He was lovely though, wasn't he. He was...

"I wonder who 'the one' was that he mentioned." she thought suddenly.

No, I can't ask. She obviously hurt him. But, what if she's still around. What if I know her. Hmmm, tricky one.

"Duck madame?" asked the waiter from nowhere, making Jo jump.

"Yes." she replied, leaning back from the table to give the man space to place her plate in front of her.

"And the steak, sir." he stated, rather obviously, serving Eddie.

The waiter then made a point of topping up both of their glasses before slipping back into his best French for another "bon appetit" before gliding away again.

"That looks good." remarked Eddie, admiring the thin strips of duck breast, brown on the outside and almost red in the middle, lined up neatly at one side of Jo's plate.

Jo was just about to find out if it was good when Eddie raised his glass and said "Cheers!"

Putting down her fork she followed suit, chinking glasses gently.

"Have you always lived in Guildford?" she asked, taking a quick sip of wine and then tucking into the duck, at last.

“Pretty much.” replied Eddie, carving off a slice of steak and finding the perfect shade of red inside.

Jo was chewing now, so Eddie paused then added “I did live in Southampton, for a while, at the University, but not for long.”

“University?” asked Jo, barely concealing her excitement. “I always wanted to go to University...”

“I thought I did too.” replied Eddie wistfully.

“So you dropped out?” concluded Jo, disappointed.

“Yes.” confirmed Eddie, quietly. “And no.” he added boldly.

Jo frowned. It was her dream to go to University. All her friends had gone. She’d been denied by circumstance, so it was shocking for her to learn that Eddie had spurned his opportunity.

“Technically...” Eddie paused to properly finish his mouthful and wash it down with the now rapidly disappearing and excellently complementary wine.

“...I was never in, so I couldn’t drop out.”

“Huh?”

Eddie sighed. Jo could tell that he didn’t really want to talk about it, but it was important to her, so she said nothing.

“In the circumstances, I... it was... it was 1989.” he muttered.

“Oh, I’m sorry...” started Jo, as things became clear at 100mph.

“No. It’s all right, let me tell you.

“I did want to go to University. And my parents were very keen for me to go too, since neither of them had. My dad in particular. He always felt that not being a graduate held him back in his job... and he didn’t want that to happen to me.

“It was never really discussed at home though. I did quite well

at school, and everyone knew I would be able to go to University... so they just assumed I would. No-one ever asked me. I never asked myself. I just assumed, like everyone else, that it was obviously the right thing to do.

“So.” Eddie sighed, “I worked hard for my A-levels, took the exams and then my dad died suddenly. A few days after the last exam actually... while I was still celebrating my freedom.”

Eddie looked down at his plate, scooped up some potato dauphinoise, and continued soberly (taking a large sip of wine first).

“I went out to the pub with my mates one night, came home a bit drunk and found a policeman there.”

Eddie smiled wryly.

“My first thought was - oh no, they’ve got me for underage drinking a month before my 18th... but of course it was about Dad.”

Eddie paused for a second. That was enough detail about death for now. Especially since they might end up hopelessly lost in coincidence city again.

“Perhaps we could talk about the weather a bit now?” suggested Eddie ironically.

“Yes.” agreed Jo, laughing nervously. She smiled sympathetically, hoping to encourage him into continuing.

“Anyway. It was a crap summer. I moped a lot, my mum cried a lot. There was a very muted 18th birthday party... When I got my A-level results they were better than I expected, but it didn’t seem to matter anymore.”

Jo’s eyes were fixed on Eddie. He seemed so far away. His voice was faltering slightly and she could almost feel his pain, even though

her experience, whilst happening at exactly the same time, had been very different.

In a way she thought it was a shame that their date had taken this turn. Perhaps some lighter conversation would have been a bit more enjoyable. But, on the other hand, it was somehow incredibly liberating and unifying to go through this together, now.

“I just seemed to sleepwalk myself down to Southampton, or is it up? Do you only go up to Oxbridge? Anyway, I ended up there at freshers’ week without thinking. At the last minute I decided I shouldn’t leave Mum on her own but she insisted - said it was what Dad would have wanted. Funnily enough, she was one of the few mothers that weren’t crying as they left their kids behind...”

As Eddie paused, Jo cast her mind back to the time when most of her friends had left for University. She was more angry than sad: angry because she felt she deserved to go as much as them, that she’d been robbed by circumstance, that she was being left behind by life - that was why she’d cried, when no-one was looking.

And now it looked like the same had happened to Eddie too. Not quite the same probably, he hadn’t finished the story yet so she couldn’t be sure, but similar - he’d been robbed of Uni by circumstance in some way. She still wondered how exactly.

“Did you stay long?” she asked sympathetically.

“Most of the week.” Eddie chuckled.

“I settled in pretty quickly. Met a lot of nice people... One couple.”

Eddie smiled and looked at Jo, remembering some detail that had slumbered in his mind for years.

“One couple met on the first night, at the hall’s opening night disco, spent all night together, and all of the next day, and got married the day after.”

“Love at first sight.” sighed Jo.

“Er. Yes. I guess so. I thought it was a wind-up at first, but the wedding was on the TV news and everything.”

“So, why did you leave?” said Jo, a bit puzzled.

Eddie took a deep breath.

“I was happy. For the first time in months. But I had lots of time to think. Lots of time. I don’t remember if it was the Saturday or the Sunday that I arrived, but I know it was the Thursday that I decided to leave.”

Eddie’s expression sort of twisted and sprang back, as he pondered the best words to portray his revelation - or failing that, something that wouldn’t sound too pathetic.

“In a way, being happy made it easier to decide to leave.”

Jo frowned.

“I’d had 3 or 4 days of ‘lectures’ on what was expected of students, what the Union was all about, where to eat, what bank to use, where to pay your hall fees...

“And some great nights out: really outstanding.”

Jo’s sympathy was giving way to bafflement now. Eddie had spelled out all the great things about Uni as she imagined it; so if he wasn’t still upset about his father’s death then what was the problem? She managed a half-smile. She was still with him, there must be something else.

“Everything was time-tabled though. Just like school, but not

just during the day, the evenings were all planned out for you too. Freshers wandered around like small flocks of sheep. No-one wanted to go anywhere alone so they'd round up a bunch of friends first and then all go together. And people were so scared of being left out of stuff that they'd go along to anything... just in case.

"People were terrified of failure. They were children, and I was..."

Eddie nearly said "a man" but stopped himself, thinking it would sound ridiculous. And it was ridiculous, that wasn't what he meant at all.

"...I needed to grow up. Life suddenly seemed too short." he said instead.

Jo was starting to understand now. The momentary look of unrestrained disgust on Eddie's face left her with no doubts as to the power of his feelings.

"So that Thursday I got up early and went off into the town by myself, away from the University. I watched people all day. All sorts of people. I went into shops and made enquires about stuff. I turned up at offices pretending to have been sent by god knows who. I even went to the police station and reported my wallet stolen..."

"All those people I met were so different from the crowd I'd been around my whole life. A little voice in my head kept saying 'leave school' over and over. The more I thought about it, the more I realised that I didn't know anything about life at all. And I just became absolutely convinced that I wasn't going to learn anything 'real' over the next 3 years either.

"My dad used to say 'In life, it's not the destination but the journey that counts' and on that day I knew which way I had to go."

Jo nodded silently. "I understand."

Eddie smiled, as if suddenly relieved of some great burden. He looked down at his empty plate, and over at Jo's.

"I think the waiter has abandoned us." he said, looking around.

"All the wine's gone too." added Jo, lifting the bottle and shaking it slightly to make sure.

With the mood lifting, all it needed to help it on it's way was the timely appearance of the hitherto ever-present waiter with the dessert menu... but he was nowhere to be seen.

"What time is it?" asked Eddie casually.

Jo looked at her watch. "About twenty to nine."

"Really? That late!" laughed Eddie sarcastically.

"Don't you have a watch?" retorted Jo in fake mockery.

"Yes." replied Eddie, "I just don't have it with me..."

"Well. It's probably late."

Jo thought about the next sentence very carefully. Not now obviously, as it followed a split second after the previous one. She'd been thinking about it on and off since she finished eating. It had even popped into her mind earlier today, and the day before, and the day before that. Actually, not the exact sentence - the words that is - but the intent it was meant to convey.

"Maybe we should skip dessert and head back to yours for coffee?"

Eddie went red.

# Chapter 4

## Tenerife

About 1800 miles from Guildford, as the plane flies, a good friend of Eddie's had just made a remarkable discovery. Despite years of evidence to the contrary, it turned out that he wasn't totally repulsive to all the members of the opposite sex to whom he himself felt any attraction whatsoever. In other words, Mike had pulled!

In a tiny but noisy bar, somewhere in the Playa de las Americas, Mike had met the woman of his dreams - a decent looker that actually seemed to fancy him. Wow! Cool!

"Shall we go outside?" shouted Mike over the booming music.

The woman nodded, picked up her glass of bright blue liquid festooned with one too many miniature umbrellas, and followed him out into the not quite so noisy street. All the tables were occupied so Mike headed for a small wall and sat casually on that. He immediately realised, of course, that however casual he might feel perched here, it was not fit for a lady.

Casting about for a spare chair, stool, anything, Mike soon resigned himself to failure - there were none... there probably wasn't an unoccupied seat within half a mile of here on a Friday night, he fumed.

"Bollocks!" he thought, "Just my luck."

So it was a mixture of surprise and joy that hit him as his 'new friend' simply sat down beside him and smiled.

"Shit she's lovely."

He was a bit drunk, but so was she. If they both avoided falling off the wall backwards and cracking their heads open then they could be in for some fun tonight...

Oh, things were looking up. It was the second to last night of his holiday. A not very good holiday so far. So this could make it. Then Eddie would be sorry: sorry he hadn't come as he'd promised. Sorry he'd let Mike down, again. Hey, if Eddie had come then this might not be happening. That was a thought.

Mike and Eddie often went on holiday together. Eddie was Mike's best friend - or was that oldest friend? There'd been a few times when they'd fallen out, but mostly they'd been friends for 20 years or so. Since they'd started at secondary school really.

One thing that Eddie certainly wasn't good for was attracting women. Actually, he could attract them OK since he wasn't bad looking (independent witnesses would usually confirm that Mike was a bit better looking than all of his friends), but he had a knack of repelling them again pretty quickly once they got near. That tended to apply to any women that Mike was trying to attract his way too - Eddie just scared them off.

It had only been like that since the Debbie incident. Before that, while they were at school, they'd both pulled at will. Within the confines of teenage nerdy boys' pulling powers obviously. But later...

They should have spotted that Debbie would be bad news. For a start, Mike had seen her first. There was no doubt about it, whatever Eddie had subsequently come to believe. That was ultimately irrelevant, since he hadn't really clicked with her and she obviously didn't fancy him. But the fact that he'd tried to pull her and Eddie had eventually ended up going out with her had caused some tension between them.

Tension that you could have cut with a chain-saw after she'd dumped Eddie. Mike wanted to console his friend but couldn't quite find the right tone. Part of it was the "she's obviously not right for our kind" type of thought, but there was more. Mike couldn't really understand why Eddie was hit so hard by it. Surely he'd seen it coming? Everyone else had. Debbie had been referring to Eddie as her "best friend" for months; she'd gone on holiday with a girlfriend instead of Eddie that year; she'd just stopped looking at him in that way that girls have of looking at their boyfriends and, later Eddie had admitted, they hadn't had sex for months.

It was truly tragic. They must have been going together 'properly' for over two years. She'd been good for Eddie all that time. She was so full of life and it had started to rub off on Eddie. Mike thought it was the first time that he'd seen Eddie consistently happy since his father's death. Some of the intensity had faded from him. Some of the relentless drive (to what?) had gone, or at least receded into the background. He was a laugh again.

So it was genuinely distressing to see him after she'd walked out. He really hadn't any idea had he. Love really was blind. Mike would never get caught out like that - he always dumped his girlfriends as soon as they started 'playing up'... well before they had chance to walk. And even if that Shannon (with the big tits (and arse)) he met in Majorca claimed she'd dumped him, it was a lie - he just hadn't got round to telling her it was over before she sent him that stupid little Dear John card in the post.

The biggest tragedy of all though was that Eddie, post-Debbie, was a total nightmare when it came to pulling situations. Even more so because somehow, by actively not trying to pull women, he seemed to be able to attract more than ever... so far, and then scare them away with some perfectly timed sharp (or more often than not, simply honest) comment.

Oh, it was too sad for words. Especially when Mike spotted a bit of stuff that he fancied, only to have his efforts thwarted by Eddie's long-range bird-repelling powers. That sort of thing can really strain a friendship. Maybe even break it, if it weren't for two key points: firstly Eddie obviously wasn't doing it on purpose, and secondly some of the birds that Mike took a fancy to these days were, on closer inspection, rather frighteningly a bit too young to be legally getting as friendly with as you might otherwise like!

For example, last Christmas. They were in a pub at the bar - it was The Star - no, The George Abbott, or The White House. Anyway, a pub. And this girl comes up to them and says "Would you like to buy me a drink?"

Now this girl was gorgeous. Not too tall, long blonde hair, blue

eyes (I think) and a very slinky, very low-cut dress which didn't leave too much to the imagination. So, Mike's reaction would have been to immediately say something like "How could I refuse such a lovely lady, of course."

But not Sir Eddie of Shore, Gallant Jedi Knight of the Round Fable. Oh, no. He says "Why, are you under 18?" Mike could barely fucking believe it! This fabulous chick was throwing herself in their general direction and Eddie's acting like he's a copper.

So it was with a mixture of growing surprise and relief that Mike witnessed the exchange that followed. First the girl went a bit pale and simply said "Yes". Then Eddie said "You're not even 16 are you." looking her right in the eye. She shook her head ever so slightly and turned to leave.

"Be careful." Eddie had said softly as she went.

Mike didn't notice if she'd heard, or where she went. He was too busy congratulating himself on a near miss.

"Would you believe it? Jail bait. I would have sworn she was 21!"

Without Eddie's help, a year before, he'd come even closer to 'embarrassing himself'. After a club session he'd been chatting to a couple of sisters (not twins unfortunately) outside, trying to pull one of them (OK, in his wildest dreams he would have loved to have them both) when a car pulled up. There was some guy driving who proceeded to glare at him. Before Mike could say "Piss off and find your own" or words to that effect, he'd opened the back near-side door and the girls were starting to get in.

Mike belatedly realised that this was more than likely their father,

and that he was giving him a “touch my little girls and you die” look. So, running away being better than valour, Mike swiftly headed off for home without so much as another glance in their direction.

Cradle-snatching aside, Eddie’s pushing powers were usually a bit more subtle and a bit less instant. His favourite, if you could call it that, was to say nothing at all. That soon saw them off - yes indeedy. For some reason he seemed to save that one for the women that he really liked.

“Why didn’t you say something man?” Mike would ask.

“I just couldn’t think of anything.” Eddie would shrug.

And if he did talk then it was often worse. Once on holiday, they’d had a few drinks and were chatting to a couple of nice looking young ladies from Italy. They had such sexy accents... Anyway, everything was going fine. Eddie seemed quite relaxed and though he wasn’t trying to pull, seemed likely to. Mike was going for the more gorgeous one of the two and was reaching the optimistic stage when Eddie asked her about her job as a nurse.

“Nurse!” Mike had thought, “Yes, yes, yes!” having missed that part of the conversation before.

So Carlotta starts telling him about where she works, which leaves out the other one a bit... (I can’t remember her name). For a moment Mike thought Eddie was trying to move in on the better looking bit of stuff, and a nurse! But that clearly wasn’t the case as Eddie seemed to take exception to the fact that she worked in a private hospital (do they even have an NHS in Italy? God knows... well, and most Italians probably would too).

She seemed to be handling him pretty well until, when asked if

they would treat someone in real need for free, she said “Eet is only money.”

Eddie blew a gasket and started ranting about how she might think it was ‘only money’ from her nice comfortable middle-class perspective, but what about all the people who couldn’t afford to eat healthily and and and...

Yawn. Nurse confused and pissed off. Mike gutted. Other Italian girl still prepared to shag Eddie for being a strong passionate man, but reluctantly dragged off somewhere else by her best mate.

Only after they’d gone did Eddie realise that she was probably trying to say something along the lines of “at my hospital you have to pay at the point of delivery but we do have ample provision for the poor via some typically bureaucratic Italian paper shuffling scheme”. Oops. He’d laughed. Mike had scowled - she was a bloody nurse for God’s sake!

Hopeless. Absolutely hopeless. In fact, the only woman that Mike remembered Eddie getting off with in the eight years since Debbie was that girl Lydia - during the Euro ‘96 championships. A time of great promise, hope, joy, expectation but ultimately shattering disappointment for every English man who ever played any game whatsoever and tried to win.

It was during the Holland game that she’d spotted them. At their best, or most triumphantly joyful anyway. She’d taken a fancy to Eddie from afar, breezed in and snapped him up. Whisked him off his feet. He didn’t stand a chance. Of course, Mike had been terribly jealous. Why wouldn’t he be? Some posh totty, who was more than a little bit of a babe, just walks up and makes Eddie pull her, against

his will almost. Is that fair?

Her similarity to Debbie was only partial - they were both blonde and very pretty but Lydia was much taller and slimmer - but the effect when she left him was exactly the same. Since it was more like 2 weeks than 2 years you would have thought that he would have taken it a bit better, but no. What was it with Eddie and women? What did they do to him? Why did he let them get to him like that?

Mike certainly didn't know. He was certainly Eddie's best friend. He'd been there both times to help Eddie drown his sorrows. He'd lent an ear as Eddie let it all out... and he'd been a good mate and been too pissed to remember any of it. He might even have offered his shoulder to cry on if Eddie had been the blubbering type... which of course he wasn't.

And Eddie wasn't here now. Mike was here alone with this lovely young woman who obviously fancied him. For a change it was all in his hands. There was no-one (no Eddie) to screw things up for him. It was Mike time.

“So, do you come here often?”

# Chapter 5

## Dessert

“There’s no rush.” said Eddie calmly.

He wasn’t calm. He was worried. Something good, no, great was happening but he wasn’t ready for it. He hadn’t prepared for this. He didn’t expect Jo to want to come back to his place tonight. Of course he wanted her to, but he wasn’t ready: was he?

With no sign of the waiter still, Eddie needed more time to think. He felt the need for a joke... something appropriate though.

“We ‘ave plenty of time for dessert Josephine.” he mumbled in his best Napoleonic accent.

“Argh! Crap joke. Cheesy and definitely not funny.” thought Eddie, although he didn’t quite think it was bad enough to elicit the kind of reaction that it seemed to be getting from Jo.

She was scowling at him.

“Arse!” thought Eddie, momentarily in despair. “She thinks I’m giving her the brush off. She thinks I don’t want to sleep with her.

She went out on a limb and I've sawn it off for her. Shit. Shit, shit, shit. What do I say?"

"Who told you?" demanded Jo, interrupting Eddie's panic.

"Er?" was the best he could do.

"Told me?" was a slightly better follow up, as he realised that he not only didn't know the answer... but he didn't even nearly understand the question either.

"What does she mean?" he wondered. Did she used to be some sort of dessert fiend? Was she once a 20 stone chocolate profiterole addict; and thought it was all behind her now but I've just gone and dragged it all up again by mistake?

Eddie smiled disarmingly. But Jo was still armed. He panicked and told the truth.

"I don't know what you mean. Is there some problem with desserts?"

"Desserts?" replied Jo.

Now they were both confused, which was only fair.

"Or Napoleon?" tried Eddie in one final attempt to rescue the situation before offering to call it quits and start again on another subject.

"Oh. That was Napoleon was it. And Josephine... I see." said Jo, out loud but it might as well have been to herself because Eddie was still in the dark.

Jo now looked a bit embarrassed, which at least put Eddie temporarily at ease. Maybe it was... no, it's gone, still no idea. Eddie looked at Jo with his best "I really like you but haven't got a clue what you're saying" face on.

She read it perfectly, smiled ruefully and looked down at her empty plate. When she looked up, ready to speak, the waiter was there.

“Dessert or coffee, monsieur madame?”

Timing! Eddie made an instantaneous executive decision.

“Crème brûlée for madame and tarte tatin for me.”

The waiter almost opened his mouth before Eddie added, “And two coffees to follow, thank you.”

He smiled and looked back towards Jo. The waiter took the hint, nodded and left: he knew he’d left them a long time, it wasn’t really his fault but the customer was always right... how nice of Monsieur Shore to rebuke him in such a polite way.

“How did you know crème brûlée was my favourite?”

“Oh no, here we go again!” exclaimed Eddie, rolling his eyes.

Jo laughed and the tension was finally broken, into lots of tiny pieces that slipped away through the cracks in the specially imported French floorboards.

“It’s quite simple really. My name is Josephine.”

“Oooh.” what else was he supposed to say?

“I’ve always been called Jo though, for as long as I can remember. I’ve no idea why my parents chose Josephine if they always intended to call me Jo anyway. My mum says it was down to my dad, but that might just be a cop-out. I only found out when I needed a passport and saw it on the birth certificate... which was after he died, so I never got to ask him about it.”

“Looks like we’ve both had our name troubles.”

Eddie’s mind drifted a bit ‘Edward and Josephine Tennyson’

sounded quite good to him... a bit too aristocratic maybe.

“Perhaps when we get married, before the five kids...”

“Four kids” interrupted Jo.

“Yes, four. Anyway, maybe we could just change our names?”

“What do you have in mind?” asked Jo, smiling again.

“I like Tennyson.”

“Good.” said Jo, simply. “I’d like to be Joanne. Most people assume I am anyway. Would you stick with Edward or be officially an Eddie?”

“Oh, I think it’s good to have one name for the official stuff, and your mother, and a shorter version for your mates, don’t you?”

“Definitely. Can’t get much shorter than Jo.”

“J, I suppose...” offered Eddie.

“You know, I heard one of the lads call Jennifer Pierce that today. Like it was some sort of private joke. Do you know what it’s about? I hope they aren’t picking on her because of this Jeff Stevenson business.”

“No, no. That goes way back.” Eddie checked himself, lest he wander into the realms of the seriously miss-timed sexist comment. “I think it’s some sort of comment on her IQ.”

“You mean they think she’s a bimbo?”

“Er. Yes.”

“Oh. Well, she is isn’t she!” laughed Jo.

“As her manager, I couldn’t possibly comment.” grinned Eddie.

“Well. We’ve sorted out the wedding, the kids and our names...” added Eddie, “...and here come the desserts.”

The waiter had hurried up the desserts because he thought that

was what Eddie wanted. If he'd been any quicker then he would have flailed straight back into the mess of being surplus to requirements. Fortunately for almost all concerned, this appearance was timed just about perfectly. The only loser was the gentleman at table 6 who would now notice Eddie's dessert and like the look of it so much that he would order one for himself... possibly with tragic consequences.

"Crème brûlée madame." announced the waiter, placing a white-dusted plate bearing a small brown dish in front of Jo.

"Et monsieur."

The waiter carefully placed another white plate, this one replete with an apple tart and cream, in front of Eddie. He then took out a box of matches from his pocket, extracted a match, struck it and lit the calvados which Eddie was just beginning to smell.

"Tarte tatin... flambée!"

There was a mixture of Oooh's, Aaah's and the odd little muted cheer from their fellow diners. Eddie was a bit embarrassed. He'd remembered the apple tart, but forgotten that they set fire to it. He blew it out gently before all the alcohol could burn off.

"Would monsieur like coffee now?"

"When we've finished please. I could use a fork though."

The waiter uttered a horrified "pardon" and scuttled away to collect the dessert cutlery that he'd left behind in the kitchen. He returned quickly and was again very apologetic.

"Don't worry about it." reassured Eddie, smiling.

"We're having a great time." he added, looking at Jo for confirmation.

"Oh, yes. Everything's been wonderful."

The waiter seemed somewhat relieved and left them happy - how kind Monsieur Shore was being to him tonight.

As they started on their desserts Eddie looked around the restaurant. It was no longer full, as several parties had left and only one couple had arrived after them (although they had left now too). Everyone that remained was part of a couple as far as he could make out. Pretty much everyone looked happy. They all looked comfortable. He felt comfortable. He'd only just realised it, but he did feel comfortable: apart from a nagging doubt about what might happen 'later'.

A few moments of silence passed. Then Eddie looked up at Jo. She was eating her pudding very deliberately and he didn't catch her eye for some time. When she noticed him looking at her, she smiled.

"Every time I look at her, I see a different face." Eddie thought.

It was a poem from somewhere. Where though? And what comes next?

"I can't quite believe we're here." he said suddenly.

"Why's that?" asked Jo softly.

To answer there was stuff that Eddie probably ought to sort out in his own mind first. But there was no time for that now. And he felt no need to conceal his confusion from her.

"It all seems a bit too good to be true... we, I mean I, keep nearly screwing things up and it still seems to be turning out OK. It is OK isn't it? I mean... what do I mean? I'm rambling now. Lost it."

Eddie pretended to shoot himself in the head with a revolver. Jo laughed, which probably means her father didn't die playing Russian roulette!

“After my birthday...” he started.

What was he saying? Was he mad? It was one thing to blurt out his sense of puzzlement at the evenings happy turns, but now he was venturing into potentially deep water. Very deep water maybe, without a life-jacket, maybe wearing heavy boots and inclined to mysteriously forget how to swim.

“...I thought something might happen.” he continued cautiously, looking at her.

“But somehow the moment slipped away. That night I waited for you, looked everywhere, but you’d gone. Later it seemed, well... I guess I’m trying to say that I caved in to self-doubt. It’s different now. I don’t know why, but it is.”

“I waited for you too.” replied Jo, a bit squeakily. She cleared her throat and continued. “It was a strange night. I was upset that you didn’t call me the next day.”

Jo looked at Eddie and he felt guilty.

“But I doubted myself too. I always have. I make up my mind to go for something, start out and when something goes wrong I just curse myself for being foolish and accept that it wasn’t to be.”

“It all works out in the end though, doesn’t it?” asked Eddie.

“Does it?” she looked like she might cry.

Eddie reached over and took her hand.

“Yes! Yes it works out. Every time! Bad things happen, sure; we make mistakes, things break, people get lost in crowds of drunkards and bouncers... people die... but it always, always works out.”

Now Jo did cry - just one little tear from each eye, which she quickly wiped away - only Eddie saw.

“I may be a bit unfortunate with birthday parties but otherwise, if you stick close to me, you’ll be OK.”

Bugger. Eddie thought he’d gone a bit far with that one. Had he spoiled it?

“I have noticed that about you.” said Jo slowly.

“Noticed?”

“Yes. I think you’re a lucky person.”

“Luck? In my experience...” he stopped himself.

“There’s no such thing as luck?” offered Jo, laughing. “Yes Obi-Wan Eddie.”

Eddie laughed too. She’d got him. He knew she wasn’t really mocking him...

“I mean. I believe that you make your own luck.”

“Well, in that case, you make lots more than I do.” stated Jo firmly.

Eddie was nearly drawn into another sci-fi reference but just avoided it. Instead he paused and thought about what she’d said. Why was she so determined to be ‘unlucky’? And what did she think she’d noticed?

“What makes you think that? I bet I’m no ‘luckier’ than you.” Eddie did that quotes thing with his fingers when he said “luckier”. He hated it when people did that... which is why he almost never did it.

“When was the last time you went to catch a bus and just missed it?”

“Isn’t that just good time management?” offered Eddie cheekily.

“Or got on a bus and had almost the right change but was 1 or

2p short?”

“We seem to be focussing a bit heavily on ‘bus luck’ here.” observed Eddie (without the finger quotes this time). “I do admit though that I very often seem to have exactly the right change in my pocket for most things... but that’s not luck, it’s...”

“What then?”

“Dunno.” shrugged Eddie, “It’s just insignificant little things. I’ve never ever won anything on the lottery, or in raffles, and I’m terrible at cards - Mike always takes me to the cleaners.”

“Maybe gambling needs greedy luck and you’ve got some sort of noble altruistic luck.” mused Jo somewhat fancifully.

“Could be. Maybe I have a great talent for helping people by not forcing them to work out how much change I need...”

“Actually, it’s harder with the right money because you have to add it up. If you get a note the till tells you what the change is.” Jo pointed out.

“True. Maybe I’m helping them practice their adding up then.”

This conversation wasn’t really going anywhere. What Eddie wanted to know was why Jo thought she was ‘unlucky’ not why he was better than average at coping with buses.

“But why do you think you are unlucky?” he asked directly.

“Maybe because I was born on Friday 13th?”

# Chapter 6

## Coffee

The waiter made something of a meal of clearing away their dessert plates, cutlery and napkins and then serving coffee. And since they'd just finished their meal, they'd didn't want another one... just the coffee.

It was a convenient interruption though. As Jo carefully unwrapped her chocolate and poured a dash of milk into her cup, she had a moment to reflect. Eddie probably thought she was a superstitious old nutter now. It hadn't come out quite right. She did think Eddie was a lucky person; but not in the lottery sense or the stupid change thing. She just had a feeling about him, a conviction from somewhere, that things would work out for him.

She wished he hadn't pressed her about being unlucky either. That had come out worse - born on Friday 13th - OK, it was true but it made her sound like she believed she was cursed from birth or something. He'd gone quiet now. She had to say something.

“I’m not superstitious though.” she tried, unconvincingly.

“What? Oh.” said Eddie, snapping back to the real world after drifting away slightly over his coffee. “I am over some things.”

“Are you; like what?”

“Well, when I was a kid I used to have this digital alarm clock with big red numbers on by my bed. For some reason I was convinced that 3 was the most special number there was - I think it was something to do with being sent to Sunday school for years and hearing about the Holy Trinity. Anyway, at night when I was going to sleep I’d look at the clock. If the number was a multiple of 3 then I’d close my eyes, but if it wasn’t then I’d wait until it was. Same if I woke up in the night. I’d always wait for a multiple of 3... and I don’t think, in all that time, I ever saw that clock display 3:33. Weird huh?”

“What did you think would happen if you closed your eyes at the wrong time?”

“I’ve no idea. That’s the dumb part. I just did it, for ages, for no reason. I thought I had to do it, so I did. Even now I sometimes see a digital clock on 10:19 or something and think ‘I can just wait for it to tick over... less than a minute, it won’t hurt’. Madness, utter madness.”

Now Jo didn’t know what to say. She was relieved but unsure where to go from here.

“So” they both started at the same time.

“Go on.” offered Jo.

“Oh. So, I think I can see why being born on a date like that might put doubts in your mind about all sorts of things.”

“That’s a good way to put it.” agreed Jo, “It’s a state of mind

thing. It's about dealing with things and whether you blame yourself for every little thing that goes wrong."

"Do you? Blame yourself for stuff, I mean."

"Yes. All the time. Like this watch - I bought it yesterday and it stopped on the way here. Look... oh, it's started up again."

She was right. It was running again; at least, it had moved on more than an hour from where it had definitely stopped before.

"Must be my influence." suggested Eddie sarcastically.

Jo scowled at him for an instant then laughed, "Yes, probably."

"It's easy to say." said Eddie, easily. "But you need to just let go."

"And use the force?" asked Jo, making herself go cross-eyed.

"You could try that." laughed Eddie.

"Is that what you do, when things go wrong? Forget it I mean, not use the force..."

"Oh no. I don't forget it. Not at all. No, I assume that there's something else, something that I haven't seen, which has happened to balance out the bad thing I did see."

Jo wasn't sure that she understood exactly what he was saying, so she raised an eyebrow (both of them actually) slightly and hoped he would explain further.

"Er. An example. OK, lets say I did just miss the bus. Then I'd try not to worry about getting to my destination late by wondering about all the bad things that might have happened if I had got on that bus."

"Oh, I think I see... and that helps does it?" mused Jo, unconvinced.

“All the time.” said Eddie confidently.

Jo smiled. Eddie’s quiet confidence was something that she’d always been attracted to. Maybe he was right about just making it happen. Maybe that was what she saw in him, why she thought he would go places and why, now more than ever, she wanted to go there with him.

“Shall we go home now?” she asked, finishing off her coffee and placing the empty cup delicately back on its saucer.

“Yes.” replied Eddie, who had already finished his a few minutes previously.

“Would you like to come back to mine for...” he paused slightly, realising that he was about to say “coffee” which of course they had only just had. “Back to mine.” he added simply.

“How sweet” Jo thought. She’d wondered if she might have been a bit too bold earlier when she’d suggested they go back to Eddie’s. After all that had been said though, and all the opportunities that seemed to have been missed in the past, by chance or whatever, she didn’t want them to part tonight.

“Yes, I’d like that.” she said softly.

Eddie tried to catch the waiter’s eye but just missed him.

“It’s not far.” he said clumsily.

“You’re just up in Charlotteville aren’t you?” asked Jo helpfully.

“Yes, Addison Road. Up is the word... that hill gets me sometimes. It’s easier after a few drinks though.”

“I suppose you could get a car.” she suggested.

“Wouldn’t they take away my licence if I drove after a few drinks?” Eddie teased.

“You know what I mean.” retorted Jo, smacking him on the hand playfully.

“Yeah. I like the walk though. You walk to work too.”

“About 3 minutes. I’m just near the police station.”

“That’s handy... for work. Do you gets lots of police cars screeching out of there with their lights flashing and sirens... wailing, or whatever sirens do these days?”

“Sometimes. Mostly they wait until they get to the end of the road before they put the sirens on. I sleep at the back of the house and I never hear them. Sarah complains sometimes.”

“Sarah’s the girl you share with?” checked Eddie.

“Yeah. There used to be three of us, but when Doris moved out we decided to pay the extra rent between us and reclaim the downstairs bedroom as a living-room. It was too cramped with three of us really.”

“Doris?” laughed Eddie.

“Oh, yes.” laughed Jo, “That wasn’t her real name. It was, um, Debbie but she was a bit of a pain so Sarah started calling her Doris and it stuck. I think she actually liked it.”

For a moment Jo’s attention was taken with remembering the origins of the name Doris. It was quite funny, and unusual, since girls didn’t really go in for nicknames and stuff. What was that programme with ‘The Doris’... the ghost that all the kids feared? She couldn’t remember, and was so taken with trying that she didn’t notice Eddie apparently freezing solid.

“What did she look like, this Doris?” he ventured, eventually.

“Er, tall, black, very short hair... so not ghostly at all. You look

like you've just seen a ghost though... Are you all right?" said Jo, suddenly becoming very concerned.

"No. I mean, yes. I'm fine; really. I am."

Eddie finally caught the waiter's eye and mimed signing a bill. The waiter immediately got his drift and headed off towards the till. Jo still wasn't quite sure what had happened, but was afraid to ask. There was a moment's silence.

"Her name was Debbie." explain Eddie at last. "The one who I thought was the one."

Ah, so that was it. Wow, he must have really been hurt to still be afraid of her name after all this time...

"I suddenly had this terrible fear that she might be a friend of yours. Silly really."

"She still lives in Guildford?" asked Jo. Worried now that they might walk out of the restaurant and bump into this woman who could turn Eddie to ice just by the mention of her name. What would happen if he actually saw her?

"I doubt it actually."

Phew, Jo was mightily relieved.

"Mike claimed he'd seen her with a short ugly guy - as if that was supposed to make me feel better - oh, years ago now. The last I heard was from my mother, who said that she'd been told by a friend of some acquaintance's tennis partner's sister that Debbie was going off to Australia to live - and that must have been over 3 years ago."

The waiter appeared with a large black wallet... which presumably contained their bill. He placed it by Eddie with a nod and a "monsieur" before withdrawing to a polite distance.

Eddie opened the wallet briefly then closed it and put it back down on the table, with his debit card, which he had previously extracted from his own wallet, on top. Before Jo could say anything, the waiter reappeared and took the wallet and card away.

“We ought to go halves.” Jo said belatedly, “How much was it?”

Eddie paused, then said “No, I’ll get this. You get the next one.”

“OK. Thank you very much then.”

Eddie resisted the temptation to say something twee and just smiled. Jo smiled back. She was quite relieved about the bill. She couldn’t let Eddie think that she expected him to pay for the meal - this was after all not a cheap place - but then she couldn’t really pay for it either, since she’d totally overspent on her outfit. Hopefully he understood; but then men just never did get the importance of accessories did they!

The waiter returned with the card slip. Eddie wrote in a tip and signed the slip. The waiter smiled broadly and said “Merci Monsieur Shore, Madame, bon soir!”

Eddie got up immediately, retrieving his jacket from the back of his chair. Jo went to do the same but the waiter, being a bit too helpful maybe, had already captured it and was waiting for her to get up so he could pull out the chair. Awkwardly Jo complied, more embarrassed than flattered by the attention. Eddie must have noticed because he stepped over and took the jacket from the Frenchman.

“Allow me.” he said, simply draping the jacket over her shoulders.

“Thank you.” said Jo, turning her head towards him.

Eddie leaned forward and kissed her on the lips briefly. Then he took her hand and lead her casually from the restaurant.

Behind them they heard the waiter say “Bon soir” again; but they missed the man who’d ordered the tarte tatin after Eddie going very pale, getting short of breath and starting to have a heart attack... just like he’d been warned.

The air outside was cold. It was December. Jo pulled her jacket tightly around her and, noticing, Eddie put his arm around her too and pulled her to him.

“That was a lovely meal, thank you.” said Jo as they started walking.

As Guildford Castle appeared before them, brightly lit and towering up towards the black winter sky, Eddie’s eyes were drawn up and up to the stars. He remembered the events of the previous few days. How his plan had ‘come together’ driven by those very stars... none of whose names he could now remember. The plan only ran to tonight though - to 9pm and reaching the restaurant. Now he was on his own, or rather, with Jo and strolling off into the great unknown. It scared him a little, and excited him a lot.

They walked in silence for a while, both lost in thought after being quickly sobered by the chilly night air. Huddled tightly together. Feeling a warm glow on the inside.

At last, as they started up Bright Hill towards Harvey Road, Eddie spoke. He didn’t really feel he needed to say anything, but he didn’t want a prolonged silence to say the wrong thing either.

“I hope you’re not expecting a mansion or anything...” he started, “it’s quite a small house.”

“Don’t worry,” laughed Jo, “size isn’t important...”

# Chapter 7

## Back

Eddie unlocked his front door and walked in. Even though the warmth of his hallway surrounded him, a cold shiver suddenly ran down his spine. He had just remembered the map. It was still on the wall of his ‘operations HQ’, a room he would probably be describing to Jo as the dining room... any minute now.

“Shit!” thought Eddie.

He’d been home after work to get changed. He’d walked past the map several times. He’d had every opportunity to take it down. But it was still there. Partly because he’d forgotten all about it, and partly because he hadn’t been expecting to bring Jo home with him tonight.

“Think. What can I say?”

Maybe she wouldn’t notice it... OK, it’s really big, it takes up half of the wall, it’s got brightly coloured pins sticking in it... if she doesn’t notice it then she’s blind. Is she blind? No, I don’t think so!

“Ah, but if I get her into the living room, or straight upstairs?”

Jo followed Eddie through the door.

“Can I use your loo?” she asked.

So much for plan A.

“Sure, it’s straight through the dining room and the kitchen.” said Eddie, trying not to sound reluctant to convey such seemingly innocuous directions.

Now he knew why people always said you just had to have two toilets! Well it was too late to think now, he’d just have to react and hope for the best.

As it happened, the cold air and the wine had made Jo quite desperate for the ‘loo’ and the last thing on her mind was inspecting the decor for gross anomalies. She sped through the dining room without a second look and on through the kitchen to the bathroom. Eddie heard the light click on and the door close.

Quickly he went to the map and started to try and unpick the tape that was holding it firmly to the wall. It had been there for some time and was well and truly stuck down. Eddie’s hands were cold too, which didn’t help. He rubbed them together, cupped them into a ball and blew into it to try and warm them up.

The corner of the tape had just started to budge when he heard the toilet flush. No time now. In a flash he realised that it would look much less bad without the pins... that was the best he could do. As a now more relaxed Jo checked out Eddie’s bathroom for a moment, Eddie quickly pulled out all the pins from the map and slipped them into his jacket pocket.

Eddie then quickly retreated across the hallway to the living

room. Maybe, even if she saw the map and thought it was a little odd, she might not say anything.

Jo appeared in the doorway. She'd taken her jacket off and was holding it, looking for somewhere tidy to hang it. Eddie jumped up off the sofa and took it from her.

"Here, let me take that." he said, wondering if there was somewhere tidy he could hang it.

Eddie backed back into the living room and placed the jacket carefully on the armchair by the door. Then he took off his own jacket, placed it on top of Jo's and went to sit down on the sofa - the two-seater sofa. Jo followed him and sat down by his side. Eddie cast his eye around the room.

"Sorry about the mess. Can I get you anything?"

"A glass of water?"

"Oh, yes, sure..." he said, a little surprised, getting up and heading off for the kitchen.

While he was gone Jo had a good look around the room. She'd already checked out the bathroom - no sign of any female influences there, not even the slightest hint. This room too obviously hadn't been visited by the fairer sex in a long time. That was fine; she didn't want any surprise competition appearing on the scene.

It was a bit messy. There were lots of books and magazines on the floor, in several haphazard piles, some of which had been knocked over. She noticed a couple of titles which surprised her - 'Don Quixote' and 'The Brothers Karamazov' - especially placed as they were on a pile of old X-Men and Spider-man comics.

"Quite a mixture there." she thought.

As far as she could tell from a quick glance there weren't any naughty magazines or even 'lads mags'. All single blokes read them didn't they? Maybe his were hidden under the bed or something...

Jo thought the untidiness was sweet. Eddie obviously hadn't planned to lure her back here tonight, otherwise he would have tidied. Wouldn't he? Maybe he did and this was the result. No, he'd apologised for the mess hadn't he. This was surprising, everyday, manly untidiness. Nothing was particularly dirty - he'd probably vacuumed the carpet recently - but the place needed a good dusting.

"Here you go." said Eddie handing her a glass.

He sat down and sipped from the beaker he'd brought for himself. All his best glasses were in the dishwasher, which he'd forgotten to switch on again.

As he forgot about the map, the untidiness and getting water, Eddie's mind turned back to the present situation. The business at hand. Him and Jo alone in his house... at night. Late at night. At bedtime in fact. Presently downstairs but most likely soon to ascend upstairs. To the bedroom.

Fear is the wrong word, because the thing that he was worried about was something that he very much wanted to happen. He just wasn't expecting it to happen tonight and he still didn't feel prepared. Mentally prepared that is - physically he would be fine... wouldn't he? He always had been, fine, apart from that one time... but that was years ago. Years and years. No, that was an aberration when he was very inexperienced. It couldn't happen again.

He wasn't very experienced now... Stop it! He would be fine.

Eddie looked at Jo. She was sitting by his side, leaning well back

into the sofa... legs crossed towards him (check!) looking at him. He put his beaker down on the floor and leaned back towards her. Jo lowered her glass and smiled. Eddie took the glass gently from her hand and leaned across her to put it on the small table by her side of the sofa. As he did so he caught the fragrant aroma of her perfume (which he didn't recognise because he knew nothing of these things) and kicked over the beaker of water that he'd only just placed carefully on the floor by his foot.

For an instant Eddie found himself wondering if the carpet was the only thing in his immediate vicinity that was wet... he half smiled as he started to move back.

"What?" asked Jo quietly.

There was nothing he could say, so he smiled properly this time, carefully removed Jo's glasses, then his and he kissed her.

It was one of those kisses where time either goes really, really, really slowly or you suddenly discover that you can go a very long time without breathing if you are distracted by something sufficiently primordial. There was passion, but not wild lust! It was tender and gentle.

Eddie felt like he was dreaming, until he suddenly became very aware of his hands. One was on the sofa arm and the other on its back. Jo had slipped her arms around his waist and was stroking his back as they kissed... so why was he clinging to the sofa? He moved his left hand slightly and found out - if he wasn't careful he'd tip over. He could probably do something a bit more exciting with his right hand, but that would put a lot of strain on his left arm... which might just buckle.

Jo was quite oblivious to Eddie's sudden mechanical problems and continued to play her part to the full. She wasn't really thinking about where things might go - how events might unfold I mean - and simply let herself go with the flow.

For Eddie though, the moment was coming to an end. He had to move into a more comfortable position. And he wanted to put his arms around her. So, he backed off slowly and hoped Jo would follow - she did, and with an almost elegant swoop Eddie fell backwards onto the sofa with Jo on top of him. For a moment he wondered if he ought to be starting to think about removing clothes but, after a few failed attempts to flick off his own tightly laced shoes, he decided that kissing fully clothed was just fine for now...

Jo's shoes had easily been discarded and now she lay quite comfortably on Eddie, who had one leg on the sofa and one dangling off it. For a few moments they lay there, lips barely touching, Eddie motionless and Jo moving her head infinitesimally. Eddie put his arms around her and pulled her even closer - which was quite an achievement given that gravity was already doing a pretty good job of pressing them together. Jo gasped and Eddie released her a little. He smiled and she kissed him again.

As the next epic kiss developed, Eddie started exploring Jo's back with his hands, very gently. After a few minutes a thought popped into Eddie's head and his right hand started slowly down Jo's spine to try and find the answer. At first he thought the answer was 'no' - which would have shocked him a little bit - but after a bit more stroking he discovered a faint ridge and concluded finally that she was wearing knickers after all. At about the same time his left hand

was confirming what he'd known for most of the evening - that she wasn't wearing a bra.

With all the basic questions to which he felt he really needed an answer answered, Eddie stopped thinking and got on with kissing. Neither of them seemed in any hurry to do anything else. Which was nice. Nice for Eddie because at the back of his mind he was still worried about something that he couldn't even vocalise: and nice for Jo because every man she'd ever been in this position with before had tried to get her clothes off after two minutes.

Just when it seemed like this kiss may go on all night, or at least beat their record from the night-club on Eddie's 30th birthday, Eddie's left leg started to go to sleep. Suddenly it was shot through with pins and needles.

"Ow!" said Eddie involuntarily.

"What?" asked Jo, worried that she might have crushed something vital somehow.

"It's just my leg. It's gone to sleep."

He tried to sit up, and Jo rolled off so he could. As Eddie sat on the front edge of the sofa rubbing his leg, Jo rubbed his back. Suddenly she said "I'm quite sleepy too now. Perhaps we should go to bed."

Eddie didn't quite freeze but he paused for long enough to prompt Jo into adding, "If you want me to stay, that is."

He turned round and looked right at her, which was difficult without his glasses.

"Of course I want you to stay."

He almost added a joke, along the lines of "I can't let you walk

home by yourself at this time of night” but wisely thought better of it.

Jo smiled. Inside Eddie quaked a little. He stood up. His left foot still tingled a bit and as he reached out to take Jo’s hand his fingers did too. He helped her up, guided her around the spilt water and led her to the door. Jo switched off the living-room light and Eddie led her up the stairs in the dark.

At the top of the landing it was quite light, as the the curtains were open and it was a full moon. Eddie paused for an instant, looking into the spare room. Did she really want to sleep with him? Should he offer her the use of the spare room? Would that spoil it? What if he did and she said yes? What if he didn’t and she declined to go into his room?

All of these questions quickly faded as Eddie felt the warmth of Jo’s hand in his. They were together now. He reached for the door to his room, pushed it open and led her in.

# Chapter 8

## Hotel

Sarah was a bitch. She'd admit it to most people. Why should she care what people thought of her? She was never particularly nasty to anyone. As far as she was concerned, she almost always bitched for mutual benefit, and as such she considered herself a 'white' bitch. This was clearly meant to be in the context of 'white witch', but the similarity was lost quite badly on the first people she'd tried it on and she'd never attempted to use the phrase out loud since.

Lying awake in the hotel bed, Sarah wondered why the hell she'd come to Tenerife on her own in December. Michele had dropped out late when she broke her ankle in a freak stiletto accident - which was fair enough - and Jo... well, she hadn't asked Jo. Jo was OK to live with but she wouldn't want to go on holiday with the girl. No way. Somehow she had a habit of attracting the worst kind of dorks and losers... and not noticing that they were dorks and losers. And if she did bag a decent man she'd always find something wrong with him

at the last minute.

The man by her side stirred slightly and his breathing grew quieter. Good - maybe now she might get some sleep. Would you believe it though, she'd come all this way and ended up shagging someone from Guildford. Maybe that had been a mistake. It was certainly the kind of 'bad omen' that would have put Jo off. But not her. Sarah wasn't going to fork out for a holiday and go home without having shagged a single man.

Mike had seemed quite nice. See, she still remembered his name so he must have made a decent impression. He was OK looking, not too boring, treated her quite well and she was too drunk to care about anything else. The sex had even been OK, although nothing special... all regulation stuff really. Sarah looked at him asleep and wondered if he was a keeper. Maybe. It would be different in the morning anyway - it always was. They could exchange numbers and promise to call when they got home. But would they? He almost certainly wouldn't; would she? Maybe.

It was nearly 2am. She was still wide awake, even though Mike was now breathing almost silently. She got up and walked very carefully to the bathroom, slightly unsteady on her feet. A glass of water was what she really wanted but the stuff in the taps tasted like shit. Turning on the light she cast around for something else, anything drinkable. There were a couple of cans of lager... no thanks... and some foreign cans which looked like they might be soft drinks. She opened one with a hiss and tasted it gingerly... it was some sort of weird iced-tea or something. She drank it all down in one and threw the empty can in the sink. It clanged loudly.

As Sarah made her way back to bed, Mike rolled over onto 'her side'. She paused, wondering if she should shove him back over, but decided to just go and get in the other side instead. Her head was starting to ache. The can was too little too late - she was already on the outskirts of hangover city.

Pressing a hand lightly on her forehead, Sarah's thoughts turned back to Jo again. What could she do to get the girl to give up on that loser Eddie that she'd been moping about for... well, for ever it seemed: almost as long as they'd known each other in fact. Actually, Sarah had never met Eddie. But he worked in the cinema for God's sake! Then again, so did Jo... but she deserved to do better, didn't she.

Sarah looked at Mike's naked back and wondered if he had any nice mates back home... for Jo obviously. She smiled to herself, remembering a certain man whose brother turned out to be the better bet...

Jo and Sarah weren't particularly close. They'd been flat-mates for about 3 years, but they didn't socialise that much together. When Sarah had first moved in she had made an effort, they both did, and they had gone out together and mixed with each other's friends. But their respective groups were like oil and water: Sarah's friends were slick and Jo's were wet; they could sit side-by-side but they'd only mix if you shook them up a bit, and then only for a few minutes.

Quite quickly their relationship became almost exclusively home-based. Which was fine. They made really good flat-mates because they were quite different without being too different. Actually, now she thought about it, they were pretty hugely different. It worked,

Sarah thought, because she was flexible and didn't kick up a fuss when Jo did unreasonable things like turn up the heating too high all the time and throw out stuff without asking her.

Running her hand along Mike's arm, Sarah wondered what it was about Jo and men. For a start the girl had a completely unrealistic view of how men worked. Sarah knew, and had told Jo many a time, that men just want food, drink, sport and sex - give them the right amount of each and they'll be happy - and if they're happy then they won't moan too much when you want food, drink, shopping and sex. Simple. That's how it works. If they cross the line and over-do the food, drink and sport... then ration the sex... or go shopping!

Jo had a stupid idea about men though. She thought that a man ought to love her and treat her like an equal. That they ought to share some special bond that would... make them God knows what. Love? How old fashioned. Love was for people who didn't believe in sex before marriage, and didn't get much sex after marriage either. It wasn't love that kept couples together, it was a combination of laziness and lack of self-confidence.

Sarah was a realist. Jo was a dreamer. OK, so Sarah had been with quite a few men that had treated her shabbily, one or two that had treated her badly and one that had hit her - but she'd left them as soon as they'd gone too far, and in the case of the hitter she'd told her brother Frank... the kick-boxer... who had himself gone a little bit too far, since he'd actually gone and broken the guy's jaw... and arm.

Her headache was easing a bit now and she started to feel a bit sleepy. As she started to drift off, Sarah decided to count up

the number of men that she knew Jo had slept with. Which was probably a mistake, since she got to one and got stuck. One? There must be more than that. There were other boyfriends; ones that Jo had said she wasn't ready to sleep with and who had drifted away... bored of waiting.

Sarah counted the men that had passed through their flat, mixing up Jo's boyfriends and her own lovers. Roughly alphabetically: Alex, Adam... Bill, Craig, there were two Chrises, David - David!

Now, that whole David thing was not her fault. No way. One day she would tell Jo the truth and she would understand. But not for a while yet... or maybe never.

David was American. He was a student at the University and worked part-time in a couple of pubs. That's where they'd met him. Actually, Jo met him first and he took quite a shine to her. Maybe she epitomised his ideal of the English rose or something. Who knows, these foreign students have some pretty weird ideas sometimes. Anyway, Jo brought him home one night when Sarah happened to be in, and Sarah had been more than a little jealous. He was tall, broad, square-jawed and just generally gorgeous. And sweet, at first.

The situation had been a little awkward. Obviously David wanted to get it on with Jo, Sarah was hardly trying to hide that fact that she wanted to get it on with David and Jo was just being Jo. Somehow David managed to manoeuvre himself and Jo into Jo's bedroom, leaving Sarah well behind - which was quite an achievement since Jo was trying to manoeuvre him out of the front door!

With the walls in their flat being pretty thin, it didn't take much

to be able to overhear most of what was going on in Jo's room. And, since she actually had her ear pressed right against the wall, Sarah could overhear precisely everything that was said, as well as every creak and moan... of the furniture. Not that there was much to overhear - basically Jo was "disappointed" that David should try and force himself on her after such a short time, and that he'd "seemed like a nice man" before.

Yep, that was Jo. But David hadn't left, he'd definitely stayed the night in Jo's room, because Sarah was up early and caught a brief glimpse of him as he'd let himself out the next morning.

So, it was all a bit confusing. With hindsight it might have been a good idea for Sarah to talk to Jo about what had happened, and what her feelings were for David, and whether she felt she had any 'rights' over him. Especially since Sarah then went out purposefully the next evening to the very same pub where David works to try and pull him.

Did she try and pull? OK, she went there hoping to leave with David - but that's not the same. She never suggested anything. She let him do all the pulling, and he didn't need much encouragement. He had talked about Jo quite a bit, which was annoying, but he didn't do it in a particularly 'Jo and I are an item now' sort of way. And he did seem quite interested in her too, as well as Jo. And it definitely was him that had suggested they go back to his room for coffee... although she had accepted pretty sharply.

On the way there, in a taxi which suggested he was really a bit better off than the average student, he had talked about Jo some more. For a moment Sarah had wondered if she was mistaken, if

David was only interested in pumping her for information. But when they got to his room, which was very small, and she found that he didn't have any coffee, she knew that she'd scored.

It was to date still the smallest room that she'd ever had sex in, and the smallest bed - she had had sex in a cupboard once, which was smaller but not a room, and it didn't have a bed...

David had obviously had quite a bit of practice at sex, and clearly knew his way around a woman's body - but somehow it was ultimately an uninspiring experience. Maybe it was the room, the decor, the situation or David's own equipment that fell short. In truth it was probably all of those. What made it worse was that David seemed disappointed too - which might have made a less confident girl feel like she'd been lacking somehow!

Sarah hadn't even stayed the night - she couldn't really in such a tiny bed - and she'd gone home in another taxi (which David paid for). Jo was in bed when she got home, but Sarah still felt a pang of guilt as she passed her bedroom door.

If that had been the end of it then it would have just been one (more) sordid little affair that didn't do much for anyone. But that was not the end. A couple of days later David called round - for Jo. Sarah had answered the door and he'd pretended that nothing had happened, that he was Jo's boyfriend and Sarah was Jo's friend. Jo had seemed quite pleased to see him, which made it even worse.

Nightmare! Jo is happy because the hunk who she thought was just after a quick shag has come back to prove that he really is a nice bloke who'll stick around after he's had his way. And Sarah's there thinking 'I know he's a shit who will bugger off after he's had

his way... and he's a fairly crap shag too, anyway.'

What was she to say? "Jo, chuck him now because he's the sort that will sleep with your mates the first chance he gets... and he already has in fact."

Fortunately the nightmare only lasted a few more days. Maybe David thought he only had to string Jo along for a few nights and then he'd get his end away. Maybe someone easier just came along. Either way, he stopped calling and both Jo and Sarah started drinking in different pubs...

Sarah finally fell asleep, just as it occurred to her that over the whole time she'd known her, she had slept with as many of Jo's boyfriends as Jo had.

# Chapter 9

## Bed

Eddie crept along the edge of his bed in the dark and switched on his bedside lamp. The sight wasn't as horrific as it might have been. Mainly because neither he nor Jo were wearing their glasses. At least the bed was made... and most of the clothes were piled onto a chair, rather than being strewn across the carpet, waiting forlornly for wash-day.

Speaking of which, when was the last time he'd changed the sheets? Washing for Eddie was definitely demand driven. When his sock drawer was empty he knew he had to wash his socks. He didn't have enough shirts to last a full two weeks, so that was the main driver usually. Of course, he could have just gone out and bought ten shirts at once... but that was more effort, for him, than doing the washing once a week.

Sheets were an exception though. He had about half a dozen sets, some of which his mother had given him and some he'd bought

himself. The problem was that he didn't change them every week. And then he would forget if he'd changed them the previous week... usually assuming he had if he couldn't remember it... which was probably the opposite of what he ought to do. So, often the sheets were on for three weeks - which didn't bother Eddie at all, until now.

Jo made her way around the other side, the right-hand side as you look from the foot to the head. Normally she slept on that side anyway. At least, she always started on that side and then drifted towards the middle - sleeping alone as she most often did.

"Do you have a big T-shirt I could use?" she asked.

"Er. I think I can find something." replied Eddie, turning and opening a drawer.

Something plain would be safe. He quickly fished out an old favourite and threw it casually over to Jo's side. Actually, it wasn't plain: it was an old 'Jesus and Mary Chain' shirt... but the writing had all worn off after about the hundredth wash... and it was now a nice charcoal grey rather than the original deep black. It was a special thing.

The drawer was particularly full. He must have done the washing very recently. And he had changed the sheets, hadn't he? The pillow cases were red with thin white stripes running diagonally across. Those were his second to last choice - totally 1970's - and didn't match the duvet cover, as the corresponding one was only a single. Casually Eddie picked up a pair of trousers from the floor and took them over to the linen basket. Putting them in he could see that there was also a duvet cover and a sheet in there. Phew.

Silently Jo slipped off her dress and slipped on the T-shirt. Then

she slipped into bed. Done. Five seconds. Eddie hadn't even got a shoe off yet!

Rather self-consciously Eddie took off his clothes, leaving only his boxer-shorts, and slipped into bed himself. The sheet and duvet felt cold as he turned to switch off the bedside lamp. For once it was very noticeable to him how fresh the covers smelt. In the dark he snuggled down under the duvet and headed for the middle of the bed... where Jo was waiting for him.

Their lips quickly met, as they resumed where they'd left off a few minutes previously on the sofa. Soon they were both nice and warm...

Suddenly Eddie became conscious that he wasn't making best use of his arms again. His right arm was doing well, it was exploring Jo's back, already underneath the T-shirt he'd lent her. The left arm wasn't doing anything though; it was just pinned to his side, and since there wasn't even room between them to slip a sliver of slippery soap, it wasn't likely to move all by itself.

It was no use, the arm had to get round the back somehow. Eddie moved back slightly, breaking lip contact for the first time in five minutes, and tried to slide his arm under Jo's neck. She didn't quite catch his intention and he ended up lifting her head slightly with his other hand, rather unromantically. When they settled back down, Eddie had both arms round Jo. He was happy. She was happy. Good, back to the kissing.

Eddie pulled Jo as close as he could. The T-shirt had ridden up quite a way and he could feel the warmth of her stomach pressed against his. Or, since his stomach was the bigger one, maybe that

was his pressed against hers. As that thought faded, Eddie suddenly became aware, no, not aware, he was already well aware, he became embarrassed by the knowledge of what else he had pressed against Jo.

Why was he embarrassed, he wondered. It was perfectly natural. Every other part of his body was well into the experience... in fact, if his knob wasn't wide awake and ready to go, then he would be really worried. Never the less, he did feel slightly embarrassed. Maybe it was just the obviousness of it: there was no hiding his intentions now.

Happy as he was to continue kissing and cuddling, Eddie's musings on the central presence of his erection made him think that it was time for him to get on with it. No rush though...

After a few more minutes something else popped up. It wasn't really a problem. Eddie was sure he had a packet in his bedside drawer. There was no doubt about that. And he wasn't worried that it had been there so long that they might be 'out of date'. No; condoms had use-by dates of years and years didn't they... it had been a while, but not that long. What bothered Eddie, mildly, was the logistics - he'd never managed to master the art of subtly slipping one out of the packet and slipping it on without a fuss. Usually he ended up fumbling with the box, packet and installation for so long that often he thought the girl might as well nip downstairs for a cup of tea while she was waiting!

Jo was feeling quite dreamy. Eddie's strong arms wrapped her completely and she felt transported to some heavenly realm. Not only had Eddie not tried to disrobe her downstairs, he now seemed

quite happy to kiss and cuddle rather than whip her pants off and go for gold - even though he clearly had a hard-on.

That was the problem with men. As soon as their little chap woke up they seemed to have an irresistible urge to immediately do his bidding. Otherwise sensitive men would suddenly become selfish bastards. Not that Jo had ever really encountered a genuinely sensitive man herself, just lots of bastards... but this was what she'd heard from her friends who insisted that they had.

In fact, by now, Jo was entering record territory. Not even counting the time they'd spent kissing downstairs, they must have been at it for at least twenty minutes by now. 'At it.' Yuck, what a terrible expression. She wondered how long it could last. The muscles in Eddie's lower back felt so hard... and yet his skin was very soft. And, considering that he really didn't seem to have planned for them to come back here together, she was amazed that his sheets were so fresh.

If they were doing anything else then Eddie knew he would be able to say the equivalent of "So, do you want to carry on like this all night, or are you keen to pop in full sex while we're here?"

He could even have added "You know, I'm happy either way."

Sex was different though wasn't it. Well, for an Englishman anyway. You weren't allowed to talk about sex until much, much later in the "relationship" ... and certainly not during the act!

Jo's right arm was getting tired of being squashed and it let her know by starting to go to sleep. Gently casting her left leg over Eddie, she rolled them both over and landed on top. Eddie lowered his arms to her waist, inadvertently tickling her, and she laughed.

“Sorry.” laughed Eddie.

“That’s all right.” said Jo, kissing him again.

Eddie wondered if Jo had gone on top to move things along a bit. It was quite forward, wasn’t it? Very comfortable though. Very. She had him surrounded. There was no escape. It was wonderful.

After a few more minutes, Eddie decided it was time to go for it. He wasn’t a hundred percent sure. He would have been happy to wait until another night. Was that because he was afraid? Yes. He worried that it would be over in an instant... and that Jo would think him a lousy lover. All because of that one time... the first time.

Deep in a dark corner of Eddie’s mind lay a secret that he’d never told anyone. He’d tried his best to forget it. He never thought about it, but it lurked there in the background. She was young, and a virgin, as was he. Eddie thought he loved her, because he didn’t know any better.

After they’d been going together for a couple of months she started suggesting that they go all the way. He was very naive. Back then he felt that he only ever wanted to sleep with one woman for his whole life - because that’s what his parents had done (so they claimed). It was nothing to do with marriage - sex before marriage was fine - but he had a strong conviction that there ought to be just the one girl for him. And he wasn’t sure she was the one, yet.

Time passed and she became more and more persuasive. Once or twice he found himself thinking “Isn’t it the boy who’s supposed to be pressing the girl for sex?” She got him into (her parents’) bed a couple of times but nothing happened because he never got an

erection. His resolve, or fear, was that strong.

Even then she didn't give up. She started trying to find ways to help him with his 'little problem'. Who the hell was she talking to for these tips, he'd wondered years later.

Eventually other factors came to play and he decided that she definitely wasn't the one. They parted, with her thinking he was impotent. It would have been so much simpler if he'd just said "I'm not ready for sex yet" ... so much simpler.

The sad thing was that his next girlfriend seemed like the one from the start. He would have slept with her straight away but, more traditionally, she was the one who wanted to wait. Then, when the time did come, to his horror he found himself thinking of Lauren. It was like she was destined to be present at his first time, whether he liked it or not. He got through it, but it was very disappointing, and the girl made no effort to reassure him.

Ever since he'd almost dreaded the first time with a new lover. But he was fine when he felt comfortable. And he was comfortable now, wasn't he! Oh yes, he was comfortable. Jo was obviously up for it. He was sure she would be fine if he said "Look, can we wait a bit before having sex" but why wait if he wanted it too. He did want it. And he knew she did too.

Eddie gently slipped his fingers under the waistband of Jo's knickers. As he moved his hands outward towards her hips he tickled her again and she giggled. Pausing briefly, momentarily hesitant, Eddie then pushed both hands downwards, taking the cotton briefs with them.

Before he'd got very far, Jo stopped kissing him and said simply,

and very softly, “No”.

It was a “No” like Eddie had never heard before. Not scolding at all, not even a refusal really. Just a confirmation of what he now realised they had both been thinking all along. They weren’t going to have sex tonight; it wasn’t the right time, they needed to explore each other some more first. That was what Jo wanted. It was what Eddie had hoped she would want, but feared, at the back of his mind, that she wouldn’t. That was it wasn’t it?

Eddie realised that Jo’s mouth was hovering over his, not quite touching. He moved his hands up, out of her pants, and then replaced them on her hips but on the virtuous side of the cotton. In response Jo ran the tip of her tongue around the edge of Eddie’s lips.

Maybe they weren’t going to have sex tonight... but it was still going to be a long hot winter’s night!

# Chapter 10

## Breakfast

Jo woke first. It was just before 8 and barely light, so she lay where she was, eyes half open. She thought about the night before. How wonderful it had been - the whole evening - the best she'd ever had probably, knickers on or off!

After about 20 minutes the sun started to stream through the hastily drawn curtains. Jo was hungry so she decided to venture down to the kitchen in search of breakfast. Eddie was facing away from her, still fast asleep. Maybe she could surprise him with breakfast in bed. Slipping out of bed, her bare arms and legs immediately stung with the cold, but she quickly found a pair of sweat pants and a jumper in the pile on the chair by the wall.

They were too big for her. The bottoms were just about OK, but the jumper was massive. There was no way she could make breakfast in this, as every time she tried to roll the sleeves up, they just rolled themselves down again. As she cast around for something else she

wondered if even Eddie would be lost in this huge top... and therefore if it really belonged to someone else. Actually it was Eddie's jumper: his mother had bought it for him a few Christmases ago. Originally it was just a bit too big, but Eddie liked it and wore it a lot. Bizarrely, whereas most of the things that Eddie washed over and over shrank or lost their colour, this jumper seemed to stretch and stretch. He was very attached to it though, and was letting it live out its days in the light on the chair by his bed, rather than condemning it to the dark at the back of a drawer.

Jo didn't want to go rummaging in Eddie's drawers so she tip-toed round to Eddie's side of the bed and picked up the shirt that he'd been wearing the night before. It was obviously very crumpled, dropped as it had been on the floor, but it was warm, the sleeves stayed rolled up and it reminded her of Eddie's arms wrapped around her.

On the way out of the room she caught herself tip-toeing, even though she would have quite liked him to wake up, but he didn't, even when she started walking normally. It was cold in the hall too, and she was tempted to go back and find some socks. A sound below caught her attention and she descended to find a copy of the Guildford Times by the front door. As she picked it up a wad of advertising leaflets, of various sizes, fell out and spread over the floor.

Jo bobbed down to collect the leaflets. As she got the last of them, a flyer for a cheap take-away curry joint which had just made it into the dining room, Jo noticed the map on the wall. It wasn't just a map on the wall. It wasn't framed for a start; it was taped on. And it was big.

In another time, at a different place, she would have worried about it. It clearly wasn't "ordinary" after all. But she trusted Eddie enough to hardly give it a second thought now. It was relegated to an "ask later" rather than leaping to a "where are my shoes?"

Putting down the paper and the leaflets on the dining table, Jo ventured tentatively into the kitchen. She'd passed through it quickly the night before with no desire to inspect it, and now that she did she was pleasantly surprised.

"Not too bad." she said to herself, "I wonder if there's any bread in the bread bin?"

To her greater surprise there was, and a loaf not sliced, and it was quite fresh. She couldn't find a bread-knife though - not in the knife block or the cutlery draw - so she had to hack at it with a steak knife. If she'd checked the dishwasher she would have found the bread-knife... covered in pizza, unfortunately.

The toaster looked a bit past it, thought Jo as she gingerly tried to feed the roughly hewn doorsteps into it. They were all too thick to fit in.

"Shit." she thought, wondering if this was some sort of anti-toast conspiracy developing.

Pausing the toast idea for a minute, Jo instead filled up the kettle and switched it on. At least that seemed to work - there was a red light on the switch and the kettle started to make a low rumbling sound (either that or Guildford was experiencing a freak localised earthquake for the first time since 1897).

There was a cupboard with lots of mugs in. Most of them were fairly plain and boring but one caught her eye - it was dark green

and had the words “Eddie Shore” painted by hand in gold on the side. She moved it and behind found another, this time dark blue, with slightly smaller text. All in all there were six.

“Hmmm.” thought Jo. “I wonder what that’s all about.”

The whole name thing had passed over her a bit until Eddie had stumbled upon the fact that her first name was actually Josephine, and not Joanne as everyone, including herself for much of her life, always assumed.

“An ice-hockey player or something...” she mumbled to herself, partially resolving to look him up on the internet the next time she found herself with nothing better to do.

Selecting the blue “Eddie Shore” mug for Eddie and a plain yellow one for herself Jo inspected the tea caddy on the shelf above for tea bags. She was pleased and not at all surprised to find it half full, but ever so slightly perplexed because some of the bags were square and some were round.

“Round for me and... round for him.” said Jo to herself, smiling and pouring hot water into the two mugs.

The fridge was disappointing though - no milk.

“Urgh.” thought Jo, scurrying for a teaspoon to whip out the tea bags before the brews got too strong. She could drink black tea, but only if it was fairly weak. What about sugar? Did Eddie take sugar in his tea? There was no sugar bowl in the ‘tea’ cupboard, so she guessed not.

“Right. Two black teas. No milk, no sugar... no toast.”

Jo spotted the oven and went over to check on the grill.

“Oh my God!” she whispered indignantly. “I bet this has never

been cleaned.”

She was wrong of course. It was clean when Eddie moved in, so the previous owners must have cleaned it... and even if they'd just never used it... Eddie had definitely cleaned it himself at least twice. It was very dirty though!

“When in Rome.” muttered Jo, placing the four slices of bread gently onto the grill in the vain hope that she might not disturb any of the grime if she was careful enough.

As the bread started to toast, Jo returned to the fridge in search of butter and ‘toast stuff’. There was butter, real butter almost, that easy spread stuff - what was it? Butter and oil or something? No spread or anything ‘light’. Oh well, she'd have to indulge for once. And no sign of any marmalade or jam or anything.

By now one side of the toasts was nicely brown so she turned them over and then inspected the cupboards for jams or, in fact, jars of any kind. Mayonnaise - that was it. Nuts, the toast was done.

“OK. Black tea and plain toast with butter.” exclaimed Jo.

“Sounds great.”

Jo almost jumped out of her skin.

“Sorry.” added Eddie, hugging her.

“I thought breakfast in bed would be nice.” explained Jo as she buttered the toast.

Eddie took out a couple of small plates from the cupboard for her.

“Wonderful idea.” he said, “Shame I haven't got much in... did you use the grill?”

“Yes.” said Jo, smiling wryly.

“Ah. It needs cleaning doesn’t it.”

“Yes it does!”

Jo smacked Eddie playfully on the bottom. She was pleased that he at least knew that the grill ought to be cleaned - which, in her experience, was not something you could say about all men - some blokes appearing to believe that dirt just evaporated somehow or got taken away by the fairies to make magic dust.

“Aren’t you cold?” she added suddenly, noticing that he was only wearing his boxer shorts.

“Yes.” replied Eddie, picking up a plate and a mug. “Let’s go back to bed.”

Jo followed, noticing that Eddie had taken the plain mug - “Why did you paint Eddie Shore on these mugs?”

Eddie turned briefly to glance at the mug Jo was holding - “Oh, those.”

“I’d forgotten about them. They were something of a cry for help I think. I was going through a particularly bad identity crisis...”

Eddie paused at the bottom of the stairs and gestured for Jo to go first; which Jo thought was nice of him, as it never occurred to her that he might be mostly motivated by a desire to watch her behind wiggle as she ascended!

“... and I wanted to go out into the street and shout ‘Edward Bridget is dead! I am Eddie Shore! I am Eddie Shore! I am Eddie Shore!’ but instead I found this box of six mugs that my mum had given me and painted Eddie Shore on them. Pathetic I know, but by the time I’d finished I felt a lot better.”

As they both slid back under the still-warm duvet, Jo looked at

Eddie seriously and said “No. It’s not pathetic. I think the world would be a much better place if more people painted mugs instead of running shouting in the street.”

They both laughed and started on the toast. After a couple of minutes Eddie decided he was still cold, sitting up, and leaned out of bed to his chest of drawers. He grabbed a T-shirt at random from the middle drawer and slipped it on.

“The Jesus and Mary Chain.” read Jo.

“Remember them?” asked Eddie.

“Yes. A bit too, err, noisy for me. All that feedback just... well, I didn’t really like them very much.”

Eddie took another bite of his toast. He didn’t want to explore their potential musical differences right now. This was the first time he’d woken up with someone in a long, long time. So long that he didn’t really know what he wanted to do next. In the spirit of communication he decided to ask.

“What do you want to do today?”

“Oh. I hadn’t thought really.”

OK. No progress there then. Eddie thought that it was now down to him to suggest something, but before he could come up with anything Jo spoke again.

“I do have to go to Heathrow later to collect Sarah though.”

“Sarah you share with?” contributed Eddie, somewhat redundantly.

“Yes. She went on a cheapo last minute pre-Christmas break.”

“I didn’t know you had a car...” said Eddie, focussing on Jo’s connection to this cheapo break thing.

“I don’t. But Sarah does. She drove it to the airport and I drove it back so she didn’t have to pay to park.”

“Ah.” said Eddie.

He didn’t know that she could drive either but he didn’t want to appear to be interrogating her. And he certainly didn’t want to get into the habit of saying “I didn’t know you could do that” every time she mentioned something that shouldn’t be surprising - that was the sort of thing his mother did and he knew how annoying and confidence testing it could be.

“I don’t like driving.” added Jo, “I’m not a very confident driver. Never had much practice at it. Especially at driving other people; so, before you ask, I’d rather you didn’t come along.”

“Oh.” said Eddie, more ‘I hadn’t even thought of that’ than ‘that’s disappointing’.

“Unless you could drive us?” asked Jo, suddenly hopeful.

“Me? Woah, I haven’t driven a car for years... sorry.”

“I guess we’re just not car people.” said Jo, patting Eddie’s leg. “Which is a bit odd for Guildford... doesn’t it have the highest car ownership in the country?”

“That’s what they say.” said Eddie dourly as he reached for his tea. “Ah. That’s nice; needs some milk though.”

Jo smacked Eddie on the arm playfully and he pretended to nearly spill his tea.

“So, where has she been?” asked Eddie finally.

Jo paused for a second, slightly thrown by the car-tangent that their conversation had veered off along - “Oh. Sarah. She’s in Tenerife.”

“Hmmm. That’s odd.” muttered Eddie cryptically.

“Odd? Well I guess it is more of a summer place...”

“Er, no, not that; it’s just that my friend Mike is on holiday in Tenerife at the moment too.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. He’s coming home tomorrow I think.”

“Isn’t that a weird coincidence?” concluded Jo, sipping her tea and deciding that she was in total agreement over the need for milk.

As Eddie downed the last of his tea, pleased to get the milk-less brew out of the way as quickly as possible, he wasn’t so sure about the coincidence theory. He would keep it to himself for now; but this was something that he needed to keep an eye on.

Snuggling down under the duvet again Eddie looked up at Jo, who was just finishing off her tea.

“What?” asked Jo, suddenly noticing him smiling.

“Are you busy?” he replied.

# Chapter 11

## Happy

Well after 3pm there came a point at which it seemed to both of them that they really ought to get up now - no, really; this time they really would get up - OK.

“What time did you have to go collect Sarah?” asked Eddie as he started to dress.

“Er, I need to leave by six I think. In case of traffic.” replied Jo, wondering how she might look traipsing home in last night’s evening frock in the middle of the afternoon.

“OK. I’ll walk you home.”

“That would be nice.”

“I think you’ll need to borrow my jacket.” added Eddie, first looking at Jo as she gathered up her little black evening dress and not much else, and then at the bright cold day beyond his bedroom window.

“Can I use the bathroom first?” asked Jo, seemingly too preoc-

cupied to register his offer.

“Sure.” replied Eddie. “There’s a clean towel on the rail...”

He was going to add “if you want a shower” but realised that she almost certainly did and wondered what she might think if he gave away the fact that he probably wouldn’t bother. Maybe he should have a shower just to make a good impression? Nah.

Jo disappeared, smiling, just wearing her underwear but holding her other clothes close to her bosom in mock modesty. God she was lovely.

When she’d gone Eddie felt lonely for a second, castigated himself for being so wet and then decided that it was only natural to miss someone if you’d just been in almost constant physical contact with them for more than 12 hours.

Wow! What a 12 hours they’d been. This was the reason that he’d been nervous about rushing into sex - or so he thought now. You just couldn’t have a time like that - kissing, cuddling, slowly exploring - if it was a replacement for sex. And after you’d had sex then it would always be that - a replacement. But now, before they’d even had sex, it wasn’t ‘instead of’ it was ‘on the way to’. The whole night and morning had been in anticipation of some future ideal event.

Obviously when it did happen, and Eddie most surely hoped that it would, and quite soon, then it would probably not be ideal. How could it be. But it would be good. And all the better for the last 12 hours. The prelude, which, like the first act could only happen once.

“There can be only one!” he muttered, laughing as he quickly rescued himself from his own melodrama.

A little hyperbolae was inevitable given his current state of happiness. He was almost euphoric: Jo was too, splashing away in the shower, singing quietly to herself (*Sweet Dreams Are Made Of This* by the Eurythmics if you must know).

Suddenly Eddie became aware that this feeling couldn't last, and to defend himself against a negative reaction he tried to think of something practical instead. Working hours. Or rather days. He was due to work tomorrow and Jo wasn't, then he was next off on Wednesday and she was off on... he didn't know.

Eddie trotted down the stairs and headed for the bathroom. When he got there he put his ear to the door to confirm that the shower wasn't actually running. He knocked.

"Jo?"

"Yeah?"

"When's your next day off?"

Jo opened the door. Eddie did notice that there was no bolt sliding sound, but before any meaning could register his attention was most firmly distracted by her semi-nakedness. He'd seen more of her by now - in instalments - but this was the most he'd seen at once, in the cold light of day, and revealed so freely.

"Tomorrow." replied Jo, smiling at his attempts to try not to stare.

"Er, yes. After that?"

"Tuesday I think."

"Hmmm. Thought it might be. I'm working tomorrow and Tuesday..."

Eddie was pleased to see at least a hint of disappointment on Jo's

face, so he continued, “Do you want me to try and swap one of us? So we can both be off together?”

“Of course, if you can. Maybe we can go up to London or something?”

“Sure.” replied Eddie, already wondering who he could get to swap their day off with Jo and how he could ‘fix’ the rota in future.

“Is that OK; going for a day out?” added Jo, unsure as to Eddie’s enthusiasm for the idea.

“Yes. Yes. I was just thinking about the rota. I’d love to go up to London with you. We can...”

Do what? He wondered. What would she expect? He was so out of touch with ‘doing stuff’ that he didn’t know where to start. And now he’d dropped himself in it. His lack of what ever it was was now laid bare. Even more bare than Jo still was. A thought which cheered him slightly but still didn’t give him anything to say.

“Have a great time together?” offered Jo.

“Yes.”

Eddie smiled. If only he could remember to stop trying so hard to impress her. She was certainly impressing him though, and he wanted to take her straight back up to bed.

There was a short silence and then Jo started to push the door to.

“I have to get dressed.”

Eddie would have liked to watch her dress - maybe she would have liked him to watch - but the bathroom was too small to have the door open or to accommodate an observer!

A few minutes later, when the door opened again, Eddie was still

standing in exactly the same spot. Jo started, obviously expecting him to have gone (somewhere) by now.

“Oh!” she exclaimed, almost dropping her shoes.

“Sorry.” smiled Eddie, slightly amused. “I didn’t know what to do with myself..”

Jo laughed cheekily. “Naughty” she said, tapping him on the arm.

Eddie opened his mouth to say something, realised there was nothing that would make him seem the slightest bit less dumb than he already was, and gave up. Instead he resorted to his best ‘whoops’ face and shrugged comically.

Now Jo dropped the shoes on purpose and hugged him.

“I missed you in the shower. Is that silly?” she asked.

“No.” replied Eddie simply.

He wondered about adding something along the lines of “when I’m with you I’m the happiest man alive” - not those exact words obviously, since they might induce Jo to immediately vomit over his shoulder and he was wearing a jumper that he particularly liked - but quickly decided to just get on with being happy and not worry about talking about it.

They embraced for several minutes; both reliving parts of the hours before, both quietly together.

Finally Eddie rubbed Jo on the back and said, “Come on then. Let’s get you home.”

Jo said nothing, she just picked up her shoes and went into the dining room to put them on. As she sat down on the nearest of the fine antique Ikea chairs... she noticed the map again.

“What’s that map for?” she called back to Eddie who was still in the kitchen looking in one of the cupboards.

Eddie started to freeze, instinctively, but immediately got a grip of himself. This was as good a time as any to tell Jo the truth, wasn’t it? He resolved to come clean, but as he closed the cupboard door, abandoning his review of the until-recently long forgotten ‘Eddie Shore’ mugs, it suddenly occurred to him that he wasn’t even that sure himself what the truth was...

“Ah. The map.”

Jo stood, taller in her shoes, as Eddie entered the dining room and he guided her over to the map wall.

“This is what’s left of my...” he didn’t want to use the word ‘plan’ so he allowed himself to indulge in a Sylvianism, “...visualisation of some previous events.”

Great. All clear now then! Jo looked expectant, waiting for more detail, rather than lost and bewildered which was how Eddie was starting to feel. He took a breath.

“You know you said that things go wrong for you?”

Jo nodded.

“Well, until recently they didn’t for me; ever. I mean the things we talked about last night: I’m not saying nothing ever went wrong for me, just not those things. So. When things started going wrong...”

Should he mention his birthday now? In a millisecond he decided not to.

“... I wondered, for a while, if they might be related. So I plotted them on this map to see if there was a pattern.”

Jo looked closely at the map, up close, and noticed for the first time the small pin-holes in it.

“Wow. Why did you take the pins out?” asked Jo, her curiosity piqued.

“I thought you might think I was some sort of nut. It’s all done with now anyway. I’ll take the map down tonight.” replied Eddie. Honesty is the best policy.

“Oh. Was there no pattern then?”

It was hard to tell if she was humouring him or genuinely interested. Anyway, what was the answer? Did he find a pattern or imagine it? Did he really achieve anything in the dark of Godalming early the previous day? When it came down to it, did he really care? What had happened since was so much bigger, brighter and better that it just didn’t seem to matter any more.

A clear explanation drifted from the depths of his mind into full view, and he went with it straight away.

“I think I learned that there’s always a pattern. And that, if you look hard enough, you’ll always find what you think you’re looking for.”

Jo wasn’t entirely sure she understood. But that didn’t matter. If there had been a recent spate of gruesome murders, rapes, abductions or some other generally bad things happening at the locations recently vacated by Eddie’s pins then she might have been worried. But as it was it seemed to hint at little more than Eddie’s loneliness - which was something she could help with.

“I think you need some nice pictures.”

Eddie looked puzzled for a second.

“Instead of the map?”

“Oh. Yes. I have some... of Rome and New York...”

Eddie wondered where he put them, but couldn’t remember.

“Somewhere.” he concluded, opening his arms wide to indicate that they were probably hiding or trying to hatch an escape plan.

“Have you been? To Rome and New York I mean.”

“Yes. Years ago to Rome, on a school trip. And New York, a couple of years ago, with Mike actually.”

They might have plunged into a topical conversation about the horrors of 11/09 at this point, which would have revealed only that they both felt almost exactly the same about it, the same way most British people (of all shades) felt. But instead the mention of Mike’s name turned them onto a lighter and more entertaining path.

“Do you think they might have bumped into each other?” asked Jo.

“What?” asked Eddie, thinking about Rome and New York still.

“Sarah and Mike. They might have met each other in Tenerife.”

“I guess that’s possible.” admitted Eddie. Feeling a bit nervous.

“But pretty unlikely. Huh. I think Tenerife is quite a big island isn’t it? Doesn’t it have a volcano or something in the middle.”

“Yes.” confirmed Eddie. “But there is the mysterious attractive force that draws holiday makers from the same home-town together.”

He paused for effect, but there wasn’t much of one so he carried on.

“My parents once visited relatives in Australia and bumped into someone from Guildford on the second day. And you can’t get much further away than that!”

“I’ve got relatives in Australia.” added Jo wistfully.

Eddie was about to say “Which proves my point.” but realised that it didn’t so he kept quiet.

So, even Jo thought that Mike and Sarah might have met. Eddie knew it. Somehow he just knew it. And he was sure that it was a sign that something odd was still afoot. For now he would have to keep it to himself, apart from the fact that Jo knew everything he did already. OK, so he would keep his suspicions to himself.

Eddie cast around for his shoes, trying not to let himself become overly distracted. At the back of his mind though he couldn’t help thinking that soon he was going to need a much, much bigger map.

# Chapter 12

## Heathrow

Sarah couldn't decide if she was glad to be home or not. Maybe because she wasn't actually at home yet, just at the nearest airport to it. More significant though was the fact that she found herself somewhat smitten with Mike... who wasn't here... but would be tomorrow.

"Come on." she muttered, wondering if her suitcase would ever appear on the carousel.

Even the usual comedy of people dashing off the plane first to get to the front, finding that their cases weren't out yet, and staying there anyway to block the people whose cases were out, didn't amuse her as it usually did.

"Inconsiderate tossers."

When she spotted her case she would be barging through there, elbows on full. There might be the odd robust "Excuse me." but it would definitely be rhyming with "Get out of the way you stupid fat

bastards!”

Not that the flight had been tedious, or delayed, or particularly uncomfortable, or... anything other than perfectly fine. Maybe even better than she should have expected for what she paid.

No, Sarah was in a mood because Mike had been better than she expected. Maybe even better than she really wanted, deep down. Although she'd never acknowledge it. Was it just bad luck that she picked the men she did, or was there a hidden need there? Either way, Mike wasn't just in a different league, he was playing a totally different sport.

The question was, then, whether he was a game she really wanted to play or just one she liked the look of from the brochure. Was he poker to the other guys' rugby? Or was he crown green bowling?

Either way, right now she liked him: a lot. He had even come to the airport to see her off on the last full day of his holiday. She had his phone number and his address. She knew where he worked and what his friends' names were. They'd kissed good-bye very tenderly.

Sarah had almost said “*A dieu*” meaning “*Au revoir*” but fortunately went with “bye” and a smile instead.

Now she found herself thinking about him, as she had all the way home. But this time she was staring at an almost empty carousel rather than the back of an aeroplane seat.

Suddenly someone bumped her with a trolley. Before she could say “Watch where you're going fuckwit.” a little old lady was apologising profusely.

“I'm so sorry dear. This thing wont go the way I want. That's my suitcase there. The brown one.”

She pointed at the carousel, which was actually pointless since there were only two cases on it, and had been for the last 10 minutes. One was brown and one was bright red.

“Would you be a sweetheart and get it for me dear?” she asked, before adding in a low voice “I would ask a man but they all look a bit dodgy around here.”

Sarah laughed a little and went to get the case. Maybe this would be her in thirty years time. Maybe she would still be here waiting for her case!

“Excuse me. Trying to get my case.” said Sarah, elbowing a particularly fat and inconsiderate and/or stupid bastard who nevertheless seemed wimpy enough to nudge without provoking a violent reaction.

The old lady’s case arrived in front of Sarah just as she got to the carousel and she immediately grabbed it, swinging it towards Mr Stupid. He wasn’t quite that stupid though, and managed to get out of the way quite easily. Unfortunately, in the process he bumped into a bigger, badder, actually more stupid, but pointedly more violent man who growled menacingly at him.

All eyes were averted from the potential fight seconds later when more cases appeared from the depths of the baggage system onto the carousel, prompting a renewed push for the front from all those sadly wed to the belief that their case must be there this time.

“Thank you so much dear.” said the lady as Sarah plonked the battered old case onto her trolley. Then she started to look in her purse and Sarah wondered if the woman was going to give her something.

Before she could say anything though the woman closed the purse, put it back into her tartan shopping bag on the top of the trolley and started to wheel away slowly, veering slightly to the right again as she went.

Sarah shrugged and turned her attention back to the carousel and the search for her own battered suitcase. As she turned round the old lady suddenly straightened up and accelerated away towards customs.

Round and round the cases went. Where were their owners? No-one was taking cases off! This would normally have annoyed the hell out of Sarah, but today she didn't bother to let it bother her. She just stood at the back and waited for everything to clear. Thinking about Mike. Thinking about tomorrow, when they'd planned to meet again.

Eventually the masses cleared off with their cheap cases and carriers full of duty free. Sarah strolled up to the carousel, picked up her small pastel-blue case and wandered off sans-trolley towards the queues of the customs area.

It didn't take long to get through. Or, if it did, she didn't notice. And soon she was in arrivals looking for Jo. There were an awful lot of people around - probably because it was a Saturday? or just before Christmas? Sarah wasn't really a big traveller, mostly just the one summer beach holiday each year, so she wasn't au fait with the expected throughput of this or any other airport.

A man in a navy blue suit and black tie, wearing an overly big peaked blue hat and holding a sign with 'Mr Smith' hand-written on it, caught her eye and made her chuckle. There were a few other

chauffeur-looking types dotted around with signs too - but there was no 'Mr Jones' as far as she could see... there was a 'Kandojimisatory' which puzzled her a bit, as she couldn't tell if that was a person's name, a company, a place or an offer of some exotic sexual service.

She kept moving forwards and finally spotted Jo, who was waving enthusiastically.

"Hi. Did you have a good time?"

"Yes thanks." replied Sarah. "Totally exhausted now though."

"Oh. And why's that?" asked Jo, cheekily.

"Not what you think. Well, not quite what you think."

"Oh?" now Jo was intrigued.

"I'll tell you all about it on the way home."

By the time they'd paid for the short-stay car park, found the car, adjusted the seat and mirrors for Sarah to drive, and got all the way out of Heathrow and into a minor traffic jam on the M25, Jo was roughly acquainted with the majority of significant, though hardly meriting the term 'exhausting', events that Sarah had experienced on her 'great winter getaway'.

"So you didn't meet any men at all?" asked Jo finally.

"Just the one." offered Sarah cagily.

"Mmm. That sounds like serious holiday romanceville."

"Maybe. I only met him last night."

"Oh no. So you just met him right at the end..."

Jo was sad that Sarah might have missed out on someone. Even more so because she was bursting to tell her about Eddie and how happy she was herself. There was a bit of a silence, from Jo because she was sorting out her feelings in her head and from Sarah because

she was trying to get into the lane to their right which seemed to be going much faster than they were. Finally Jo said, hopefully, "Do you think you might stay in touch?"

"Oh yes." said Sarah matter-of-factly, "He lives in Guildford."

Suddenly Jo remembered Mike and said, jokingly "And I bet he's called Mike."

"How did you know that?" demanded Sarah.

Jo was stunned for a second. It couldn't be the same Mike, could it. I mean, what are the chances of her friend going to Tenerife and actually getting it together with Eddie's friend... on the same night that she and Eddie were.

"Oh, it must be another Mike." mumbled Jo.

"What do you know about Mike?" asked Sarah, still puzzled rather than concerned.

"It's just that Eddie said his friend Mike was on holiday in Tenerife this week. That's all."

"Eddie your boss?"

"Yes." admitted Jo, not sounding so sure.

"The one you fancy. Right?"

Sarah glanced at Jo and then, since they were hardly moving still, looked again more probingly.

"You got off with him didn't you!"

If it hadn't been so dark in the car Sarah would have seen Jo go red. She didn't need to see though, she could tell by her reaction. Jo was uncomfortable at being found out before she could tell it her way. 'Get off' sounded so crude when it had really been so romantic.

"No! He asked me out to dinner and we had a lovely time."

“And did you sleep with him?” asked Sarah excitedly.

“We spent the night together, yes.”

“But you didn’t have sex?”

It was a rhetorical question. Sarah knew that Jo would never sleep with anyone on a first date. Not even Robbie Williams (actually, especially Robbie Williams). There was a hint of doubt though. Maybe in Jo’s mind it wasn’t a first date... she had imagined so much about this Eddie guy. Eddie? Ed. Sarah remembered something.

“No. We kissed all night though. It was wonderful...”

Jo continued to describe the previous evening but most of it washed over Sarah. She was having to concentrate on the traffic, which had finally accelerated from a slow crawl to a medium speed crawl. That wasn’t the main thing on her mind though. Mike had said something about a friend of his, an Ed she thought, and she wanted to get it completely straight before she said anything to Jo.

“It’s a bit weird. You going out with Ed and me going out with his best friend.” interjected Sarah at last.

“Eddie.” corrected Jo, adding “If it is the same Mike.”

“Come on Jo. How many Mikes from Guildford with a friend called Ed do you think there were in Tenerife last week?”

“When’s he coming home?” asked Jo.

“Tomorrow.”

“Oh.” said Jo simply. That was it then.

“And?”

“Yes. That’s when Eddie said his Mike was coming home.”

There was a short silence and then Jo asked, “Why do you keep calling him Ed?”

“Ed? That’s what Mike called him. Ed, Eddie, whatever. You know what boys are like. I bet he often calls him Knob, as in Knob Ed, and your Eddie will call him Mr Hunt, as in Mike Hunt.”

“Sarah!” Jo pretended to be slightly shocked, but wasn’t. “Yes, you’re right of course.”

They’d both lost the original point by now. Sarah was trying to say something about this Ed, Eddie, bloke and Jo wasn’t making it easy for her. The traffic was almost moving slowly now, so Sarah kept her eyes on the road and her mouth shut for a bit.

Eventually they got off the dreaded M25 and on to the A3: just 7 or 8 miles to go now and not much traffic. It would be nearly 9pm when they got home; they could sit down and talk then, thought Sarah.

“What’s he like, Mike?” asked Jo suddenly.

“Oh.” Sarah had to think. “He’s nice. I know, before you say it, not my normal type. And yes I did let him pick me up because it was my last night and I hadn’t got off with anyone all week. But he surprised me.”

Sarah seemed wistful, which wasn’t like her at all. Jo could tell that she’d obviously encountered something special.

“Good for you. You deserve a decent man for a change.”

Hmmm. Sarah wasn’t quite sure how to take that. She had picked all those previously indecent men quite carefully - apart from the ones Jo had picked and she had stolen. And it was quite ironic that Jo was now congratulating her on finding a (possibly) decent man when perhaps she herself had just landed a bit of a cad.

Could she say that to her though? I’m sorry Jo but Mike told

me that his friend Ed was a bit of a bastard with women. What was it exactly? He's all nice up front but underneath he's the shag 'em and shelve 'em sort.

She couldn't tell Jo that could she. Look at her. She was almost glowing in the dark with love for this man. A man she'd admired from afar for years. But what was the more cruel, say nothing and let her suffer at the hands of this Ed or tell her the truth?

Jo wondered why Sarah had gone quiet, and decided that she must be tired or thinking about Mike. Jo thought about Eddie for a bit. She wondered what he was doing. They'd agreed to meet the next evening after Eddie finished work, but she was probably going to call round at the cinema during the day and surprise him.

"Do you think I should call Eddie tonight? Would that be a bit... clingy."

"No." replied Sarah, distracted slightly by an obscenely large 4x4 which was in the wrong exit lane and trying to cut her up.

"Not clingy or don't call?" laughed Jo.

There was a long a pause and then Sarah finally replied, "Be careful with this guy Jo."

# Chapter 13

## Sunday

For the second day running, Jo got up late. She wasn't as happy today though. Not to say that she was particularly unhappy, she was more confused than anything.

Why had Sarah been so funny about Eddie? What could she know about him that she didn't know herself? After all, Sarah's only source was Eddie's friend Mike, and she had only known him for a day! Known in the biblical sense too by what she could gather, and Sarah's track record.

Maybe it was just pillow talk then. But why would Mike slag off his best mate to some tart he'd just shagged on holiday? It just didn't make sense. Unless there was something really bad about Eddie? But why would Mike want to bring that up: wouldn't it imply that he was bad by association? Maybe that's what he wanted Sarah to think - that he was bad, as in baaad man. Sarah did go for that type... but last night she was making a big thing about how Mike

had surprised her, because he was different; not her usual type, and she still really liked him.

How could that be? Maybe he seemed bad and ran with the bad types but was really good. For a moment Jo had an image of Eddie and Mike clad in leather riding big motorbikes. The ridiculousness of it snapped her out of the introspection.

On the way down the stairs Jo wondered again if this really was the same Mike that knew Eddie. She'd only ever met him a few times, at Eddie's birthdays mostly, and couldn't really think how to describe him - 'so high, brown hair, two eyes'. Sarah had gone out so she couldn't check now anyway, and she was fairly sure that she never took a camera on holiday with her either.

The more she thought about Eddie the more she couldn't believe that he was deceiving her. But at the same time, at the back of her mind, the more afraid she became that he might be ... and that she would be totally devastated if he was.

Over breakfast, or brunch as it would become later when she didn't have any lunch, Jo mulled the same thoughts over and over. It was like the record was stuck and she just needed someone to give her a little nudge and get her back on track. If the phone had rung that would have done the trick, but it didn't.

What finally snapped her out of it was a decision - she would go to the cinema as soon as she was dressed and see Eddie. Yes, that was it, that did the trick. With her worries temporarily parked on the shelf, she managed to get herself ready quite quickly, and was out the door in a little under 55 minutes...

It was normally only a 5 minute walk from her house, down past

the Law Courts, to the cinema. Guildford's only cinema now that the old Odeon at the top of the High Street had closed down: only big one anyway, there were some smaller venues that did show films occasionally, but not current releases, not ones you'd heard of anyway.

Today Jo was dawdling. She was thinking about Eddie again, and what Sarah had said last night. Bitch. Why was she trying to spoil it for her? Jo didn't know what she was going to say to Eddie. Nothing direct probably. What could she say - "Sarah says you might be a bad 'un. What have you got to say to that huh?"

She needed to see him. That was all she knew for sure at the moment. As she reached the back of the cinema and started to walk round, passing the Harry Potter poster, she thought of wizards and magic a bit but her imagination quickly twisted back from the fantastic to the just plain odd. Eddie's map on the wall was odd...

Was that something to do with it? It was odd. He hadn't explained it away very convincingly. Oh no, what was really going on?

There was quite a queue at both sides of the box office. Harry was certainly pulling them in if he could get this many people out for the 11:50 on a Sunday. For Jo though it meant that the rest of the staff were too busy to notice her slipping in, and Eddie would probably not be too busy to talk to her - unless something calamitous had occurred, and this being a cinema, calamity started with the toilets malfunctioning and ran all the way up to a customer feeling 'poorly'. If an actual disaster occurred, like a projector breaking down or a fire breaking out, then Eddie's range would be exceeded and he would

need to call for outside help!

As she expected, Jo found Eddie in his office. He smiled when he saw her: a big wide warm smile.

“I wondered if you might pop in today.” he said, adding “Hoped you would.”

“Hi.” said Jo simply.

Since he'd had nothing else to think about all day, Eddie's mind had more than enough capacity left over to immediately spot that something was up. Not that he needed to be particularly sharp at this point. It was so obvious that a blind man could have seen it; well, heard it anyway.

Eddie stood up and placed his hand gently on her arm, “What's wrong Jo?” he asked directly.

She looked at him for an instant and then threw her arms around him, her head on his shoulder. She said nothing; so Eddie kept quiet too.

Somehow Jo's fears had gone. She didn't know where or why, they'd just gone. Maybe it was the look on his face, the sound of his voice, the touch of his hand - probably everything; everything now and in the past.

After the relief came the regret. Now she felt stupid. What was she going to say? He would think she was a weirdo for swanning in here and falling to pieces. Only the truth would do.

Before she could speak there was a gingerly knock on the door. It was Henry Wilks.

“Er, excuse me Mr B. Did you want me to start at the bottom or the top today?”

“At the top please Henry. Thanks.”

The older man nodded and toddled off, smiling to himself. It was about time those two got together. They thought he didn't know but he did. He'd known all along, before they did probably. Young people today - they were so backward at going forward. Anyway, all's well now by the looks of it.

“Do you want to get a coffee or something?” asked Eddie, unable to think of anything more relevant, mainly because he didn't have the foggiest idea what the hell was going on. He was at least confident that he hadn't done anything himself to cause it; because he hadn't done anything since he'd seen her yesterday, unless having a bath was suddenly a heinous offence. Now, not having a bath maybe but...

“Yes. But can we bring it back here.” interrupted Jo.

She stepped back a little and Eddie saw that she was crying. His heart went out to her, which was quite something since it was already hers. He didn't know what to say. Not because he was afraid of saying the wrong thing, but because he didn't know where to start. He'd already asked her what was wrong. Was she going to tell him or was this some sort of test to see if he could cope with mystery weeping?

“You wait here; I'll get the coffee.” said Eddie at last.

He vaguely remembered that she drank it black with sugar so he went with that in mind. No point in getting bogged down with endless questions - milk? sugar? cappuccino? mocca? espresso? americano? small? medium? large? cheap? expensive? strong? weak? nice? tastes like dishwater but everyone else is drinking it?

Eddie tried to take his time getting the coffee - to give Jo a chance

to gather herself. He hoped someone would pop up with a question for him or something to sort out, but they didn't. In less than five minutes he was back in his office, with two coffees, and Jo, who had taken off her coat and was sitting down by his desk.

"Here you go." he said as kindly as he could. Not that he was overly trying to sound kind. That was just how it came out.

"Thanks."

She took a sip of the coffee and was impressed that he'd sugared it.

"You must think I'm a real wimp." she added.

"I just don't know what's wrong." said Eddie, still none the wiser.

Jo took a deep breath.

"It's all very silly..." she started.

That's OK then, thought Eddie, getting the impression that he was either in for the long haul or she wasn't going to say anything that made any sense at all. He would try and be as understanding as he could.

"Sarah came home yesterday, as you know. And she did meet Mike on holiday."

Eddie raised an eyebrow in surprise. Actually it was both eyebrows because he wasn't one of those people who can operate them independently, although he did sometimes wonder if it was a skill he could acquire with practice.

"More than that though. They actually got off with each other."

"No." whispered Eddie, leaning forward a bit. Now he was interested. Well, of course he was interested before but now he was even more interested.

As Jo continued with more detail, Eddie started wondering where she was going with this. How was it a bad thing that two of their friends had got together? From what Jo had said Sarah wasn't even a particularly close friend - they shared a flat so they made an effort to get on - so even if the punch-line was 'and Mike dumped her' it surely wasn't worth the tears.

Eddie listened intently, mind ticking over rapidly in the background, looking for some connection between what Jo was saying and his reality. At last it started to become clear that there had been some sort of negative comment made about him by Sarah, based on something that Mike had told her in the few hours that she'd known him.

"But why would Mike slag me off to someone he'd just met?" interrupted Eddie, suddenly compelled by his confusion to attempt some sort of defence.

"I don't know." replied Jo quietly, "That's why it played on my mind and I ended up thinking you must have done something really terrible..."

"How..." was all Eddie could manage. He was horrified.

Jo could tell by the look on his face that he was horrified.

"You're horrified aren't you." she said.

"Dumbfounded actually." said Eddie sternly. Then he smiled.

This was one of those moments that could have gone tragically wrong. Just the wrong type of smile, out by a fraction, might have said 'And now you've rumbled my fiendish plan I will have to kill you and chop you into bite-sized pieces to feed to my pet wolf'. Luckily Eddie's smile was well over on the right side of the divide

and conveyed more of a 'I forgive you; we can work this out'.

Jo was relieved. She'd said it, got it off her chest. Someone had told her that Eddie was a bad 'un and she had doubted him. She was sorry but it had happened. At least she'd been honest about it. And now that it was out and Eddie seemed to understand, she was happy again.

For a few moments they both sat and sipped their coffee - which was surprisingly good, thanks to a new member of staff who 'knew someone in the business' and had got a load of free samples of some good stuff.

"I guess the map didn't help." said Eddie suddenly.

He was thinking out loud and surprised himself more than Jo. Oops. What now? He could tell by Jo's reaction that he was right. Bugger. No way could he gloss over it again - that would make everything... worse than bad.

Clearly it was a day for honesty. Eddie took a deep breath and let it out.

"It might take a while; but let me tell you the whole story."

He began his tale at George Thompson's retirement. He told her everything about his birthday, the battles with Jeff Stevenson and all the attacks. He told her every detail of his plan and the story of the map, the 'mission' to Godalming and the police.

It did take a while. Eventually she knew it all and it felt like a weight off his shoulders. There were one or two tiny details that he left out... his den for one. And that other thing after his birthday. No, he would have to keep that to himself, he couldn't tell her, she wouldn't understand.

# Chapter 14

## Call

Mike must be at his desk by now, thought Eddie. He dialed the number again, it rang six times, the voicemail system kicked in - again.

“Bah.” exclaimed Eddie, putting down the phone firmly.

He’d been itching to speak to Mike all morning. He should have phoned him at home last night, but Eddie got home late. He did phone him at home this morning but Mike must have gone out early! So where was he?

At least Jo was at work today. They’d already had a coffee together; during which Eddie was sure he’d caught a glimpse out of the very corner of his eye of someone pointing at them and whispering. So by now everyone knew. Which was good. He wanted everyone to know.

In particular he wanted Mike to know. And he wanted to know what Mike had said to Sarah... and more importantly, why.

Eddie dialled again. It rang six times.

“Hello?”

“Hi. Mike. It’s Eddie.”

“Hello mate. How are you?”

“Fine.”

Eddie felt incredibly uncomfortable. He knew what he wanted to say but didn’t want to say it to this piece of plastic. If Mike were sitting right here then he would just come straight out with it. But at the other end of the phone... yes, sure, he knew it really was Mike... but seeing is believing. No point in beating about the bush.

“Look, I need to talk to you about something.”

Mike didn’t reply. They were talking weren’t they; and he didn’t know about what, so what could he say? After a moment’s silence though he decided to help things along with a friendly “OK”.

On the one hand Eddie wanted to arrange to meet for lunch so they could talk face to face. But on all the other hands he wanted to know now and, anyway, Mike worked on the other side of town and he didn’t want to have to trek over that way in this cold weather.

“About that girl you met on holiday?”

Mike’s immediate reaction was to say “Phoarh! Which one mate?”, as blokes should, but then he realised that Eddie’s question was not in the right context. Not at all.

“Er, do you know her or something?” came his rather fearful reply. How else would Eddie know he met someone?

“Yes, she lives with Jo.” pressed Eddie directly.

“Jo?”

Now Mike had made made the transition from lack of understand-

ing to total confusion. His pause made Eddie wonder if this was an admission of guilt.

“Yes. We’re going out together.”

“What? You and Mandy?” floundered Mike.

“Mandy? Who’s Mandy?”

Now Eddie was confused too. Which was nice and fair.

“Who do you think I met on holiday?” asked Mike at last.

“Jo’s flatmate Sarah.”

“And you’re going out with her?”

“No, I’m going out with Jo.”

“Hey, at last...”

Mike was pleased for him. About time too. But who was this Sarah bird and why did Eddie think she was Mandy?

“... but who’s this Sarah?”

“Jo’s flatmate.”

“Yes, yes, you said. But why the fuck do you think I met her? The girl I met was called Mandy... or so she said.”

Now Mike was starting to wonder.

“Sarah came back from holiday on Saturday and said she’d met a bloke from Guildford called Mike who had a friend called Eddie.” stated Eddie, trying not to sound accusing now that he really didn’t know what the hell was going on, and wanted to give his oldest friend the benefit of the doubt.

“But she said her name was Mandy...” started Mike, then suddenly remembering, “Hang on. I never said I had a friend called Eddie. We hardly talked about home at all - she said we would have plenty of time for that when we got home!”

“Oh.” said Eddie simply.

Mike couldn't tell what state Eddie was in. He didn't like talking on the phone...

“Why don't we meet up at lunchtime.” he offered.

“OK. Where?”

“The White House?”

“Sure. Great. Twelve thirty?” asked Eddie, brightening.

“Yep. See you there. Bye.”

“Bye.”

As he put the phone down, Eddie felt warmed by Mike's offer to come all the way down to him for lunch. Nevertheless, confusion dominated. Could it really be another Mike that had dissed him, or rather some other Eddie, to Sarah? It must be mustn't it. Mike wouldn't lie. How could he have anyway.

His mind drifted for a while, failing to hit on the fact that Mike had found himself a woman too - one that wasn't Jo's flatmate Sarah. Suddenly something hit him. Sarah! It was Sarah playing games. She must have known that he had a friend called Mike and pretended to have met him on holiday to stir things up for Jo.

But how did she know Mike was on holiday in Tenerife too? Eddie thought about it for a bit. Bollocks. Nothing. He couldn't think how she could have known... and she couldn't even have known that he and Jo had got together until she'd come home either.

Unless. What if Jo had told Sarah first that they were going out; and mentioned that Mike was on holiday in Tenerife too. Maybe then Sarah made up the stuff about meeting Mike. Yes. That would make sense.

Why would she do that though? And how did she think she could carry it off? Surely she must know that Jo would find out the truth pretty quickly. After all, Jo had met Mike, so even if Sarah produced a ‘Mike’ Jo would know he was a fake.

It was all very troubling. The only saving grace was that Eddie was now at least sure that Mike hadn’t rubbished him to Sarah. He wondered about going to find Jo and telling her what Mike had said. But he thought better of it: he’d talk to Mike over lunch first and get all the facts. Then he wondered what other facts he might get.

After another half an hour of not doing much, Eddie got up from his desk and set off to check on anything he could find that looked like it could handle a bit of checking. All the projectors were fine. All the ticket machines were fine. All the staff he’d seen were fine.

“Jo’s in the loo.” announced Jennifer Pierce as he approached.

Eddie felt his face redden so, figuring that retreat was better than failing to feign valour, he changed direction and headed back towards his office. As he arrived Jo was coming out.

“Oh. Jen Pierce said you were in the loo.” mentioned Eddie.

“Ah. That was just an excuse to come and see you...”

Eddie smiled, “Slacker.”

She hit him on the arm playfully.

“Look.” said Eddie, “I’m having lunch with Mike today.”

Concern spread over her face like a thin veil. So Eddie changed his mind and decided to tell her something of what he’d learned.

“It seems that he did meet someone on holiday, but not your Sarah.”

“Really?” gasped Jo. She was mightily relieved. This was per-

fect; there couldn't be any doubt now. "So Sarah did meet a completely different Mike then."

Eddie was sure that revealing his belief that there was no other Mike would be unwise at this point.

"Yes. She must have." he said, looking away momentarily.

"So who did Mike meet? Your Mike I mean."

"Oh; some girl called Mandy. She is from Guildford though... spookily."

Eddie wondered if the same thought was going through Jo's head as had waltzed by him when he'd heard this.

"I wondered if Sarah had just told him her name was Mandy for some reason..."

Jo didn't say anything, but Eddie could tell she thought it was a real possibility.

"... but Mike is adamant that he never talked about me at all."

"Oh."

"Just to be sure, what does Sarah look like?"

Jo looked on the blank side of quizzical.

"So I can ask Mike about his Mandy."

"Oh, I see. Yes. Erm. She's about my height, her hair is very straight and quite a bit shorter - about this length..."

Jo waved her hand about two inches beneath her ears to indicate the exact length, and Eddie got an image of Natalie Portman in Leon.

"... and a lot darker, nearly black. Brown eyes."

Of course, for comparison with Mike's description Eddie needed to know if Sarah was fit and had big tits, so he hoped Jo would be getting on to that next. She didn't, so he had to guide her.

“And what sort of, er, build is she.” he asked gingerly.

Jo looked at him knowingly, with just the slightest hint of contempt. She could have given him Sarah’s vital statistics, or compared her assets to her own, but she wasn’t going to lower herself to that. Anyway, she well knew that men’s descriptions of women’s bodies were limited to phrases like “nice legs”, “nice arse”, “nice tits” or the catch-alls “fit”, “dog”, “babe” and “double bagger”.

“She’s not quite as slim as Jennifer Pierce but she probably has bigger breasts. Is that what you mean?”

Eddie was embarrassed.

“I guess so. That’s the sort of thing Mike would notice.” he replied with a tiny wink, smiling.

“Urgh. Men!” joked Jo.

“Anyway, I’m sure Sarah and Mandy are different people.” stated Eddie, steering the conversation back towards its original direction.

“It’s a bit of a wild coincidence though isn’t it? Two Mikes from Guildford in Tenerife at the same time and both meeting women who were also from Guildford.”

“Yep, spooky.” added Eddie. He was hoping Jo would make the leap now by herself.

“And both Mikes having a friend called Eddie.” remembered Jo out loud.

“Yes.”

He looked at her, not sure if he should make an exaggerated “And so?” expression.

“I think Sarah’s Mike lied.” Jo announced suddenly.

“Woah.” thought Eddie.

His expression of partial disbelief spurred Jo on.

“Yeah. Look; the whole thing is too much of a coincidence isn’t it?”

Eddie nodded. That was indeed what he thought.

“So someone is telling porkies. You don’t think it’s Mike do you.”

It was a rhetorical question, but Eddie answered “No” formally anyway.

“Right. There’s no reason why he would. And the same goes for Sarah. She’s been trying to fix me up with men for years, so why would she try and spoil this for me now - with such a ridiculous story?”

Eddie had to agree that she seemed to have a point.

“Which just leaves this other Mike. Someone we know nothing about, who has no reason to care a jot about us.”

Eddie was still playing catch-up so he just nodded encouragingly.

“He could have just said he was from Guildford after Sarah did, to make her feel comfortable with him. He could even have got the name Eddie from her and then fed it back to her later. I think it all came from her - he was just working her to get her into bed.”

Wow, did men really do that sort of thing? Jo seemed to be speaking from bitter experience, so Eddie was certainly convinced. No wonder he’d always had trouble chatting up women if there were operators like this all over the place, raising the stakes.

Eddie was flabbergasted. Which made Jo smile. It was sweet that he should be horrified by the lengths other men would go to to get a woman into bed. She knew that Eddie was the kind of man she’d always wanted - and every time he did something which proved

he really was that kind, she warmed to him even more.

“So, presumably Sarah is going to find out pretty quickly that this guy is a fake.” managed Eddie at last.

“I guess so. She said she had his number.”

“Let’s just wait and see then shall we?” concluded Eddie.

It felt like they’d come through a crisis together. In some ways they had - a crisis of confidence on Jo’s part and trust on Eddie’s, or the other way around, or some of each. They’d both grown in confidence, not when they were alone, but when they were together. It was somehow warming, comforting, to know that they’d sorted out the problem between them. Things looked hopeful for the future.

Eddie leaned forward to kiss her.

“Excuse me Mr B.” interrupted Henry Wilks.

# Chapter 15

## Jo's

Was she wailing now? Sarah was already crying when Eddie had made a diplomatic exit from the kitchen, but now things seemed to have escalated. He tried to turn on the TV, but it made a clunk which suggested that it had already been 'on' and now was off. He pressed the button again - another clunk.

"Where's the remote?" he muttered.

Instinctively, the first place he looked, after the obvious top of the TV option, was under all the cushions on the sofas and armchairs. Not there. So it had to be somewhere under the mass of crap on the coffee table. Eddie carefully moved a few magazines, a hairbrush and some sort of small bag, before finally finding the remote under a box of tissues.

"Bingo."

Eddie pressed the big green button at the top and the TV immediately blinked from 'on and blank' to 'on with picture and sound'.

Lots of sound in fact. Quickly he searched for the volume buttons, which were carefully hidden by making them the same size as all the other buttons and partially surrounding them with funny symbols.

The booming voice of a news-reader finally faded away. It was more about the war - apparently one of the captured Taliban had turned out to be an American citizen. Eddie turned the sound down even further and let the images wash over him. He didn't know what to think about it all. The attacks in September had horrified him, but was this the answer, would it fix things or actually make it worse? He didn't know, and, since no-one was asking his opinion, his solution was to watch and listen. He'd take it all in and make his mind up later. He couldn't change anything now anyway - he had to assume that the government were doing their best, since they had all the information and he didn't.

As the war images faded, the next item was about the upcoming 'Lord of the Rings' movie. Eddie turned up the sound a bit and soaked up some of the hype. The film was out next week but they'd been bombarded with promotional material for weeks already. He should be getting the actual reels in a few days, since they were doing some advance screenings for the press and 'special guests'.

It certainly looked impressive. Eddie was surprised that it looked set to sweep all before it, given the closeness of the release to Christmas. Originally he thought that Harry Potter would hurt it too much, as it was out first, but maybe that was the perfect build up?

Eddie still hadn't seen HP all the way through. He just wasn't into all that wizard stuff. Well, not junior wizards anyway. He definitely wanted to see LOTR - that was the real deal. Or so he

imagined. He hadn't read the books, he'd only seen the hype. Maybe he would read the books if he liked the film... they seemed a bit long though... film and books!

His musings on wizards fighting terrorists were suddenly interrupted by Jo and Sarah entering the room. It was obvious that she was still crying, although she tried to conceal it, and she passed straight through without a word.

Jo sat down by Eddie.

"She seems to be taking it pretty badly." stated Eddie, somewhat redundantly.

"Surprisingly badly." added Jo in a low voice.

There was a short silence. Eddie knew what he wanted to say but didn't want to say it. Fortunately Jo said it instead and saved him the trouble.

"It's not like she hasn't been let down before..."

Yes! He knew it: she looked like the type. The type that he'd often fancied but got nowhere with because they were always after guys that were cooler, tougher or just plain richer than he was. In many ways he found it hard to find any sympathy for her.

"... but this one seems to have got under her skin."

"He must have been very convincing." offered Eddie.

He would make an effort for Jo's sake, but, not so deep down he couldn't help feeling that Sarah deserved this. How many poor blokes (like him) had she teased, lead on even, and thrown away. Dozens he would bet. Dozens. About time she got a taste of her own medicine.

"Yeah." sighed Jo, then, leaning towards Eddie she whispered

“She’s no angel herself though.”

Eddie smiled. Maybe they could leave it at that. He didn’t want to talk about Sarah any more. He didn’t know her, he didn’t really like her, he was sure she could look after herself.

“I’m sure she’ll be fine.”

Eddie paused for finality, hoping Jo wouldn’t prevent him changing the subject. She was about to, since she’d just spent half an hour with Sarah crying, so it was still somewhat on her mind, but Eddie got in just quick enough.

“Anyway. Tomorrow night.”

“What?”

It was going to take Jo a few moments to switch subject. What was the connection between Sarah and tomorrow night?

“Mike. The real Mike. He asked us out tomorrow night?”

“Oh, yes. That.”

Eddie wasn’t trying to be cruel, but he thought he could tell what was going through her mind.

“He has seen this Mandy since he got back...”

She gave him a funny look. Shit. She obviously wasn’t thinking that. What then? At least, Eddie’s subconscious would later reveal to him, he wasn’t panicking now. How much difference a week makes. Obviously he wasn’t happy that they were talking at odds, but it didn’t scare the crap out of him any more.

“I...” was the best he could do for now.

“I know.” said Jo reassuringly.

Did she? What did she know, he wondered. He certainly didn’t know what she knew. But, for the time being, he wasn’t that both-

ered. All he really wanted to know was whether she wanted to go out to dinner with Mike and this Mandy. Exposing his own concerns seemed like a good way forward.

"I'm not too sure about it myself. Tomorrow night with Mike and Mandy. You know." suddenly he stopped and laughed.

"What?" asked Jo, unable to stop laughing along herself.

"I just have to call them Mork and Mindy, don't I."

"Mork and Mindy?"

"Oh surely you remember Mork and Mindy. Robin Williams and... that girl."

OK, so Eddie didn't remember them that well either. There was a catch phrase wasn't there. What was it? Jo certainly didn't know. She didn't have the faintest idea what he was talking about.

"No." confessed Jo; almost proudly, since she was sure it was bound to be something nerdy. "I think Mike and Mandy sounds like a 70's folk group."

"Ha. Yes, it does."

They still hadn't decided if they were going to go on this double date. Actually, Eddie had told Mike they would, sort of, so he was quite keen that Jo should want to go. Mike was obviously as keen to show off his woman as Eddie was. In that respect they were a bit like two little boys that had just found a new toy in their cereal box and couldn't wait to get to school the next day to show their friends.

Eddie's main doubt was whether it was too soon. Maybe he ought to play with his new toy a bit more by himself first before he went showing it off in public... and what if Mike's toy was better. No; he didn't mean better. Prettier. No, he didn't mean that either.

More eye-catching maybe, superficially, just on the surface, at a first glance more glamorous with bigger tits.

“What are you thinking about?” asked Jo.

“What?”

“You were miles away.”

“Oh, I was just wondering... about Mike and this woman. I mean; holiday romances, they're not well known for their longevity are they.” bluffed Eddie with a fallback comment that he managed to pluck out of thin air.

Jo wondered if this was a comment on Mike's track record or Eddie's. She was curious about Eddie's past girlfriends but didn't want to get drawn into talking about her former boyfriends, so she decided to avoid the subject for the time being. There was that whole comparison thing wasn't there - and since all exes were done and dusted (hopefully) - why bring them up when you are hoping what you have now is going to last.

“There's always hope.” said Jo, placing her arm around his waist.

“Yeah. Mike deserves a good woman. He's a nice bloke.”

“Well, I guess we'll meet the lucky girl tomorrow won't we.”

“So, you're up for this dinner then?”

“Sure. Did you say Chinese?”

“No, Indian. The Maloncho.”

“Where's that?”

“Right at the top of the High Street. Where it splits into London Road and Epsom Road.”

Jo still didn't look sure.

“Opposite where the old Odeon was.”

“Oh. Yes. Is it the blue one?”

“Yes, that’s right.” laughed Eddie, “The blue one.”

“Are you laughing at me, Eddie Shore?” asked Jo, pretending to be stern and trying to tickle him.

“Oh no, I wouldn’t do that.”

Eddie laughed and tried to get away; he just didn’t try very hard. They wrestled for a while and ended up lying on the sofa with Eddie on top.

“Fancy meeting you here.” said Eddie in a low voice.

He kissed her and the evening moved over into the slow lane. The next half hour seemed to take as long as the whole of the rest of the day put together. Each minute movement had to be carefully considered, sometimes consciously, sometimes subconsciously. Each contact had to be savoured, mulled and remembered. Each moment was unique.

They might have gone on all night, again, but Sarah emerged from her room to go to the toilet and they felt compelled to sit up. Not quite like they’d been caught at it by their parents but almost. They both sat in silence a bit uncomfortably, pretending to watch the TV, until Sarah came back and retreated to her room once more.

Both of them were tempted to giggle as they heard Sarah’s door close. Probably as a relief from the awkwardness that had been thrown over them like a bucket of cold water. But neither of them did. Jo felt bad because she was canoodling while her friend was crying her eyes out, and Eddie thought that Jo probably felt bad and wouldn’t take well to him being infantile.

Perhaps they should have giggled, because instead they sat there

feeling awkward, saying nothing, and wondering what the other one was thinking for several minutes. In the end it was Jo who broke the silence.

“So, what sort of girl does Mike normally go for?”

That conversation seemed like an age ago to Eddie, so he struggled to cast his mind back that far.

“Er, blue eyed blondes usually.” he said without thinking.

“Oh. Real blondes or dyed?”

Eddie didn't understand the question. Obviously he knew there was a difference, but what was Jo getting at? More importantly, which was the preferred option? Eddie always fancied blondes, who didn't, but usually found them a bit scary - out of his league. Look but don't touch was the general guideline that he'd gradually settled on.

“Er.”

He didn't know what to say.

“I guess I mean natural or glamorous.”

Again Jo thought it was sweet that Eddie seemed so floored by a simple question. He was probably as far away from the chancer that Sarah had just encountered as you could possibly get. That made her feel good, and secure. She didn't expect to always like what he was or what he did, but she was confident that he wouldn't deliberately lead her up the garden path.

“Oh, I see.” lied Eddie, “I think, er, he would probably prefer natural but usually ends up with glam. There are so many more dyed blondes about than naturals aren't there.”

Actually, Eddie wouldn't necessarily know a natural blonde if he

saw one. He could spot dark roots, obviously, but was there anything else? A particular shade of yellow, or tell-tale straggly ends maybe. Perhaps it just felt different if you were allowed to stoke it - like fake breasts.

“Yeah.” agreed Jo.

OK, so maybe it wasn't such a tricky question after all. Eddie wondered about raising the fake breast issue, but thought better of it. Jo clearly wasn't blonde and, from recent experience, didn't have fake breasts: so that was all that really mattered. Any hair dying or plastic surgery issues relating to this Mandy could happily wait until they met her tomorrow, or preferably afterwards since it may be considered rude to raise it during an introduction.

“Hi. Pleased to meet you. I notice you have blonde hair. Is that real? And those breasts...” thought Eddie, chuckling a little.

“What?” asked Jo.

“Oh, nothing.”

# Chapter 16

## Machine

“... so please leave a message.”

The recorded voice of her son was as familiar to Marjorie Bridget as it was unexpected. Where could he be on a Monday evening when he was working an early shift, or what passed for early at that accursed cinema.

She put down the phone, as she wasn't expecting the answering machine and so hadn't prepared a message. After a few moments thought she dialled again, half expecting an answer this time, but not getting one.

“Oh, hello dear. I was expecting you to phone me tonight. I hope everything is all-right. Call me when you get back, if it's not too late. Bye.” she said, in that typical ‘I hope the machine records this properly’ voice.

Sometimes she wondered if Eddie was actually there but choosing not to talk to her. Most of the times when she phoned him he didn't

seem that keen to talk to her, or seemed distracted by something. On the other hand, he did phone her two or three times a month, and then they did have nice chats.

The reason for this was quite simple, but had totally bypassed Eddie's mother. Single men know when they need to talk to their mothers, and it's hardly ever when their mothers want to talk to them. Especially if they call up when the football's on, during a good film, or begin the conversation with "I was talking to Doris Morris the other day and she wondered if you remembered her daughter Maggie that went to the Church School with you."

Marjorie worried about her son. Eddie knew this but, since the main cause of her worries was his persistent singleness, he'd been working quite hard at fixing the situation for his own benefit as much as hers.

"Maybe he's met a nice girl at last." thought Marjorie.

This was more of a hope than an expectation. She'd almost given up on attending any sort of wedding involving Eddie. At best she expected he might turn up one day with someone and say "Guess what, we got married in Las Vegas, here's your new daughter-in-law."

She still couldn't understand why he let poor Debbie go. What a lovely girl she was. They'd always got on like a house on fire. Her family were lovely too - that garden party they'd given was just a delight. So what had gone wrong? Eddie would never talk to her about it. Obviously he was upset at the time, but there was no excuse for some of the things he said to her when she was just trying to help him.

Stepping away from the telephone table, she turned and looked at the small wedding photo on the mantelpiece. It was 1966 and she was just turned twenty one. The day was still as clear as if it had happened only yesterday. She had put so much effort into organising things, with her mother, that it was heartening to know that the memories still lived on so strongly. Look at that bouquet, exactly the right mix of roses and greenery that she had wanted. And Edward looked so handsome in his morning suit...

On other occasions like this she had often shed a small tear, but not today. For a moment that recollection itself almost made her cry but then it had the opposite effect. Maybe something exciting had happened. Maybe Eddie had met someone. It was either that or he'd been run over. Just this once she was going to be positive - after she'd phoned the hospital just to check that he wasn't there.

As she reached for the phone though, it rang and made her jump. Gathering herself for a second first, she picked it up.

"Hello." she said in a jolly voice, totally expecting it to be Eddie - maybe with news of a forthcoming marriage.

"Is that Mrs Bridget?" came what sounded like a young woman's voice.

"Yes." she replied, disappointed.

"Great. I'm calling because you responded to a survey recently and we would like to tell you about some of our other services."

This had happened a few times recently. She used to get a lot of nuisance calls, but they went away when Eddie registered her with the phone people (Telephone Preferences Service). Now though she was getting people saying that she'd done a survey. She couldn't

remember doing any surveys. She wanted to ask the girl about the survey, but she couldn't get a word in edgeways.

"... and if you sign up today we can give you a special ten percent discount valid for fourteen days ..."

Marjorie was a polite person. That's how she'd been brought up. But this was getting too much. She wondered about just resting the receiver on the table and going to make a cup of tea or something. Then she wondered if Eddie might be trying to get through with news of his engagement. Something inside her snapped a little bit.

"Please go away." she said firmly and put down the phone.

Somehow, hanging up on the annoying survey girl felt immensely liberating. Marjorie even smiled, and set off for the kitchen with something of a spring in her step.

Half-way there she remembered that she was going to ring the hospital. She'd changed her mind. Eddie was all right. The reason he hadn't called, was a good reason. Maybe he wasn't engaged yet. He probably hadn't won the lottery... no, the Bridgets had never, ever, won anything even verging on the beginnings of something significant. No; it wasn't a big good thing, just an ordinary good thing.

By the time she reached the kitchen, Marjorie was starting to wonder why she'd come. Tea was the main word that lingered, but it was far too late for tea... unless you were the sort of person that drank that awful decaffeinated stuff. Marjorie Bridget had never tasted decaffeinated tea, and she didn't need to, she just knew it would be dreadful.

Instead she took a digestive biscuit from the small round metal tin in the second from last cupboard on the right, and headed back

towards the living room. As she sat down, she wondered again what Eddie could be up to. A new job maybe?

“Don’t get your hopes up!” she thought.

Eddie finally finding a wife was one thing, but however unlikely that seemed to be becoming, Eddie finding himself a proper job was almost certain to never happen, now.

Oh, how she’d tried to be happy for him. But, he wasn’t really happy there himself was he. She could tell. It was only a cinema wasn’t it. I mean, who works in a cinema? Nobody. She’d certainly never heard of anybody else who knew anyone who worked in a cinema. Of course it wasn’t particularly unrespectable per-se, it was just unheard of.

How different it would have been if he’d gone to University. Gone and stayed there she meant...

Marjorie allowed herself to daydream for a few minutes about being the mother of a doctor or a lawyer.

“Hello. Yes, Marjorie. My son? Oh yes, he’s doing very well.”

Somehow she’d always thought that Eddie would make it as far as the House Of Lords one day. Just that mother’s instinct. He wasn’t going to make it there from a cinema though was he. Not unless they reform the House entirely so that every job (as well as the professions) has to have a Lord.

“Lord Bridget of Cinema may I introduce your new neighbour, Lord Smelly of Dustbins.”

Snobbery didn’t suit Eddie’s mum - she’d been a widow too long, and it always came out as bitterness rather than classy distinction. Her parents wouldn’t be proud if they had seen what she’d made of

her life since she'd been married - when it could have been so much better. She picked up the phone to check that it was still working.

When he'd been a little boy, Eddie could do anything. Top of the class, in the first XI for cricket and rugby. What more could parents ask for. His future looked so bright. It had even started to heal some of the rifts between herself and her husband, Edward senior.

In truth, it might have been fairer to say that Eddie held his parents' fragile marriage together... just. But Marj would never see it like that. Her mind was full of conflicting emotions and mixed recollections of events long brushed under the carpet. She wanted, for all the world, to remember Edward as a gallant husband cruelly ripped away from his family in his prime. And Eddie as the promising youngster held back by his father's untimely death.

Edward senior was far from gallant though. He had even been described unfavourably in public by people Marjorie respected. Sometimes her only comfort was that her parents had died shortly after their wedding, and before his faults had risen to the surface.

It would also be more than fair to say that Eddie, Edward junior, had begun his slide from the pinnacle of the elite long before his father's untimely death. In fact, he'd only been top of the class once, in his first year, and had totally lost interest in sports by his third. So, contrary to the way Marjorie remembered it, his 'decline' was well under way when they moved him from the Royal Grammar to George Abbot School, and was not caused by it.

No, the effects of crashing from moderate wealth to mere financial comfort were much more subtle. If anything it was the changes in his mother that had affected him.

Sitting in her armchair, alone, Marjorie was still dreaming of Eddie as a high-court judge when she thought she heard someone at the door.

“Who could that be at this time of night?” she muttered.

It took her a minute to get up, walk to the door, secure the chain and open it. An icy gust of wind blasted the door open as far as the chain would allow... but otherwise there was no-one there.

“Hello?” said Marjorie in a firm voice.

There was no reply. But, as she started to close the door, she heard the loud shriek of cats fighting. She banged the door shut in horror.

“Oh! Cats!”

Returning to the living room she immediately went over to the drinks table and poured herself a very small sherry, which she drank down in one. She poured another, bigger, one and took it back to the armchair with her.

“Where did it all go wrong?” she wondered.

Edward had let her down and, deep down, she felt she had let Eddie down. Perhaps it would have been different if she'd had more children. They'd tried and tried to no avail. Neither of them could understand it: when they'd decided to have Eddie she had fallen pregnant almost immediately, but when they tried again, when Eddie was two years old, nothing.

In the end she had wanted another child more than she wanted the one she had. For a time Eddie came to represent what she couldn't have rather than what she already had. But all that was in the past. Now he was all she had. Everything.

By now it was almost midnight and Marjorie knew Eddie wasn't going to call. She wondered about calling him again. If he was there she'd only wake him, and if he wasn't she would... what? The question swam round a few times but she couldn't think. Draining the last of the sherry she decided to call anyway.

"Hi. This is Eddie." began the machine.

At least this answered Marjorie's question. She was worried. He wouldn't be out this late on a Monday. He wouldn't. He must have had an accident. A vision of a man being hit by a car flashed through her mind, but she couldn't vocalise it. The hospital. No. Try the news first.

She turned on the TV and went to BBC News 24. There was some sort of business item on. In depth business. So much for round the clock news. Marjorie was comforted though; they wouldn't be showing this if a plane had fallen out of the sky onto Guildford. Strangely, it didn't actually occur to her that she might have heard something herself...

"Oh. Silly me." she whispered, castigating herself. "He's probably just gone to a Christmas party or something. It is the festive season! And he's not going to meet any nice girls sitting at home is he."

Calmed by her conclusion, Marjorie turned off the TV and headed upstairs to bed. Her half-awake dreams would be about white weddings and knights in shining armour... but her real dreams were darker, and it was perhaps fortunate that she would not remember them when she woke.

# Chapter 17

## Stick

As strange days go, Jo thought this was fairly mid-ranking so far. Eddie had stayed over at hers, for the first time, and they had overslept because she'd forgotten to set the alarm. Which was weird in itself because she always left it set and just turned the volume right down at weekends. Anyway, they were up late so Eddie had to dash straight off to work without any breakfast: which was a shame because she was looking forward to making him a proper nice breakfast, with ingredients this time.

Since she was a mere peon she could afford to arrive a bit later than Eddie, who was now the head honcho. That was another weird thing. Eddie was now the cinema manager, her boss. Only the acting manager, admittedly, but this time he seemed determined to land the job permanently and was confident of doing so since the company needed to make a quick appointment, given the time of year and the circumstances of Jeff Stevenson's inglorious departure...

She'd never slept with the boss before. And actually she had only literally slept with Eddie so far - they were still waiting for the right time. Which was very sweet of him. Maybe it would be tonight, but as the day was shaping up as a weird one, rather than a nice one, she doubted it.

Next on the weird list was the old woman who'd approached her as she approached the cinema.

"Excuse me dear." she'd said.

Jo thought from the off that there was something odd about her. She couldn't quite put her finger on it though. The woman was clearly quite old - in her seventies probably - with white hair bulging out of a brown headscarf which was wrapped very tightly around her head. Nothing particularly odd about that, nor the long faun coat that she was wearing. The walking sticks were a bit strange; one being a good few inches longer than the other, so that the woman was both bent over forwards and sideways.

"Can you tell me where the Post Office is?"

"Er, yes. It's on North Street." replied Jo instinctively.

Somehow Jo couldn't help wondering how someone so apparently dodderly had made it all the way down here if they were looking for the Post Office.

"It's quite a long way." she added, "To walk."

If you had to use a pair of walking sticks, she meant. It would only take Jo five minutes to get there from here.

"Oh, I'll be fine. Thank you dear."

And off the woman headed, in the right direction, even though Jo hadn't indicated. Jo stood open-mouthed for a moment, watching

the back of the woman as she teetered ever so slowly on her way.

“If she knows how to get to North Street. How come she doesn’t know where the Post Office is?” wondered Jo.

The woman certainly seemed to be managing, however slowly, to get on her way so Jo left her to it and went on her way to work. Throughout the day though it came back to her and she wondered, puzzled, if the lady had got there OK.

As it happens she didn’t. As soon as Jo was out of sight, she had picked up her sticks and walked, quite briskly, back into the Bedford Road car park (from whence she had come) where she found her waiting brown mini-metro and drove off.

The rest of the day had, in comparison, been positively normal. Well, dull actually. That was why it was normal: it was a Tuesday in December after all. Tuesdays were normally quiet, apart from during the holidays. Today wasn’t a holiday, but it was close enough to Christmas for most of the people who may otherwise have been tempted to pop into the cinema to go shopping instead.

Jo hadn’t done any Christmas shopping yet, so she spent most of the day thinking about what she might buy for the only two people who really mattered to her - her mum and Eddie. Her mum was a tricky one, not because she didn’t know what she liked, but because she had been buying Christmas and birthday presents for her for so many years now that it was tough to come up with anything different. In a way that made it easier, because she knew that if all else failed she could fall back on an old favourite - perfume or ear-rings or a jigsaw. There was always a wish though, at this time of year, to come up with something a bit different for a change. Maybe a nice

headscarf...

Eddie was the real tester. Jo had been buying him little gifts for a while, to help him notice her. But obviously she hadn't bought him any proper 'to my boyfriend' presents yet, because he hadn't been. Now he was and it was a whole different ball game.

"Hmmm. I wonder what games he likes?"

Jo didn't know if Eddie was into football or rugby or cricket. She guessed he was; most men were weren't they. But since she had no interest in sport, apart from gymnastics and ice-skating maybe, there was little incentive to find out, in case she gave him the false impression that she was interested. Being a sports widow was not something she relished.

She had so long to think about it, pretty much the whole day in fact, that it was inevitable that she should consider a few 'naughty' options. Some cheeky underpants or a pair of chocolate breasts maybe. Such thoughts led her, not to present ideas though, but to thinking about sex and how she wanted it to be so great, so much, that she was worried about messing up their whole relationship over it.

Eddie had been busy all day. Jo had only seen him twice, and one of those was for lunch. What did he think about the whole sex thing, she wondered. All she could think was that they needed to do it soon or at least talk about it. She wanted to. He must too.

The only event that disturbed her musings throughout the day was Henry Wilks asking her to check the ladies toilet. He often did this, on account of his hearing being not so great. "Anyone in there?" he would ask, but he often wasn't sure if he'd heard a reply. Being

of the gentlemanly sort he would rather go and get someone to check than barge in on some poor young lady.

Nine times out of ten Henry would ask Jo. She was his favourite, reminding him as she did of his youngest daughter Claire. Jo didn't look anything like Claire, it was her manner that was similar - she always liked to help, always smiled and said hello, and never treated him like a dodderly old fool... just because he was.

Having confirmed that the ladies toilet was indeed vacant, and thus completing her most productive task of the day, Jo got back to thinking about Christmas, her and Eddie. Quite quickly she moved on from presents to the evening ahead. There shouldn't be anything to worry about - she'd met Mike a few times before. It was this Mandy who was the odd one out. But, then again she was just 'there' before and now she was 'with' Eddie. And what if this Mandy was a bit of a bitch, or even worse, really beautiful.

"If she's a cool beauty, like Kate Moss, then I can handle that." thought Jo.

Did she mean it? Well, if you define "handle" as "not melting into a puddle of self-conscious mush" then yes she did. Obviously she would be jealous though, and a bit put out. I mean, who wants their boyfriend's mate to be going out with Kate Moss? How many times could Eddie say "you're every bit as pretty as Kate" or, even worse, not say it, before you had to go and find a pitch fork to kill her with?

For a few minutes Jo wondered about all the different types of women that this Mandy could be, realistically. Mostly though she found herself imagining her as quite like her but taller, or thinner, or

blonder, or bustier, or more intelligent.

“Not that it matters.” she muttered out loud, to herself.

Eddie was probably right, she might not last long anyway. And if she did, and they ended up seeing her quite often, then she would make an effort to get on with her... even if she was Kate Moss.

“I’m off now.”

“Huh?” said Jo, who was still miles away.

“I’m done. Another day, another dollar.” expanded Henry.

“Oh, Henry. Good. See you tomorrow. Actually no. I’m off tomorrow...”

“See you when I see you then. Bye.”

Henry set off, then looked back and added “Have a good time.”

“Thanks.” replied Jo without thinking.

Then she wondered what Henry meant. Did he know about tonight, or was he talking about tomorrow? Had Eddie said something to him or was there some gossip going round? Obviously people had spotted that they were together now, and Eddie hadn’t been particularly subtle about re-jigging the rotas so that they could have the same days off.

It had occurred to her that the timing couldn’t have been much worse, as far as appearances were concerned. Eddie ascends to the manager’s position and within days she’s going out with him. The few people she cared about at work knew that she’d been sweet on him for years, but it wasn’t common knowledge - or so she hoped. What the gossips said didn’t really bother her anyway. Obviously she’d prefer not to be talked about, but if they had to then let them. Since she wasn’t exactly averse to indulging in the odd scrap of tittle-

tattle herself, Jo would have to accept that for a while it was her turn to be the subject of the wagging tongues.

Jo's new-found confidence was born, quite simply, out of the strong sense of security that she was starting to feel. Especially when she was actually with Eddie, everything just seemed likely to work out in the end. She couldn't quite believe it, but every time she found herself starting to doubt it now, and negative thoughts crept upon her, she would make a big effort to think about something else instead. After all, she had waited so long for this, what she believed she had now found, that it would be madness to doubt herself out of letting it happen.

Her last stint of the day was in the box office and a few people were starting to dribble in for the early evening shows. Earlier in the day, just after lunch in fact, she had had an almost moderately interesting encounter.

"Two for Harry Potter please." ordered a swarthy looking youth.

His girlfriend was dressed like a cheap tart and chewing gum. The girl, who could barely have passed for fifteen, was obviously bunking off school and so the filthy look she was giving Jo was clearly a challenge.

"Eleven pounds sixty please." replied Jo.

The youth, who looked like he was trying his best to grow a beard, handed over a very crumpled twenty pound note. Jo did her best to straighten it out and held it up to check that it wasn't a fake. It looked OK so she handed over the tickets and the change. She had deliberately not asked them where they wanted to sit and just given them seats in the middle of the back row... wondering if they

would say anything. The youth paused for an instant, on the verge of speaking up, but quickly opted to grab the tickets and count his blessings. As they walked off the girl jabbed him in the ribs with her elbow and said something.

“Kids.” muttered Jo under her breath, wondering how long it would be before the pair she’d just served would be accidentally producing one of their own for the state to support.

For this stint though there was no such high-point, just a steady stream of boringly ordinary customers. Time seemed to run slower and slower the closer she got to ‘home time’. At last though she saw Eddie coming towards her.

“Leave in 15 minutes?” he asked.

“Yes.” smiled Jo.

The other box office was just opening, so Jo waited until Joe Perry was all set up before closing her till down and heading to the staff room to get her coat. A few minutes later she headed for Eddie’s office and he was already coming out as she arrived.

“Ready?” he asked.

“You bet. It has been such a boring day.”

“Boring? Great things are afoot. Let me fill you in.”

# Chapter 18

## Curry

“So he was arrested, and then escaped?”

“Yeah. Amazing isn’t it.” confirmed Eddie.

“And all this was over the Jenny Pierce thing?”

Jo couldn’t quite believe what Eddie was telling her. He certainly hadn’t skimped on the detail either. The whole time she’d been getting ready he had told her, at length, the pitifully grisly story of the descent, fall and nose-bleed-inducing plummet of their former leader Jeffrey Marmaduke Stevenson, 54.

“Well, this is the intriguing part, isn’t it. Why would they want to arrest him for that? And why would he try to escape?”

Eddie was almost bubbling with excitement. The months of resentment he’d felt at Sylvia’s annoying regime were quickly distilling themselves into joy at his downfall.

“I shouldn’t go on about it though.” he concluded, knowing that he would anyway.

“Shall we go then?” asked Jo, picking up her coat.

Eddie was caught by surprise. He'd been talking at Jo for twenty minutes and hadn't noticed that she was getting ready as quickly as she could. Now that he actually noticed her again he was stunned. She was wearing a pair of blue jeans - very nicely fitting (tight) blue jeans - and a pale blue (cornflower) top with a deep v-shaped neckline. As well as the merest glimmer of a lacy bra, the top also exposed a rather elegant heart-shaped gold locket.

“Wow. You look great.”

“Thanks.” said Jo. Accepting the complement but not being quite able to decide if it was a good or bad thing that Eddie, like so many men, couldn't tell the difference between a big effort and something which was just thrown together in a hurry after work when she was starving hungry.

“I just have to pop to the loo.” added Eddie, jumping up and dashing out.

“Tuh!” exclaimed Jo. “Good job we're not in a hurry.”

When they eventually got out the door, they found that it was only moderately cold, but both were still pleased of their hats, scarves and gloves. They didn't make the coolest looking couple, as they walked arm in arm up the town, but after a long day at work neither of them was prepared to trade comfort for style.

Eddie felt very proud as they walked. It was a long time since he'd been part of a couple in public. He liked the feeling. Instead of looking at other couples with a combination of envy and contempt - the balance depending on his mood and degree of frustration - he quickly developed a measure of 'like us' or 'not like us'. For example,

the thirty-somethings at the bottom of North Street going into Ha! Ha! Obviously they were 'like us'. On the other hand, the teenage couple (were they students?) heading for a pub somewhere were definitely 'not like us'.

The obvious cases passed them without a thought. What was interesting were the boundaries. The man and his wife going into Pizza Express - he was shorter than her, they both had smart leather coats, she was very beautiful, he was quite ordinary looking (bullock dressed as bull?), they were holding hands - were they 'like us' or not. It made Eddie feel good to wonder.

"Do you think that will be us in a few years?" he'd almost asked.

"Do you think we'll still be holing hands in a few years?" Jo said.

"Yes. I hope so." replied Eddie, "We will. I'm sure."

Jo smiled. Holding hands through thick gloves wasn't quite the same somehow, but it was better than not holding hands at all. She let go and wrapped her arm around his instead.

"Or walking arm in arm?" she added.

Eddie just smiled. They were nearly there. The road ahead split into two: one going toward London and the other to Epsom. On the corner was a large estate agent, with a clock mounted high above the main window.

"It's only quarter past eight. Can we have a quick look in the hi-fi shop?" asked Eddie.

"Sure." said Jo.

Eddie could tell immediately that this was "sure" as in "just for a very, very quick look and then I'm going to be getting quite restless and eager to get on to the restaurant anyway because, let's face it

matey, looking at music centres, TVs and DVD players is very, very, very boring isn't it."

"I just want to see if the price of big TVs has come down yet." he added reassuringly.

"Yeah right."

Eddie just smiled and crossed them over the road. If he'd been on his own then he would have had a good look in the shop window, noticed that the shop was actually open (especially late for Christmas) and gone in for a quick shifty. Tonight though, because Jo was clearly not a technophile and because he was really quite hungry, he just had a quick look in the window.

"Hmmm. Eight hundred. Still quite a lot."

Jo looked up at him. She might as well have said "can we go now" out loud.

"Yes, we can go now." replied Eddie anyway.

Jo smiled; her mind powers clearly had a strong influence on the male mind. She hugged his arm tighter, pulling them together even closer.

"Lets eat." added Eddie, rather optimistically since they were still going to be at least ten minutes early.

Having successfully negotiated the 'air lock' doors of the Maloncho Indian restaurant, they began to remove their hats and gloves. It was nice and warm inside, and Jo's nose was very grateful.

"Can I take those for you?" asked the middle-aged Indian waiter who had appeared beside them.

He spoke very softly, in a strong Indian accent and Eddie's ears were cold.

“Yes, thank you.” replied Jo, handing over her coat, with its pockets stuffed full of woollen accessories.

“Ah. Yes.” mumbled Eddie, realising what the man had probably said.

He didn't normally like to hand over his coat in restaurants, but on this occasion his pockets were empty (apart from the hat and gloves) so it didn't seem to matter... unless someone were to steal the whole coat... in which case he would be in for a very cold short walk home. The thought reminded him of the several umbrellas that he'd lost in restaurants - some of which he'd just left behind because it wasn't raining when he left and he simply forgot about them - particularly the cool black and gold JPS golf umbrella that was his dad's...

After the lengthy hand-over of coats, it was still only 8:24 and Eddie knew that Mike and Mandy would be late. Mike wasn't the best timekeeper Eddie knew (Eddie was) and with a woman to hold him back even further...

“Table for two sir?” asked the waiter.

“No. Four. We booked...”

“Oh yes. This way please.”

The waiter obviously wasn't bothered about checking the booking. Perhaps because the restaurant was completely empty.

“Quiet tonight.” commented Eddie as they were seated.

“Yes. We have some bookings later, but Tuesday is often not busy. Drinks?”

“Er, yes. I'll have a Tiger beer please.”

Eddie looked at Jo.

“A glass of white wine please.”

“Which one?” wondered Eddie, but the waiter was obviously happy to choose as he simply wandered off.

Eddie and Jo picked up their menus and started to peruse. It had been a while since Eddie had had a good curry.

“What sort of thing do you like?” he asked suddenly, “Hot, mild, very hot?”

“Oh, definitely not too hot.” replied Jo, almost shuddering at the thought of a mouth burner.

“Korma?” enquired Eddie knowingly.

“Probably.”

Eddie was tempted to groan but simply nodded. What was it with women and curries. Out of all of the great dishes on offer here, at a great Indian restaurant, Jo, like all the other women Eddie had ever known, was going to go for one of the blandest. They might as well change the name to ‘Ladies Curry’ and have done with it. Eddie suddenly got an image of some thick, drunk, yob saying “Yeah, I’ll have that Lads Curry mate.” and smiled.

“What’s wrong with Korma?” asked Jo accusingly.

“Nothing.” protested Eddie.

“Are you going for a Vindaloo then?”

“Oh no. I’m not that brave... or stupid. A Jalfrezi maybe.”

Jo sought out the name on the menu and found it was merely a ‘hot’.

“Hmmm.”

The waiter arrived with the drinks.

“Oh, here they are.” said Jo.

Before Eddie could begin wondering why Jo should greet their drinks in this way he realised that she was looking over his shoulder towards the door. Mike and Mandy were here. He turned round to look. It was Mike, yes. And. And.

Time stopped for a moment. The girl with Mike, who Eddie could only assume was Mandy, was tall and slim with long blonde hair and blue eyes. She had a slightly crooked smile (it was higher on her right, Eddie's left) and pins like sticks.

When time got going again, Eddie reached quickly for his pint and took a big swig.

"She looks very nice." said Jo, satisfied that the Kate Moss rating was within acceptable limits.

"Yes." replied Eddie, hoping to hell he could mask his confusion until he'd sorted his head out.

To his great relief Jo was distracted enough by Mike and Mandy to not notice his behaviour, which was so slightly odd that she probably wouldn't have noticed it anyway. It was all in his mind, just like his relationship with Mandy whose proper name, as I mentioned once before, was actually Amanda.

"Hi." said Mike, as he and Mandy, now divest of their coats, approached the table.

"This is Mandy. Mandy, this is Eddie, and Jo."

"Hi." said Eddie and Jo, almost in unison.

Eddie was sitting opposite Jo and expected Mike to sit next to him. So, when Mike sat next to Jo and Mandy started to lower herself into the seat by himself, Eddie felt a mild panic arising in him.

“Don’t be stupid.” he told himself, smiling politely at Mandy.

Mandy smiled at Eddie and then turned to smile at Jo. If she recognised Eddie then she was doing an excellent job of hiding it. On the one hand this was definitely a very good thing, but on the other hand Eddie was a bit disappointed. He’d admired this girl on a daily basis for years. Some glimmer of recognition would have been nice, however hard it may prove to explain away to Jo later.

“Mike tells me that you two have just got together too.” announced Mandy with all the subtlety of a town crier.

“Yes. We have known each other for a while though.” countered Jo.

And so it began: an evening of polite conversation, getting more relaxed and friendly and fun as the alcohol soaked into them. Mike was on form, with a few choice stories from his holiday and Mandy was nicely complementary, if slightly too brazen for Eddie’s taste. Her voice was a bit squeakier than he’d imagined too - something that started to completely alter his projection of her.

It quickly became easy for Eddie to forget that he knew Amanda and treat her like any other stranger that Mike might have produced. Mainly because he didn’t know her, did he. He’d seen her many times, but he knew nothing about her really. In his mind he had slept with her on several dozen occasions: but that was a girl called Rachel.

During a lull in the conversation over the main course, Eddie did allow his mind to wander down that fantastic path (“The last time” he told himself later). He imagined himself getting up to go to the toilet.

“Oh, I need to go too.” Amanda had said (in her deeper, more Mariella Froustrop, voice) “Can you show me the way?”

Of course, when they got there they’d nipped into the ladies, Mandy had confessed that she recognised him, that she’d always wanted him and that she was damn well going to have him right now.

“Excuse me.” said Mandy, “I need the loo.”

Eddie coughed. “Um. Hot bit.” he added, pointing at a chilli with his fork.

Mandy seemed to be well capable of finding her own way to the toilets, so Eddie’s daylight fantasy evaporated quite quickly. He did wonder for a second whether to just go to the gents now, just to see what might happen. Obviously he didn’t expect a sexual encounter; in fact, he would have run a mile if Amanda had come on to him here, or anywhere really. He was Jo’s now, and very happy to be a one woman man.

No, what Eddie was curious about was whether Mandy / Amanda recognised him at all. After all, he had seen her many, many times in the street. She must have noticed him at least once. Surely she must have recognised him.

On her return Mandy smiled sweetly and, confirming that her Korma was as finished as she wanted it to get, resumed the conversation she was having with Jo about the best places to buy shoes in Kingston.

“Another beer?” asked Mike.

Eddie nodded and turned to find the waiter already there behind him. Jo’s glass was three quarters full but Mandy was empty.

“Two more Tigers and a Screwdriver please.”

# Chapter 19

## Burns

The more she thought about it, the more Jo became convinced that Eddie knew Mandy in ‘a past life’. There was no specific thing that gave it away, just a lot of little things that added up to the sum of their parts. Logic aside, she just knew it. Logic inside, the little things were irrefutable.

Firstly, in the restaurant he’d been a bit quiet when she first appeared with Mike. Nothing much but it could easily have been a “Uh, is she going to say anything?” pause. You know, the sort of thing that happens when two people think the other one is about to, or ought to, say something.

And secondly Eddie had said, Jo couldn’t remember exactly what, something other than the expected “Pleased to meet you.” ... was it “Hi, how are you?” or something. Again, nothing much, but a hint that they might have already met.

Several times over dinner she’d caught him throwing a quick

glance over Mandy. Obviously she was an attractive woman. Eddie was only a man. What did she expect? And Mandy seemed much more interested in talking to her than to Eddie. What did that mean? Was she trying to give him the cold shoulder for some past transgression or did she just prefer to talk about shoes?

Her thoughts were suddenly interrupted by their arrival back at Eddie's house.

"Well, they seemed to make a nice couple." offered Eddie once they were inside.

He hadn't really noticed Jo's silence on the way home because, A, it wasn't very far from the Maloncho to his house, B, he'd had a few drinks, and thirdly he was busy wondering about Mandy and how she could have totally failed to offer any semblance of recognition for him whatsoever. So complete was her lack of acknowledgement of him as a previous, if merely visual, acquaintance that he was now almost completely sure that she really didn't remember him at all.

That was a bit of a disappointment. To say the least. All those times he'd thought of her, sexually. That was intimate stuff; he'd committed a lot of time and energy to her, the least she could do was notice his simple existence. Was he really that invisible?

"I guess so." replied Jo. "She seemed familiar..."

"Really?"

Eddie was frightened for about half a second. Then he realised that Jo knowing Mandy wasn't a problem at all. He'd never done anything with Mandy. He was OK. He hadn't done anything wrong.

Jo's attempt to trick something out of him had worked; or had it? She thought it had but she wasn't sure. It was no more of a

reaction that she'd observed before. And it was getting late. And she'd eaten too much.

"Did you recognise her?"

"Me?" said Eddie, regretting it instantly.

Stupid, stupid, stupid. Now he'd let Jo know, with a single word, that he not only did recognise Mandy but that he felt a need to hide the fact. Strangely, Jo read Eddie's reply as a pretty convincing "No. Not at all."

Eddie had drunk too much at the Indian. He was tired and wanted to go to bed. But he didn't want to leave an air of suspicion lingering.

"Actually I have seen her in the street. She's often walking up North Street as I'm going to work."

Eddie paused and then added "I thought she might have recognised me but she didn't seem to."

Jo didn't say anything. She was trying to assess this new revelation. So now he was admitting that he'd seen Mandy before. Did she believe him? Was this part-way to a full confession; to something else that would come out later?

The atmosphere in Eddie's hallway was cold, both literally and metaphorically. Eddie wasn't sure if Jo believed his statement about Mandy, and neither was Jo. Neither of them thought it a good idea to press the issue though. Or rather, they were both too tired to deal with it now. Tomorrow was their joint day off, they could sort it out then.

"Bed?" offered Eddie.

"Yes." accepted Jo.

The notion that she'd had earlier in the day, that tonight might be the night, now seemed tragically absurd. Now she was doubting him again. After all the machinations that she'd come through, his apparently slender connection to a skinny blonde had undermined her confidence in a jot.

Or had it? As she watched Eddie undress - nearly falling over as he got his foot stuck in his trouser leg because he thought he could get them off before his shoes - her mind wandered back over the 'incriminating facts'. Was everything consistent with him just spotting her in the street? She was attractive, probably quite memorable to a single man...

"So you fancied Mandy then... when you saw her in the street!"

This was a bit of a low blow for Eddie, especially as he was having trouble freeing his left foot from the grips of his jeans.

"Er." he threw out as a place-holder while he thought about it.

Giving up on the foot for a moment, he turned to look directly at Jo, who was now sitting on the edge of the bed, half undressed, looking a little troubled. It was one of those sobering moments. Unfortunately Eddie was more than a little drunk so he only sobered a bit, but it was enough for him to realise that this was an opportunity to clear the air.

"Actually, I fancied the other one more. The one she walks with."

Jo's immediate reaction was "What!" but she kept quiet for long enough to encourage Eddie to elaborate. After all, he was volunteering information now, so better to let him let out as much as possible.

"Uh. I think they are sisters..."

"Mandy did mention a sister called Claire... while you and Mike

were discussing the football.” muttered Jo thoughtfully.

“Oh, right.” mumbled Eddie.

“So...” started Jo.

That was as far as she got. Eddie was confessing to fancying an attractive woman that he'd seen on the street - so what? It was very honest of him wasn't it: he could have just bluffed it out and denied ever seeing her, but he hadn't. That was a good thing. And this was before they had got together - probably a long time ago - and not unlike the situation she'd been in with Eddie for the last few years.

She knew what it was like to admire someone from afar. To not be acknowledged. To feel invisible. So how could she sit here and be critical of Eddie for the same thing.

“... nothing ever happened.” completed Eddie. “She obviously never even noticed me.”

“I think that happens a lot.” said Jo quietly.

“People not noticing me?”

“No, silly.” said Jo climbing into bed. “People not noticing people who have noticed them.”

“Oh.”

“Once on the radio, Virgin I think, this guy phoned in and said he'd seen this girl on the tube. She was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. They had made eye contact but he was on the platform and she was on the train. He tried to get on the train but the doors closed before he got there. And she was gone. The guy wanted the DJ to help them get in touch because he thought they'd made a connection... that she would want to meet him as much as he wanted to meet her.”

Eddie was already guessing she didn't, and he'd freed his foot now so he could give the story his undivided attention.

"Do you know what the DJ said? He said 'Sorry mate. But this happens to that girl every day. You have to move on.' The guy was crushed. It seems so obvious when someone tells you. But until then you just need to believe that someone you like might like you..."

Eddie could have added "And for a bloke, after a few times, your confidence can be shattered and you stop hoping and just live it out in your head. As if it happened anyway." but didn't, so he didn't find out that Jo had even been there too. He still didn't know how long Jo had fancied him from afar. It didn't click that that was what she was trying to tell him now. He just thought she was being understanding.

After Eddie turned out the light they both cuddled up together and kissed tenderly. It was a good job that they'd both been eating roughly the same stuff, because they both had equally bad breath at this point and therefore neither noticed.

Silence reigned for a few minutes, but was quickly overthrown by Eddie as he remembered something... and decided he had to share it with Jo.

"Years ago, when I worked in Farnham, I used to pass this little office. It was a one-desk affair; part of something bigger I think. At the window sat this pretty woman. I often used to go out of my way to pass the window and sometimes she'd smile at me. I was far too shy to go in and talk to her..."

Eddie paused for some time. Remembering the angst of wanting to go in, but not being able to. He'd been up to the door many times,

and then chickened out at the last minute.

“Ah.” said Jo, holding his hand.

“There’s more. Eventually I decided to write her a poem. I thought if I posted it under her door then she would know it was from me. Maybe she would open the window when I passed and invite me in...”

Jo turned to look at Eddie, who was staring straight up at the ceiling.

“I tried for ages to write something original, but failed. I did write some stuff but thought it wasn’t good enough. So I copied something out of an old book, something obscure. ‘Every time I look at her.’ it was called. I wrote it out very neatly on nice paper and put it in an envelope. I didn’t sign it, and I didn’t know her name, so I just put a question mark on the front.”

Eddie could almost see himself doing the writing, with his dad’s old fountain pen.

“Did you send it?” asked Jo softly.

“No. I went to the office early one day. The front door was open, but hers was locked. I wanted to put it on her desk rather than slip it under the door... but that wasn’t the problem. On the door it said Mrs G. Littlewood.”

“Oh no!” whispered Jo.

“After that I tried to get a look at her hand through the window, to see if she had a wedding ring. Maybe it was a mistake and she was a Ms not a Mrs, or maybe the label was left over from the previous occupant. I never found out. It was over, and it had never even started!”

Unseen by Jo, tears were welling up in Eddie's eyes. Not because of this one thing: there were many other examples, including tonight's revelation that Mandy had never even noticed him. No; the tears were a release. Maybe he could finally put all the disappointments behind him. His confidence in Jo was seemingly unshakeable. She was the one. The real one. He could never let her slip away.

Jo could have cried too but as she rolled nearer to Eddie, and kissed him on the cheek, she felt the moisture of his tears. "Oh God." she thought. She thought she'd been unlucky in love... and she had. And Eddie had kept her waiting. But it was obvious why. He'd been through as much, if not much more, than she had. He was really special. He would never let her down. She loved him.

There was a long silence. Then Eddie turned purposefully towards Jo.

"I..." he began.

Jo put a finger to his lips.

"Don't ever say it. Just mean it."

# Chapter 20

## Supper

After a long hard day, sitting down with a mug of hot chocolate and a couple of digestives was about as close to heaven as Marjorie Tennyson expected to get. This side of the grave anyway...

Obviously there were people who had harder lives than her. She wasn't starving, or living on the street or hooked on drugs. Not counting the marijuana, of course, but that was for the arthritis. The pain. Why should she suffer more pain, after seven years of it now, just because the drug, her medicine, was technically illegal. Maybe the lawmakers could come here and let her hit their arms and legs with a hammer for a while, if they thought it was fair to condemn people to pain for no good reason.

The arthritis was a mere inconvenience compared to the loneliness though. After twenty six years of marriage she'd now been a widow for twelve years. Twelve long years. Some people might have thought that, at only 44 when her husband died, she might have found a

second husband by now. But Marjorie had hardly even considered it, even now. She had married at 18, after being with Norman for five years before that. They would have married when she was 16 if her father had allowed it; but he wouldn't, mainly because she was an only child and he wanted her to be completely sure that Norman was the right man.

They'd wanted to have children right away. But nothing happened. Eventually they forgot about it, or at least stopped talking about it, and sought solace in each other. They had become so close, that when she did suddenly find she was pregnant, at 32, she worried it might upset things. But it didn't. Her life just got better and better. For a while she wondered if she might have another child, but nothing happened. She'd actually gone her whole life without using a contraceptive once!

When Norman died, in 1989, she was crushed. It was very sudden, and cruel. She couldn't quite believe it. For months she'd woken up every day expecting him to just be there again. If it wasn't for Jo she might have quickly lost the will to live. Norman was her whole life. Without him she was lost. And now, with the arthritis, she was in physical pain too. Sometimes she wondered what she'd done to deserve this. Then she'd see something terrible on the TV and think she wasn't so badly off.

Another thing that pained her was seeing Jo unhappy. So it was not a small comfort to see her looking so thrilled about this new boy she was seeing, Eddie. He sounded very nice, the time she'd spoken to him on the phone. And hopefully he'd be a bit more reliable than some of the other boys she'd been out with. Anyway, maybe it was

good that Jo hadn't settled very young like she had...

The man on the news was talking about Afghanistan and how well the war was going. Which made Marjorie think of all those poor souls who had died in the twin towers - especially the ones who had jumped to their deaths - yes; she wasn't so badly off.

Suddenly the news switched to a lighter item and there were lots of ladies wearing hats. Marj was thrown for a minute, and then realised that it was an advert. She normally watched the BBC news but tonight was on ITV.

"Hats." she said to herself out loud.

"Makes me think of wedding bells."

If Jo's manner was anything to go by, and usually it was, then she definitely thought this Eddie was the one. Maybe she ought to start looking for a hat... no rush. It would be lovely to have a wedding.

"I wonder what his parents are like." she thought.

There was a big mush of undissolved chocolate at the bottom of her mug. She would have liked to spoon it out, but didn't even try, because she knew it would be hard to grip the spoon. Little things like that got her down more than anything.

Her mother had worn a giant blue hat at their wedding. It was 1963 and fashion was starting to become something that people like them did. How fab it had all been. Maybe she should do something like that for Jo's wedding. Turn back the clock to the sixties... again! People did that every few years didn't they?

The news finished and more adverts came on. Next up there was going to be a programme about celebrities trying to lose weight. Marjorie picked up the remote and turned off the TV. She couldn't stand

programmes about celebrities (aka people who have been on other TV programmes). Over-paid, over-sexed and over-rated. Attention-seeking nobodies who think they deserve special recognition for just doing their job. Second only in contempt to the politicians who insisted on criminalising her medicine.

If she did get a big hat then she'd have to hope that Jo got married in the summer on a nice calm, hopefully completely windless, day. Maybe she could get two hats, a big one and a wind-tolerant one, and make her mind up on the day, depending on the weather?

The room was now almost completely silent, apart from the faint boom-boom of some music playing next door. Her neighbours were very nice. A young couple who seemed very concerned about disturbing her.

"I'm sorry about the noise last night." the girl would say.

"I really didn't hear anything dear." she would answer.

The girl would smile disbelievingly.

"Anyway, I don't like it too quiet. I need to know that I'm still here." she might add.

Which would just confuse the girl a bit more. Marjorie wondered if they were trying for a baby but hadn't asked. She had heard them having sex most nights... which always made her smile, because she'd been a bit of a moaner in her youth too.

It would be nice if they had a baby. It would be nicer if Jo had a baby; if she had a grandchild. Even better if she had several grandchildren. But somehow she thought there would only ever be one. Jo was an only child, she was, and her mother was... she thought she remembered her mother saying that her mother and her

grandmother were only ones too. In fact that was wrong; Marjorie's grandmother was a twin but her identical sister died in her teens, and Marjorie's great-grandmother was one of nine!

Jo would make a great mother she thought. There was something about her that just shouted it. A way with all sorts of people and a generosity of spirit; but mostly patience. She'd always had incredible patience - something she must have got from her father because Marjorie definitely didn't count that amongst her virtues. Having said that, holding onto her virtue until she was married had required some patience - although not nearly as much as poor Norman. He was positively bursting by their wedding night, poor boy. Two and half years after he'd proposed and she'd accepted!

She really ought to go to bed now. It was quite late. But she didn't have to get up early for anything in the morning. She never had to get up early for anything. She never had to get up for anything, full stop.

The thought left her as the faint boom-boom next door turned into a dum dum-te dum-te dum. Ah, they were going to have sex now. She'd stay down a bit longer - she didn't want to listen tonight... and it was a Tuesday so they wouldn't be long (he had an early start).

It never occurred to Marjorie to wonder whether Jo and Eddie might be having sex too. They weren't, but they were in bed together. She wasn't even sure if Jo was a virgin or not. She hadn't liked to ask because she hoped that she was, but things being as they are in this day and age, feared that she wasn't. It was difficult though, she knew. It had been hard enough to hold Norman off, and herself back, until she was 18. So how was Jo supposed to last until

her mid twenties. People got married later now didn't they. But it still wasn't right - sex before.

There was a gentle rhythmic knocking on the wall upstairs. Marjorie smiled. She might not have if she knew, contrary to her assumption, that the couple next door were not in fact married. Nor were they likely to ever be, given their convictions. In fact, the chap did have several convictions for possession which might have also horrified Marjorie until recently.

The knocking stopped, and soon after the music was turned off too. Marjorie's house fell silent. She sat in it for a few moments until a car passed outside. Suddenly she felt abandoned. Jo was supposed to have come round today; but had called to say that she was working instead. Something to do with her Eddie. Marj could never remember when Jo was working and when she was wasn't. That cinema job was a funny one. Thursday off one week, Friday the next, Wednesday the one after that. Jo just had to say "see you on Tuesday" as that was the most she could cope with.

It wasn't like her to change the day though. Jo would still keep coming round now that she was with this Eddie wouldn't she? Marjorie had always seen her daughter every week - apart from holidays. And even then Jo had only recently started going on holidays without her (the last 4 years).

Marjorie's mood continued to sink. The lights flickered slightly. A cat shrieked in the garden, presumably as the result of a fight with another cat, although it could have been a fox. A trickle of cars started to pass the front of the house - it was about half an hour after closing time.

Usually they went shopping together when Jo came round. Not often buying anything much, but having a good look together. Sure, she could shop with her friends, but that was different because they thought like her. With Jo it was the clash of generations that made it interesting.

“You’d never wear that.” she would say.

“Why not?” Jo would ask.

“Well... it’s too revealing.”

“Mother! You are so square. Look at that 11 year old girl, she’s showing more right now.”

“Oh. People don’t still say ‘square’ do they?”

They’d both laugh and carry on looking. Generally they’d each buy stuff that the other one only just disapproved of. Jo’s clothes were a bit too sexually provocative for Marj and Marjorie’s stuff was a bit too, well, stuffy for Jo. That was the fun of it. And after the shopping they’d go to a tea shop, or a coffee shop that did tea, and talk about what they hadn’t bought. Eventually they’d get round to talking about how awful one of their friends was being to them. What she’d said and how hurtful it was. How they couldn’t be friends with them any more unless they said sorry... and how they’d made up with the friend who was bothering them last week.

In some ways, apart from the thirty year age gap, they were more like sisters than mother and daughter. Jo hadn’t even considered what life would be like without her mother ‘being there’. But Marjorie was thinking about it right now - on her own, quietly. Not her own death - her faith in God was strong enough to not let her fear that; after all, it would reunite her with Norman; and she knew she

had to make the most of her time on Earth. No, Marj was thinking about life without Jo, or with a lot less Jo, because Jo might be too busy with her own life to make time for her.

“I don’t want to be a burden.” she whispered.

Somehow, the fact that she’d whispered it shook her out of her moroseness.

“I don’t have to be a mouse. What am I apologising for?” she announced strongly, to the picture standing on the blank TV set.

“I choose not to be a burden.”

Marjorie got up, slowly, and headed off to bed. Her legs didn’t hurt so much now. When she needed it she had all the strength anyone could ever hope for. Norman had taught her that!

# Chapter 21

## London

The train finally crawled into Waterloo station, very late, at 11:09am. Both of them would have been quite stressed had they not been together, or if they were travelling for an appointment. As it was they hardly noticed. Their day out had started when they woke up together... and it would take a lot more than a signal failure to spoil it for them.

“Where shall we go first?” asked Jo, realising that of all the things they’d talked about on the way here, what to do wasn’t one of them.

“The clock, of course.” replied Eddie.

Jo knew what he meant and, corny as it was, she wanted to do it too. They had arrived on platform 14 so it only took a few paces and they were there, under the famous timepiece. Eddie was a bit disappointed that there wasn’t at least one person there standing alone and wearing a carnation... but it was late morning on a Wednesday.

“Pleased to meet you. You must be Jo.” said Eddie, kissing her.

“And you, Monsieur Eddie.” replied Jo, pretending to be French for reasons known only to herself, and then only fleetingly.

They embraced theatrically and then simultaneously became self-conscious. So Eddie led them off towards the Underground. He didn’t know where they were going so it seemed sensible to move slowly until they had decided.

“Shall we walk over the bridge rather than squash onto the Tube?” he suggested.

“Yes. That would be nice.”

It was cold, even for December, but they were both well wrapped and somewhat in need of fresh air after being trapped on an overheated, fusty, train for about an hour longer than they had anticipated.

Eddie took Jo’s hand and off they wandered towards the South Bank. As soon as they hit the outside though he had to let go so she could pop her gloves on. He could see his breath as he waited... and wondered if he could make it spell “you forgot your gloves didn’t you” by staring hard enough... but couldn’t.

“Have you got your gloves?” asked Jo, seemingly as if reading his mind, apart from it being the bloody obvious thing to say.

“No.” admitted Eddie, plonking his left hand firmly in his pocket and taking her cosily gloved left in his right. He could think of a couple of other places he’d like to pop his hand to warm it up, but thought better of mentioning it in public.

For a moment Eddie considered suggesting a drink stop in the South Bank Centre, but decided against. If they went in for just

one then they might get all cosy and not want to come out again... and he would be hungry soon... and fancied eating somewhere more romantic. He also didn't want to get drunk today. There was a plan for later (much later) and he didn't want to mess it up because of a couple of extra pints at lunchtime.

The wind on Waterloo Bridge bit into them and they huddled together like penguins. They moved a bit quicker than penguins; deciding quickly and unanimously that discretion was indeed the greater part of romance and legging it as rapidly as they could for the other side. Both of them laughed with relief as they reached the sheltered street level on the North Bank.

Eddie was much more out of breath than Jo.

"I hope I don't need to carry you home, ever." he would have said if he'd been able to. Instead he managed something more like "Haaaw!"

"Are you all right?" asked Jo. Not really concerned. And almost adding "old man!"

"Yes. Fine." insisted Eddie, straightening himself up. "War wound."

He was seriously tempted to suggest a tube ride to Leicester Square, even though it wasn't any further again than they had already walked (or run). But before he could, Jo suggested it first and he gratefully accepted. Something inside hurt. Probably just the cold air burning his lungs. So he said nothing.

"Do you like the Tube?" asked Jo, five minutes later as they rattled along in an ancient, crowded, rocking carriage.

"I don't mind it so much now." shouted Eddie over the brakes

as they approached Charing Cross.

No-one got off, but lots of people got on, so Eddie was squashed up even closer to Jo. He touched his nose to hers and added softly "As long as it's not too crowded."

Jo kissed Eddie. Or did he kiss her? I don't know; it was probably a draw. Either way their lips remained firmly together until the train set off again and yanked them apart. Eddie was all for scrapping the middle bit of his plan and skipping straight ahead to the late, late bit... but they were here in London now, so it seemed a shame to go straight back home.

Earlier on, before they'd got up in fact, Jo had thought that perhaps going up to London for a day out might not be the best idea. Out in the cold when they could stay at home... in bed... all day... and...

"Mind the doors please."

Suddenly Eddie was tugging Jo's arm and leading her off the tube train. This was Leicester Square. Round the corner from China Town. And that meant lunch. Or so Eddie intended.

"You do like Chinese food, don't you?" he asked suddenly.

Jo was just opening her mouth to ask where he was taking her so, suddenly furnished with the answer, the first thing she said was "Ah." followed soon after by "Yes. I do. Very much."

"That's lucky. There's a few round here."

"Really?" exclaimed Jo sarcastically. "Do you have a particular favourite?"

"Oh. Why? Do you?"

"Not really. I couldn't name a single one... but I could probably

take you to the one I remember best. It was very good last time I came.”

Eddie wondered who'd she'd been with that last time. He didn't dare ask in case it had been a former boyfriend (it was). He was comfortable with that, just, but there was no point in dragging up old flames unnecessarily. Coincidentally he only knew the restaurants around here by sight too so agreed to let Jo lead them and waited to see if they would arrive at one of his haunts.

They did. Which was something of a relief when it turned out to be not very good. The service was bad, the food was cool (as in not hot) and the ambience was non-existent. Then again it was Wednesday lunchtime. Then again, again, that's no excuse.

“Hmmm. Not a great choice today.” admitted Jo as they came out.

“I would have picked the same place.” reassured Eddie. “You're right, it has been good before.”

“It was almost worth it... for the look on the waiter's face when you paid.”

“Oh. Sorry about that. It was a bit embarrassing.”

“No, no. I thought it was great. More people should stand up for themselves in this country. We're too soft. Why should you pay for service that bad.”

“Exactly.”

Eddie wondered if he should suggest that they go home now. Things weren't exactly going swimmingly, so maybe they should cut and run. Perhaps at home they could at least get a decent dinner.

“Maybe for dinner we should...” he started, but suddenly remem-

bered something and changed his mind.

“What?” enquired Jo, just hoping he would take responsibility for the choice this time.

“Er. I’ve just remembered that my friend John works at Simpson’s.”

“Simpsons?”

“Simpson’s in the Strand. It’s an old restaurant next to the Savoy... quite quirky. They do very traditional English food in this grand setting.”

“Sounds nice.” she meant expensive.

“I should have checked to see if he’s working tonight... shall we buzz by later and see if we can get in?”

“OK. What shall we do this afternoon?”

Eddie was all for doing something lazy like sitting in a cinema watching... a film, anything. But he knew that that would be more than a little pathetic. They could camp out in a cafe or something. What about one of the museums? No. On the way the only thing he’d had in mind was the Big Wheel... but they seemed to have picked today to do essential maintenance on it... just to spite him.

The way things were going he was starting to wish that he hadn’t thought of Simpson’s. John wouldn’t be there, or wouldn’t be able to get them in anyway. Strangely none of this was bothering Eddie as much as you might think. Deep down he was still confident that the day, and more importantly the night, would come out rosy in the end.

On the other side of the street was a small shop next to a tatty old building. The shop caught Jo’s eye and she started to move them

towards it.

“Let’s have a look in here.” she explained unnecessarily.

“Oh shit.” thought Eddie. He’d had his chance to suggest something and now Jo was reverting to her default option - shopping!

This wasn’t entirely fair. Jo was just curious about this one shop - being, as it was, a curiosity shop. She wasn’t the kind of girl who enjoyed dragging shop-hating men around the shops after her. Well, not for long anyway.

As they approached the shop, Jo eagerly and Eddie with dread, Eddie noticed a poster on the wall of the tatty building. There were lots of posters; most of them brightly coloured adverts for the latest flash-in-the-pan band or West End show. But the one that caught Eddie’s eye was largely dark and muted. It featured a portrait which Eddie correctly guessed was William Shakespeare. He pulled away ever so slightly to get a better look and then submitted to the pull of Jo towards the virtual Aladdin’s cave of the junk shop before them.

The shop was even more underwhelming on the inside than it had appeared from the street. There were a few shelves, but most of the fare was in boxes, stacked at various heights, some of which were open. Eddie picked up a wooden elephant, only to find, from its weight and texture, that it was actually made of plastic. Yuk. Jo was doing a bit better - at least the teapot she’d found was a real piece of pottery.

Five minutes was about as much as Eddie could bear.

“How about the National Portrait Gallery?” he said at last.

“What?” asked Jo, not quite hearing him.

“The National Portrait Gallery. Do you want to go there next?”

“Er. Yes. That sounds nice. Is it part of the National Gallery?”

“Not quite. It is next to it, but the entrance is round the side near that church, St Martin in the Fields.”

“Oh.” she didn’t sound convinced.

“It’s not just Kings and Queens you know. Last time I went they had a section on fashion designers... do you know what Coco Chanel looked like?”

“OK then. Lets go.” she announced, abandoning the teapot.

Eddie took her hand and led the way. As long as the damn place was open they were sorted for a couple of hours now. After that maybe a coffee and a wander around Trafalgar Square trying to kick the pigeons. Then on to The Strand: he really, really hoped now that they could get into Simpson’s. That would be a good end to their trip; then they could go off home and...

“Excuse me!” said Jo firmly.

A man walking the other way had clipped her shoulder with his. Eddie turned round to look, half expecting to see the bloke running away with Jo’s bag. He wasn’t. He was standing about three paces from them scowling. Eddie almost expected him to start foaming at the mouth and snapping like a rabid dog.

“Oops.” whispered Jo.

Eddie moved round slightly, so that he was closer to the man than Jo was - the whole time fixing his gaze on him. It occurred to him to look and see if the man was holding anything, a knife perhaps, but it seemed more important to hold his gaze. Eddie’s heart was pounding. He didn’t know what he was doing, or what he should be doing. When he was 8 he’d started karate lessons... but given up

after 3 weeks because he broke his thumb.

The stand-off seemed to last for ages. Whereas in fact it was more like fifteen seconds. No-one said anything. And no-one moved until, still scowling, the man turned and walked away. Eddie watched him go until he was at least fifty metres away and then let out a sigh of relief.

“My hero.” whispered Jo, also in relief.

“Let’s not try and provoke the natives any more than we have to.” muttered Eddie solemnly.

# Chapter 22

## Brasserie

“Are you staying in the hotel sir?”

“Yes. We’ve just arrived. Look, we were meant to be meeting my uncle, Earl Jellicoe, but there seems to have been some sort of cock-up with the time.”

The man looked down at his list, again. There was no Jellicoe, just as there was no Shaw. Jo held Eddie’s hand tightly in disapproval. She also held her breath, without looking like she was holding her breath.

“Will his Lordship be joining you later sir?”

“Not now! No. And my dear fiancee is almost faint with hunger.” blustered Eddie, raising his voice slightly to suggest exasperation rather than anger.

“A table for two then, sir?”

“Oh. Yes. Fine.”

“This way please.”

Eddie smiled cheekily at Jo after the man had turned away. She squeezed his hand even harder, but really she wanted to laugh out loud. This was the most amazing restaurant she'd ever been in - wood panelled walls, high ornate plastered ceiling... and chandeliers. From the outside she thought 'The Grand Divan' sounded a bit over the top, but it wasn't. It was grand. If anything it was perhaps a bit too grand for the neat rows of tables and chairs - it ought to be a banqueting hall, with lots of servants and a jester.

The man stopped beside a booth, rather than a table, and it seemed plenty big enough for four people. Either he wanted them out of the way because he suspected they were frauds or he believed they were posh and deserved a smart spot. Either way, both Jo and Eddie were well impressed with the accommodation.

"Who the hell is Lord Jellicoe?" whispered Jo when the man had gone.

"Earl Jellicoe." corrected Eddie. "He was chancellor of Southampton University when I was there."

"And you met him?" challenged Jo.

"No. Course not. I did see a photo of him once..."

"Near enough, I suppose." laughed Jo.

"...and I thought he looked a lot like my granddad. So I sort of adopted him as a long-lost relative from the better side of the tracks. I do know quite a lot about him... although I'm not completely sure whether he's still alive or not."

"What?"

Suddenly Jo half expected the man to come back and say "I'm very sorry sir, but I've just checked and your uncle is dead. Perhaps

you and your friend would care to leave now. If you hurry, you may only be three years late for the funeral!”

“I’m fairly sure he’s still with us.” assured Eddie, picking up his menu.

He wouldn’t normally dare blag his way into a place like this. Not in a million years. But he wasn’t expecting to. He was expecting to walk in, maybe loiter a bit, spot John, catch his eye and let his friend sort them out with a table. His heart sank when they walked in and the man approached them immediately. In hindsight they were too early of course - the place only opened at 5:45 and it was barely after six now. His mouth had gone onto autopilot, hoping that his brain could help out his eyes and find John quickly enough to dig them out of whatever hole it had dug for them.

John hadn’t appeared. But Jellicoe had, the previous week, as clearly recalled by the man (who’s name was Ralph). He’d seen something of a resemblance in this younger chap... but was a bit puzzled that his Lordship should be returning to London so soon. Bloody nice bloke though... a real gentleman. If only the younger generation would at least try to emulate their elders.

Now that they were in they could enjoy their meal. It was surprisingly busy for a Wednesday, Eddie thought. And the waiters did very well to manoeuvre all the silver-domed serving trolleys around each other without any noticeable accidents. Jo thought it was a bit like eating in an old movie - an Agatha Christie or something - and kept expecting the director to say “Cut”.

After the initial excitement at getting away with impersonating members of the aristocracy, they both became somewhat subdued.

There were no long silences, they still had plenty to talk about, but their conversation was just a bit ‘matter of fact’. The longer the evening wore on, the more they were both thinking about what was to come - what they expected to happen later. Tonight was going to be the night.

On the one hand, Jo was really looking forward to it. Why wouldn’t she? This was the man she’d been saving herself up for her whole life. OK, so she hadn’t managed to save herself entirely, not strictly speaking... not at all, on several occasions, with a number of different men in fact. But that was because they’d each tricked her into thinking they were the right man, when they weren’t. At the time, each time, she had thought they were the one. It was only afterwards that she realised they weren’t. And then it was too late, obviously. It didn’t get any easier either. Each time was a bit more heartbreaking than the last...

Eddie also looked ahead with a mixture of ravenous expectation and terrifying trepidation. All that averaged out to a bare acceptance that it was going to happen, that he wanted it to happen, that it would work out OK and a glow of hope that it would actually be great. He tried hard to not think in terms of performance. At one point, noticing Spotted Dick on the puddings menu, he nearly collapsed in a fit of juvenile giggles to hide an inner fear that should have died years ago.

Perhaps it was the reluctant anticipation that made them eat so slowly. Or maybe it was the long discussion they had about the merits of a university education, as evidenced by people they knew who had one. At one point the issue of children came up again and

they spent at least half an hour talking about which names they liked, and which they didn't.

Eventually though they had to leave. Eddie was even pleasantly surprised by the size of the bill - which was simply big and not gargantuan as he'd feared (if they'd had any wine he would have almost certainly been sunk). Remembering his entrance act he skipped over to the pianist on the way out and congratulated him on his particularly excellent rendition of Gershwin's 'Oh, Lady Be Good' ... which was the only piece he knew by name. The player was thrilled, but somewhat disappointed that Eddie's praise wasn't extended into a cash tip too.

"Good night sir. And please pass on our regards to your uncle. We do look forward to welcoming him again soon." said Ralph as he helped Jo into her coat.

"Thank you. Er..."

"Ralph, sir."

"Ralph. I will indeed convey your kind regards to the old boy at the first opportunity. Good night."

Ralph waited until they were outside before muttering "Young people!"

Jo waited until they were a few yards down the pavement, "Did you hear that?"

"What?" asked Eddie, puzzled because he thought he'd done rather well.

"He said 'welcome him again'."

Eddie had missed it, and wasn't quite sure what she meant. So, he shrugged his shoulders.

“Old Ralph has met your Earl Jellicoe!”

“Oh. I see... shit.” laughed Eddie.

They were still laughing about it when they got back to Waterloo. About how they might have found Jellicoe there in the Grand Divan or one of the bars, and been shown over to his table. What would he have said then? Eddie tried to think of a few things but Jo quickly shot them all down. So he had to admit that they were lucky - if Jellicoe had been there, and it looked like he might be a frequent visitor, then they would have been knackered.

At the top of the escalator they strolled, hand-in-hand still, over to the departure board. There were a lot of people standing around with mobile phones and looking upset. But Jo thought that was just what commuters were like. Their smiles evaporated as their mood turned first to confusion and then to frustration, as they realised that no trains were running.

A big notice read ‘Due to a security incident in the Clapham area, no services are available at the current time. Please consult the station staff if you require assistance.’

“What are they going to do? Carry us home?” muttered Eddie.

Jo clutched Eddie’s arm tightly. “What are we going to do?”

“Well, we could get a taxi home, if there are any. And it would cost a fortune. Or we could wait and hope the trains start again soon. But I certainly don’t want to spend half the night here.”

He looked into her eyes and she knew exactly what he meant.

“I think we should find a hotel and stay overnight.” said Jo.

Eddie smiled at her, “I agree.” he said, kissing her.

In a way this was perfect. So perfect that he wished he’d thought

of it himself. If it happened at his house, or at Jo's flat, then there would always be something wrong - some baggage would get in the way. Maybe a reminder of an ex-partner or something more subtle, but equally damaging. And presumably in years to come they would be moving, together, into a bigger house... and wouldn't be able to revisit the scene.

For an instant, Eddie imagined them both on the doorstep of his house asking the new owner "Do you mind, we had our first shag here and would like a quick look at our old bedroom?"

But a hotel, that was perfect. It was neutral ground. There would be nothing there from either of their pasts. So they could start their future without fear of what had gone before. Poetic. The only down-side he could see was that it had to be the right hotel. They couldn't do it in some dingy little crash pad by the station... or a sleazy little tourist trap. And he didn't have a clue how to start looking from here.

Jo liked the idea of a hotel too. Not for all the same reasons, but for some of them. Neutral ground certainly appealed. Her flat was out for all sorts of reasons (including Sarah's presence) and she didn't feel one hundred per cent comfortable at Eddie's house. It was nice enough, but needed a few more female touches... it was all his and none of hers. If they did it there she would have felt 'captured'. In a hotel they were equals.

Eddie's mind was racing now. He didn't want to ask Jo about the hotel, because he felt that it was his job to do it. Nothing was coming to mind. But, it was only 9:30 so he guessed he had time before pressing the panic button.

“Fancy a drink? The South Bank Centre maybe.”

“Why not.” agreed Jo.

So off they went. Eddie had bought some thinking time. It was much colder now, and dark obviously, so they clung together closer than ever. The concrete architecture, normally just rubbish to Eddie’s mind, seemed to be actively oppressive. So he cast his eye instead over the river. The buildings there seemed much more welcoming. Their facades were older, their lights warmer and more assured.

Suddenly he realised what he was looking at. It was almost like he’d been looking at the back of a piece of paper with writing on. The ink was dark and shone clearly through to the other side. He’d been looking at the shapes thinking “they look nice” and then suddenly realised that he could turn the paper over and read the word. And the word was ‘Savoy’.

“The Savoy.” said Eddie out loud. He sort of half pointed but Jo could see where he was looking, as she was looking at it too.

“Hmmm.” agreed Jo.

“Tonight.” he added. “We could stay at the Savoy.”

“Isn’t it a bit expensive? I mean, it must cost hundreds of pounds a night to stay there.”

“So? It would be worth it wouldn’t it?”

Well, now that he put it like that, yes she supposed it probably would. It was a one-off occasion. What price their first time? What an opportunity.

“I mean; Ralph thinks we’re already staying there, so why not?” Eddie added, still thinking she needed convincing.

“It’s a wonderful idea.” agreed Jo. “As long as we don’t bump into your uncle.”

Eddie laughed. “Shall we get that drink now?”

Jo took his hand and pulled him in the opposite direction. “I think I’d rather have an early night.”

# Chapter 23

## Together

The approach to the Savoy was quite intimidating, set back so far from the street, and Eddie found himself almost trembling. Jo might have felt it, if she hadn't been in the same state herself.

"Wait a minute." she whispered suddenly, about 20 feet from the door.

"What?"

"We don't have any luggage. You can't go into a place like this without luggage... they'll think..."

His first thought was "Well, we could say that our luggage went to Hong Kong by mistake." but then he realised he was falling into the same trap Jo had.

"Jo!" laughed Eddie reassuringly. "We're not trying to blag our way in here. We're proper paying guests. Maybe a little bit intimidated by the grandeur, I'll admit that, but paying guests all the same. We don't have to lie. If they ask about luggage we tell

them the truth - we got stranded by the trains and decided to stay in town overnight.”

“Oh.” said Jo. It was obvious when he put it like that. But she was still nervous.

The doorway was deserted, so they approached with a sense of trepidation, half expecting a doorman to leap out of nowhere. But the doorman stayed in nowhere (actually the toilet... it was very cold) so they wandered in to the lobby without his help.

Having been in Simpson’s earlier the grand wood-panelled room seemed almost familiar and Jo was put at her ease. Eddie wasn’t. He was building himself up to approach the main desk and ask, without humiliating himself completely, for a room that he could maybe afford. At least there wasn’t an audience and the lighting was what is often called ‘subdued’... in other words, it was fairly dark. In fact the only other person in the room was the one man behind the desk.

Eddie and Jo approached the man, who was now looking at them. He seemed to be about the same age as Eddie. He was a bit taller. He looked very smart in his hotel uniform... and he was smiling at them. Jo thought he looked a bit too happy to see them and that made her more nervous. Eddie thought...

“John?”

“Eddie; what are you doing here?”

“I want to buy a kangaroo. What do you think?”

“Ah. Out of kangaroos today. And who is this?”

“Oh. Jo, this is John. John, Jo.”

Eddie wasn’t very good at doing introductions but everyone got the message pretty much.

“Nice to meet you.” said Jo, assuming that this was a friend of Eddie’s, as he hadn’t said.

“Enchanted.” said John, out of character and perhaps overly influenced by his present surroundings.

“So, do you have any rooms? The trains are knackered so we thought we’d stay overnight... here.”

Jo was standing slightly behind Eddie and didn’t see the look in his eyes. He was trying hard to convey something to his friend. The thrust of it was “Look, please don’t make me look stupid. I know we like to have a laugh together, but this isn’t the time. This is serious. This is important.”

John could see that his friend was at his mercy. He knew that Eddie couldn’t really afford to stay at the Savoy, especially as all the cheaper rooms were booked - it was just before Christmas after all and lots of people were here on shopping expeditions. He glanced at Jo. She seemed to be holding Eddie’s hand very tightly. Jo? Had Eddie mentioned her before? She was very nice looking...

“I don’t have any rooms...”

Eddie’s face dropped.

“...but I can give you a suite.”

“Er. I think I’d probably need a second mortgage to pay for that.” he whispered, pointlessly because both John and Jo could hear him clearly and there was no-one else there.

Eddie felt too crushed to even bother glaring at John. He wasn’t going to beg. The best he could do now was get away with some small shred of his dignity intact.

“No.” whispered John back, leaning over the desk towards them.

“Staff specials. I can give you a suite for the price of a normal room.”

“Oh.” said Eddie.

“Wow!” thought Jo.

“Let’s see.” John checked the computer on his desk. “You can have a two bed suite, with river view, for the bargain sum of... two forty nine.”

Eddie scowled slightly and leaned over to John.

“We’d prefer a double bed.” he almost hissed.

John laughed out loud. “Sorry.” he said, looking at Jo and then back at Eddie. “That’s two bedrooms, you dork. Two king-sized bedrooms in fact.”

He raised his eyebrows suggestively, and Jo blushed slightly.

“Oh, good. Thanks.” muttered Eddie.

They registered as Mr and Mrs Bridget, not Jones as John suggested, because Eddie had to pay with his credit card and the computer insisted that the names matched. But that done they headed off to their room alone, since they clearly didn’t need a porter just to help Jo with her handbag.

“Here we are.” said Eddie, opening the door.

If he hadn’t opened it himself, with a key, then he would have assumed he had the wrong room. It didn’t look like a hotel room at all. He wandered in, and Jo followed.

“Wow.” she said.

They were standing in a living room. Not an ordinary living room - it was bigger than any living room Eddie had been in in his entire life.

“This is like something in a stately home.” marvelled Jo. “Only

bigger!” she added, giggling enthusiastically.

“Can I take your coat madam?” asked Eddie, pretending to be a butler.

They laughed. Eddie turned her round by the shoulders and kissed her. Suddenly they both remembered why they were here...

“I’m going to take a bath.” whispered Jo.

Eddie smiled, tossing Jo’s coat onto one of the sofas (which was technically a love seat). He took off his own coat and plonked himself down in one of the two armchairs, suddenly aware that his feet hurt and wanted to get out of his shoes.

“Oh. That’s a bedroom.” came Jo’s voice from behind him. “Wow. That is a big bed.” She crossed to another door, “And the other bedroom. And... the bathroom.”

She disappeared inside, leaving the door open. Eddie heard the water start to run, loudly, and then thought he caught her singing. There were two more untried doors and Eddie’s curiosity soon got the better of him. The first was a large walk-in cupboard with row after row of drawers... which was bigger than his bathroom at home. And the second was another bathroom - which was huge. So big in fact that he assumed it must be the main bathroom and that Jo had gone into the ‘secondary’ bathroom by mistake. He went to tell her but saw, at the door, that hers was just as big.

He saw something else too. Jo, naked, climbing into the bath. She didn’t see him. Eddie was frozen but felt hot, and suddenly overcome. That image was locked in his mind; the most beautiful he’d ever seen. Uncontrived, natural, pure. A secret view, unexpectedly caught.

She was singing softly to herself. Eddie stood outside and lis-

tened. Nothing that had gone before entered his mind. He was completely lost in the moment. The song, the image, the room. This was the entire universe. It was as if the future was just beginning from this present, and there had never been a past.

His feet still hurt, which brought him back to reality a bit. Would it be romantic to jump in the bath with Jo? He thought not; they ought to 'get ready' by themselves... and bath together afterwards. He headed off to the other bathroom.

Above the bath was a giant shower head, which was the second thing to catch his eye, after the complimentary pair of slippers tucked neatly under the wash-basin. Eddie smiled and started to undress; almost burning his hand on the heated towel rail...

When Jo came out of the bathroom, wrapped warmly in a large white bathrobe, she wondered where Eddie was. "Which bedroom?" she thought. Then she heard water running and decided that it was either raining inside or Eddie had found a separate shower room. Opting for the latter, she wandered over towards the sound and saw him standing, back to the door, under the shower in a room virtually identical to the one she'd just left.

She paused by the door for a moment, almost went in, but instead turned round and headed for the bedroom. "Nice bum." she murmured under her breath.

Eddie spent at least ten minutes under the shower, savouring its rejuvenating properties, before he started casting his mind forward. Then he got a shock. As surely as if the water had suddenly run cold. This was the right time, no doubt about that. And it was an excellent place - he couldn't think of anywhere better, it was totally

fabulous. The problem was... it wasn't the place he'd planned... and something he needed was at home, where he'd expected to be.

"Condoms! Where the fuck am I going to get condoms?"

He cast his gaze through the steam towards the bathroom table. It was festooned with luxury products. Eddie switched off the shower, climbed out of the bath and hopped over to the table. He found the shower gel, shampoo, cotton buds, moisturiser, French-milled soap and some flat round cotton pads that he didn't know the use of. But no condoms. Maybe they were in the bedroom.

Jo's bathroom was quiet, and empty he soon discovered. Carefully he crept over to one of the bedrooms and peeped in. She wasn't there, so he went in and started to search around. Nothing. Well, there was plenty obviously - huge bed, chairs, dresser - that sort of stuff, but no condoms.

"Shit."

He couldn't just get dressed again and slip out. Jo might think he'd lost his nerve and run away. No, he'd have to go and tell her. What was she going to think? He cursed himself for lacking foresight.

Eddie tried to keep his chin up as he entered the other bedroom. Jo was reclining on the bed, wearing a robe just like his, waiting for him. As he approached she could sense that something was wrong and sat up. Her robe fell open slightly.

"What's wrong?" she asked softly.

"I..."

Jo was afraid. Did he not want her? After all this. It was perfect. It had to be now. They would never have an opportunity to make it like this again. Why would he change his mind? What hadn't he

told her?

“I... didn’t bring anything with me.” spluttered Eddie at last.

He was building himself up to add that he would have to go out and get something from somewhere: so it was most disconcerting that Jo turned over and reached down towards the floor by her side of the bed. Eddie moved to his left and saw that she was rummaging in her handbag.

To his amazement she took out a dark blue packet. A packet that looked, at this range, identical to the one that he presumed was still sitting in his bedside drawer back home.

“Just in case.” smiled Jo.

Eddie beamed. Before this moment, if you’d asked him, he would have told you quite clearly that he thought it wasn’t right for women to carry round condoms. Just one of those things, a man thing, it gave the wrong impression. But that impression vanished in a puff of expedience - another convenient belief, founded on nothing, discarded and forgotten like yesterday’s rubbish. All Eddie could see, all he knew, all he needed to know, was the beautiful woman sitting on the bed in front of him.

He took a step forward, undoing the belt of his robe. At the edge of the bed he slipped the robe off and stood there, naked, for an instant. He looked at Jo and she looked at him. The room was virtually silent, and rather warm. If there had been any doubt, this moment would have revealed it. Neither of them spoke, neither of them smiled, both gazed at the other intensely.

Jo felt so emotional. She had waited so long for this. It was so different from those times before. This was the real thing. Eddie was

the one. Other men had told her they loved her... and then left her, or worse. Eddie hadn't said it - he didn't need to, she didn't want to hear it - she knew he really did love her... and would tomorrow, and the day after. Unlike before, she not only couldn't imagine life without him, but she had a real confidence (not just a hope) that he would never, ever, let her down.

Eddie crawled across the vast expanse of the king-sized bed towards Jo. As he approached, Jo lay back and slipped her arm around his waist. They kissed tenderly and Eddie pulled her close to him. For an age they lay together kissing, as they had done before. Jo remembered their first night together as vividly as Eddie did. Neither of them thought of the doubts that had existed then. And somehow it felt like all history was forgotten, and they were transported back in time by five days; like this was actually a direct continuation of Friday night.

Jo's fingers ran, tingling, along the length of Eddie's spine. Eddie wasn't thinking. He wasn't worrying about his arms, or what to do next. Everything was just happening nicely, all by itself. The bedside light was still on, but that didn't bother him. The curtains weren't absolutely completely fully drawn, and he hadn't even noticed, let alone wondered whether there might be a perv over the river with a very expensive telescope. And most importantly, Eddie wasn't thinking about how he felt about Jo... or anyone else. He just knew. He knew his feelings for her were stronger than anything he'd ever felt. He thought he'd been in love before... but now he knew he hadn't... or if he had then this was something else - something much bigger and better, maybe even spiritual.

Eddie slid a hand inside Jo's robe and massaged the small of her back. Their skins, fresh from bath and shower, didn't slide as smoothly as before. For an instant the ghost of self-doubt saw an opportunity and tried to launch "you're doing it wrong" at Eddie's conscious. But before his confidence had even started to square up for a fight, everything evaporated as Jo's fingers set off on the return journey down his back.

Both of their hearts were beating rapidly now. They entwined themselves together, wrapping each other, physically and emotionally. Eddie's hand worked its way, gently and slowly, up Jo's back as they kissed. Then, as his hand reached her shoulder he eased the robe gently off her arm.

This time Jo didn't whisper "No" ... she sighed "Yes."

# Chapter 24

## Present

The bed was half covered in wrapping paper, discarded by Eddie and Jo, who were sitting up in their new robes. They both had cups of tea, in brand new his-and-hers mugs, and numerous crumbs down their fronts from eating breakfast in bed. Bright sunshine broke in through the window, casting doubt on the accuracy of the clock radio, which read 6:06.

They had agreed to only buy token presents. Or rather Eddie had suggested it, knowing that Jo didn't have much money to spend. But he well knew that he was going to buy her whatever he could find that he thought she might like. Present buying for people who mattered was hard enough, without being constrained by an artificial budget too.

Jo was pleased with her chocolates and the collection of hand-made luxury soaps from Lush. She didn't even mind the Jamie Oliver cookery book, although she wondered if there was an implied

message there that she ought to be taking offence to. Somehow she didn't quite see how the Chanel perfume counted as a token present though... and felt a bit bad that she hadn't spent more on Eddie. Then again, she had spent a lot of time and effort choosing, and she knew he was only being sweet.

Eddie was perfectly happy with what Jo had bought him. Where she got it all from he didn't know; nor could he guess how she knew what he would like... when he didn't even know himself. "What would you like for Christmas?" people would ask him. "I don't know. A surprise." he would usually reply. And compared to the sort of thing he normally ended up with, from his mother in particular, Jo had produced a veritable extravaganza of tasteful stuff. Even the cocktail shaker was something that he would actually be pleased to use; rather than hide in a draw, give away to the charity shop or accidentally break on purpose. He would have to suffer his mother's gifts later in the day... he had asked for socks, but even then the outcome was uncertain.

"Thank you." said Jo, kissing him again. This time for the "You know I'm gorgeous" night-shirt that he'd thrown in for a joke. Despite all the bad and cheeky Xmas gifts she'd had in the past, it was cute when he did it (Robert was long forgotten).

She carefully folded the shirt and put it with her other things. She sighed happily. This was already the best Christmas she could remember for years, and they'd only been awake for a couple of hours. Later on she was taking Eddie to meet her mum, and then they were going to meet his mother. She was a bit nervous about that - Eddie said she was a bit odd, and Jo wasn't sure if that was supposed

to be a disclaimer or a warning. Anyway, it would be fine. It was Christmas.

The next challenge was to make the Christmas lunch. Just for the two of them, but she'd never done it before. It was quite exciting; although she'd woken up in the night worrying that the turkey wouldn't be defrosted... only to remember that Eddie had bought them a fresh one. They had all the trimmings too. And cranberry sauce. It was going to be great.

Jo's tea was finished and she wondered whether to go and make another, as it was her turn.

"All done?" she said, meaning the tea.

"No. Actually there is one more." he replied.

Eddie got out of bed and pulled out a big box from underneath it. It was only about four inches deep, but at least twenty inches square. The wrapping was gold with little silver stars on. Eddie handed it to her, with a smile, and got back into bed.

"What's this?" asked Jo, as if he was going to tell her.

"Open it."

His eyes gleamed. Obviously it was something special. But what? It wasn't very heavy... in fact it was very light. Jo wanted to rip the paper off as fast as she could and see what was inside. But she restrained herself and unpeeled one end so that she could take the paper off without tearing it.

Under the paper was a box. A black box. Or was it navy blue? A dark colour anyway. Jo lifted off the lid and found that it was full of packing material - those twisty twirly things that look like crisps. Was this another joke? She put her hand in and felt around, but it

was just packing and box.

“Eddie?” she didn’t think this one was funny at all.

“Keep looking.”

Jo rummaged a bit more, glancing at Eddie a couple of times to check that he was still nodding encouragingly. Eventually she felt something solid, in one of the corners. It was another box.

This one was definitely black. With gold writing on. Which said ‘John R. Fox of Guildford’. Jo knew Fox’s shop. It was a jewellers. Quite an expensive one too. She’d certainly gazed into the window on more than one occasion and dreamed. The box was about nine inches long, an inch wide and an inch deep.

“Eddie!” she exclaimed. This was definitely not going to be a token present. Unless he’d managed to get a box from Fox, somehow. That wouldn’t be funny. It would be too cruel.

Jo’s hand shook as she lifted the lid of the box. It was a very tightly fitting lid, so she had to pull it quite hard. She couldn’t quite get over the thought that Eddie had bought her expensive jewellery for their first Christmas. What was it? A necklace or a bracelet? She certainly hoped it wasn’t ear-rings at this length. Then she paused. What if she didn’t like it? She held her breath and pulled off the lid.

It wasn’t a necklace, or a bracelet. It wasn’t ear-rings or even a watch. Eddie had tricked her with the box. There was just one small thing in the centre of it. Jo was still holding her breath. She was surprised, and a little shocked. It was a diamond ring.

“Jo. Will you marry me?”