

April

Eve

Four Seasons Hotel, East 57th Street

‘*Good morning, New York!*’ Ed’s Robin Williams impression reverberated around Eve’s poor head.

Last night, celebrating their new life with dirty Grey Goose martinis in the hotel bar had seemed like the obvious – the only – thing to do. They’d had a few drinks, and a late dinner, and very sexy hotel sex, and about five hours’ sleep. This morning . . . not so much . . . the dirty Grey Goose martini may be a very New York drink, but Eve was clearly still a very Guildford girl. Dirty was the word. Eve’s mouth felt like the proverbial bottom of the parrot’s cage.

She pulled the down pillow over her head in an attempt to keep out the bright sunshine pouring in through their twelfth-floor window wall, but it was insistent, like Ed, who was now running through his Sinatra repertoire, oblivious to the fact that she might just have to kill him soon. Thou shalt not – not ever – drink three vodka-based cocktails. The Eleventh Commandment.

The doorbell rang. Ed was obviously in better shape,

as usual. It took more than three drinks to fell her husband. He answered the door with a cheery ‘Good morning!’, and admitted their breakfast, brought in by a waiter so discreet that he laid a table, arranged an orchid in a vase, and silver domes on porcelain plates, then left again without ever acknowledging the groaning woman-shaped lump under the duvet.

‘Come on, lightweight. Breakfast.’ Ed, who was, she now noticed, already showered and dressed, flipped up the bottom corner of the counterpane, exposing a foot. He squeezed her big toe.

‘Ugggh.’

‘Tea?’

‘Mmm.’

‘Wasn’t sure what you wanted, and wasn’t about to risk waking you up, so I ordered pancakes, bacon, fruit salad, egg white omelette . . .’

‘Who would ever want to eat an egg white anything? The yolk’s the only fun part of an egg.’

‘And the only part that will kill you . . .’

Eve sat up grumpily and accepted the cup of tea he proffered. ‘And so it begins . . .’

‘So what begins?’

‘You’re turning American. Joining the cholesterol police.’

Ed laughed. ‘So I guess you want the pancakes and bacon?’

‘Kill or cure.’ Eve came to the table and peered under the silver dome on her side of the table.

‘I’m hoping for cure. Busy day in prospect . . .’ Ed

raised his glass of orange juice in a toast, and clinked it against Eve's cup. 'Here's to the new house!'

Except that it wasn't a house. Eve and Ed *used* to live in a house with a name, on a street with a name. In a house with a garden and a driveway and a garage for a car. Their car. Ed had a shed in the garden. Eve had a job. Eve used to live twenty-five minutes from her sister and her nieces and nephews.

That was then. This was now. She took her tea to the window and looked out, at the tall grey buildings, and the blue, blue sky. Steam rose from manhole covers, just like in films. She couldn't kick that feeling – like she was herself in a film. But this was real. This was it! They were here . . .

Two pancakes, three rashers of very crispy bacon, four mugs of tea and a fifteen-minute power shower later, Eve felt human. Ish. When she emerged from the bathroom that was bigger than her bedroom at home, Ed was on the phone and it was obviously work. She frowned at him. Today was their day.

He raised a conciliatory hand, and shrugged apologetically. But he said, 'Yep. Right. Yep. I'll be there in,' checking his watch, 'half an hour. Forty-five minutes tops. Great.' When he'd hung up he came and sat next to her on the bed, and put his arm around her shoulders.

She glared at him reproachfully. 'You promised.'

'I know. I won't be there all day, I promise. Just a couple of hours.'

Neither of them believed him.

‘You’d better be there when we pick up the keys.’
That was 3 p.m.

‘Definitely.’ Ed was pulling on his jacket. ‘I’ll meet you there.’

‘Okay.’

Ed took her face in his hands and kissed her deeply. ‘I’m going to make love to you in every room tonight.’

She crinkled her nose up and sniggered. ‘Cheeseball. Good job it’s a classic four, not a classic six.’

‘Get you, with your New York realtor talk.’

‘Oh, I know all the lingo.’

He smacked her bum. ‘And, fyi, I reckon I could manage a classic six, or, indeed, a duplex.’

Eve laughed. He probably could, actually. When they’d moved into the cottage, he’d managed every room, the patio table, and the shower, although, truthfully, things had gotten a little half-hearted by the time they’d got to the old larder with the freezing cold marble countertop. She’d made him promise they’d christen every house they ever had that way, even the assisted living facility she was confident they’d end up being Darby and Joan in. He remembered.

One more quick kiss, a groan of regret, and he was gone.

Back to bed then, just for a while.

She couldn’t believe she was here. Everything had happened so fast. Four months ago there had been no hint of any of this. Four months ago she’d been looking out

of the window at her garden, at the deep beds she'd dug the year before, thinking about springtime. She'd loved that garden. And the house. Their first house. A three bedroom cottage in a village four miles from the centre of town. Top of their budget when they'd bought it, it still needed lots of work – the old couple they'd bought it from hadn't done a thing to it in twenty years – so she'd become a rabid weekend DIY'er. She'd learnt to strip wallpaper, and tile and grout, and over the course of a year or two she'd eradicated all the Eighties décor and created a place she truly loved – all white walls and deep sofas. The garden had been the best part and the biggest revelation. She'd never taken the slightest bit of notice of the seasons before. She'd lived in her parents' house, where the garden was somewhere to play and lounge around, in university halls and in flats, where, on hot, sunny days, Clapham Common was the only garden you needed, and you ignored it for the other 360 days of the year. Now, she drank the first cup of tea of the morning on the little patio off the kitchen, almost every day, drinking in the sights and sounds and smells of the garden all year round.

She'd been on the patio when Ed had come home, that day. Wearing his Barbour and a rainbow-striped woolly hat that she'd had forever and that Ed called 'the teacosy'. Drinking a mug of Earl Grey, and inspecting her beds, daydreaming of bulbs. She was always home an hour or so before Ed. He worked in London, and was at the mercy of the capricious trains. Much as she loved him, that was often her favourite hour of the day.

All her own. A good day's work done (mostly). Time to indulge her new-found domesticity. Marinate something. Prune something.

He was later than usual, that day. She smelt beer on his breath as he kissed her. 'Evie.' She loved that he called her Evie. He had, since the first day she'd met him, and he was the only person in the world who did, since her mum.

'You've been drinking!'

'Sorry, Mum. Just one.'

'Who with?' She put her hands on her hips in a Lucille Ball sort of way, but she was smiling.

'The boys from work.'

'The Boys' were an amorphous lump of masculinity so far as Eve was concerned. She'd met them, possibly, at the Christmas party, at the Summer Family Fun Day (and the award for most misnamed day goes to . . .), but they were an indistinct lot – Ben and Dan and Tom and Dave and Tim and . . . the rest.

'Good day, then?'

'*Great* day.'

Now her curiosity was aroused. 'How so?'

'Come inside, babe. It's freezing out here. I want to talk to you.' Ed pulled her by both hands, walking backwards towards the door. She let him. Inside their kitchen, he went to the fridge, and pulled out a bottle of wine. 'We're celebrating.' He grabbed two glasses from the washing-up rack and poured.

'What?'

'I've got a new job. I've been promoted.'

‘Ed! That’s fantastic! I didn’t even know you were up for something . . .’

‘Nor did I. Well, not exactly.’

Eve picked up the two glasses, proffering one towards him. ‘You star. Cheers.’

‘Cheers, Evie.’ They both drank.

Eve pulled out a chair and sat down, still watching him. He looked so happy. ‘Tell me all.’

‘I haven’t told you the best bit . . .’

‘A raise?’ A raise would be great. They could really do with reducing the mortgage . . . all the spare cash they’d had in the last couple of years had gone to B&Q . . .

‘Yes, yes, a raise. A pretty massive one. But that’s not it.’ He widened his eyes, smirking at her.

She smacked his chest playfully. ‘Stop teasing me, you bugger. Wha-a-at?’

‘The job is in . . . *NEW YORK!*’ Ed did jazz hands. He looked strangely comical doing jazz hands. The moment was surreal.

‘What?’

‘New York. The job’s in the New York office. Manhattan. Two years, maybe more if we want. New frigging York, Evie! Can you believe it?’

Eve felt like all the air in her lungs had been sucked out. Her cold, garden cheeks were suddenly hot.

Ed stood in front of her, jazz hands frozen. ‘So talk to me. You look like a fish.’ He blew out his cheeks, and made ‘ohs’ with his mouth. ‘Say something . . .’

‘Wow.’

He shook her gently by the shoulders. 'Say something else.'

'New York.'

'A whole sentence would be good ...'

'You took this job?'

Ed's face fell just a little. 'Well ... I told them I'd need to talk to you first, obviously, but ...'

'But?'

'But I said I was sure you'd jump at it. You will, won't you? Jump at it? I mean, it's not like we haven't talked about something like this ...'

'We talked about it once, years ago.'

'But you were up for it then, weren't you?'

'Well, yes ...'

'And nothing's changed, has it?'

'There's the house ...'

Was that a flicker of irritation crossing his face? 'And we can keep the house, Evie. Of course we can.'

'I love the house.' She sounded wistful, even to herself.

'I know you do. I love the house, too. We'll keep the house, Evie. They'll rent us a place, sort all of that out. It's a really sweet deal. We'll be much better off. We'll rent it out, of course. Tenants will pay the mortgage. And we'll come back.'

'Will we?'

Ed knelt down by her chair, and put both arms around her hips. 'You don't sound happy like I thought you would, Evie.'

She laid her head on top of his, in her lap. 'I'm

just ... it's a bit sudden ... it's a bit of a shock, that's all.'

'Not a shock. A surprise. A wonderful, fortuitous, bloody marvellous surprise.' He rubbed her hair. 'Hey, Evie. We can talk about this as much as you like. We can say no.'

She looked at his face, trying to figure out whether or not he meant that. His lovely face. She knew she wouldn't make him say no.

Eve wasn't quite sure when it was decided that Ed had the career and she had the job. Or who decided. But she knew that that's how it was. And so she knew that they would go to New York.

And now she just needed to figure out how to be happy about it.

And so, four months later, here she was, (almost) completely happy about it. She was even (almost) a little ashamed of her initial reaction. It wasn't very intrepid of her. This was a huge adventure, wasn't it? A fantastic opportunity. The most exciting city in the world. She wanted to be the sort of woman who grabbed life. Who'd ride a bike downhill without the brakes on, and who'd sit in the front seat on the roller coaster, and who'd stand at the karaoke mike. She'd always wanted to be that sort of woman. And now she could be. This was the perfect place to be *that* woman. And today was a good day to start ...

Perhaps she'd start by calling her sister. Cath had always been *that* woman. In some ways it made no sense

that she was here and Cath was there, married to Geoff. Slightly wet Geoff. Who ever knew what alchemy was at work when two people fell in love? It made no sense, sometimes.

Cath answered on the third ring. She sounded out of breath.

‘It’s me. Eve.’

‘Eve! How are you? How’s it all going?’

‘Oh, you know, it’s hell at the Four Seasons. What to eat? What treatment to get at the spa. Just ordering from the pillow menu is exhausting . . .’

‘Shut up. I just cleaned poo out from under my fingernails.’

‘That’s disgusting. How are the poo machines?’

‘Smelly. Noisy. Adorable.’

‘I can hear one now.’

‘That’s George. He wants Cheerios in the car. I’ve only got a minute, actually, sis. School run, you know.’

‘I forgot.’

‘No worries. Sometimes I forget, and that’s much more serious. I’ve got a sec. How is it, really?’

‘Really? A bit weird. Ed’s gone to the office, even though he’s supposed to be off all day helping me, and I realize I don’t know a soul. I’m totally Dougie No Mates until he meets me later.’

‘Go shopping. No one can feel lonely in Bloomingdales. Visa can be your best friend.’

Eve laughed. ‘You’re probably right.’

‘So when do you move in?’

‘We get the keys this afternoon. The new furniture

should be coming tomorrow – the stuff from England is meant to have cleared customs last week, but I’ve got to check. So, today, I suppose, officially, although we’ll sleep at the hotel for another couple of nights.’

‘No room service in the flat, I suppose.’

‘In the *apartment*? No!’

‘Listen, hon. I’d really better go. Call me later – tell me again how fabulous it is?’

‘Sure. I will. Love to everyone.’

‘And back. We all miss you like crazy, Eve.’

Eve missed her sister, too. She could picture everything about Cath at that moment. George, with his plastic beaker of Cheerios and his untameable blonde cowlick; the chaotic kitchen, full of unread newspapers and sticky jars; Cath, tall and willowy and totally yummy mummy.

Suddenly a little tearful, she sniffed and reached for the remote control. Nurse Hathaway and Dr Doug Ross were arguing again. She lost herself in the County General ER, and eventually slipped back into sleep, not waking until the credits were rolling.

Apartment 6A

Avery Kramer was barking orders as usual. She looked like an angel but right now she was about as far from angelic as a curly blonde, blue-eyed toddler could get. The blue was icy, the lash-fringed lids narrowed in cold rage. She sat in the ungainly wooden high chair, legs

splayed as though to trip you on purpose, and demanded yet another breakfast option. Behind her, the kitchen sink was already piled high with dishes from rejected offerings. She'd wanted French toast, but hadn't eaten it, had demanded a boiled egg, but discarded it after the first dip of a bread finger. Now, it seemed, Cheerios, no milk, was what was required. Her mother Kimberley was reaching for the cereal box, talking to Avery, all the time, in the sing-song storytime voice Jason had grown to hate. He straightened his tie, taking in the domestic tableau, and wondered how it had all gone so wrong. His first meeting wasn't until 10 a.m., but he was ready to leave already. Kissing the top of his daughter's head, he gave Kim a jaunty wave, almost a salute, but moved no closer to her.

'See you tonight!' He sounded cheerier than he felt.

'Are you going to want dinner?' she asked, not looking at him.

What the hell kind of question was that? Who didn't want dinner? Why was he made to feel, should he dare answer that daily question in the affirmative, that eating an evening meal was an inconvenience? He ate breakfast at his desk. He was gone all day. His shirts and suits went to the dry cleaners. He just wanted dinner.

'No. I've got a lunch. I'll have a sandwich.'

'Good. My schedule is pretty full today.'

Full of what, for Christ's sake? This question, of course, he did not ask out loud.

'Say goodbye to Daddy, Avery.'

She didn't call him Jason any more. She called him

Daddy when Avery was awake and around, and when she wasn't . . . she didn't call him anything at all.

The door to the Schulmans' apartment opened just as Jason closed his own behind him. The hall between the two apartments, the only homes on the sixth floor, was about ten feet wide, and he could smell Rachael's perfume before he saw her. It wasn't one of those chemical, strident fragrances – it was flowery and soft and sophisticated. Just like Rachael Schulman.

Even their children were perfect. Jacob, Noah and Mia Schulman, bed-rumpled and sleepy, stood in the doorway to wave goodbye to their parents, their babysitter behind them. Mia looked like a bushbaby – all huge brown eyes – standing tiny between her two bigger brothers. 'Love you, Mama. Love you, Daddy.'

'We love you, too. See you tonight.' Always the 'we'. Envy swelled in his throat.

David patted Jason on the top of his arm. 'Morning.'

'How are you?' The elevator doors opened and they got in, Rachael pressing 1 with the manicured index finger of her left hand, diamond wedding band sparkling.

'How are Kim and Avery?' Rachael asked, her wide Julia Roberts smile revealing her small white even teeth.

They're horrible, he wanted to say. Out loud, 'Fine.' A pause, a floor of silence. Rachael brushed lint from David's shoulder in a quietly proprietary way. Jason coughed. 'Great weather we've been having.' God, could he be any more pedestrian?

'Fabulous. Felt like a long winter, this one, hey?'

We're going to go out to the country this weekend. So nice to feel the sun on our skin.'

Rachael's skin. Golden, even through the long winter. Smooth, even, glowing. Like the skin on the girls on the advertisements for body lotion.

'You must come out for a weekend. Mia and the boys would love to have Avery to play with.'

David nodded in agreement. 'We'll make that happen, definitely.'

Jason really, really hoped so. In the country, Rachael would wear a bathing suit. A bikini. More skin than he'd seen before. Last summer, Rachael in her short shorts had fuelled his dreams for weeks. Rachael in a bikini . . . he felt his heart racing.

The elevator had reached the ground floor. Che, the doorman, was mopping the floor at the end of his night shift. Jason reached into his jacket pocket for his Metro Pass, and waved to Rachael and David as they climbed into the Lincoln town car that picked them up each morning and delivered them to their respective offices downtown.

It was a beautiful morning – classic New York blue.

In their air-conditioned car, David put one hand on Rachael's knee. 'Did you mean that?'

'Mean what?'

'Mean that the Kramers should come to the country with us?'

'Shouldn't I have done?'

David shrugged. 'I don't know. He's always a bit . . . furtive . . . these days. And she's so uptight.'

‘She’s protective of Avery. That’s all. First baby.’
‘I don’t remember you being like that with Jacob . . .’
‘You’re biased. I think it could be fun. Besides, I feel bad for him. He always seems a bit sad to me.’
‘I see furtive, you see sad.’
‘You’re just naturally suspicious.’
‘And you’re just naturally a soft touch.’
Rachael laughed. David squeezed her knee. ‘Fine. Invite them. I bet Kim says no. Too much danger in the country, you know. Mosquitoes. Deer ticks.’
‘Bears!’ Rachael laughed.
‘Bears. Quite right. Avery could get attacked by bears. She’ll never come.’

Apartment 5A

Jackson half opened his eyes in irritable protest at the bright light seeping through the blinds of his bedroom, and then turned his head to read the alarm clock. Eight a.m. Jesus. He’d only been in bed for three hours. He focused unsteadily on his left foot, sticking out under the sheets at the end of the bed. Fuchsia-pink toenails. That had seemed a good idea last night. Or this morning. His mother had left a bottle on the side of the sink when she’d invaded the apartment in a cloud of Hermès last week. He’d been watching reruns of some reality show, drinking beer, and he’d found the nail varnish, and he’d been bored . . . Not really his colour, he saw now. He wondered vaguely whether she’d left

remover, too. Probably not. He couldn't imagine Martha Northrup Grayling taking her own nail polish off, any more than he could imagine her making her own tea, or blow-drying her own hair. The varnish would only have been for emergency repairs. God forbid she should appear in public with a chipped nail. This was a woman who wore full make-up to the gym. He felt too awake to roll over. He groped on the bedside table for his Marlboro, and his engraved Zippo, and lit up without lifting his head from the pillow, taking a deep drag.

From the hallway he heard the sound of the porter, in the service entrance, collecting the glass bottles and black sacks of trash. Too much damn noise. The building might be getting up, but he wasn't ready.

What was there to get up for, after all? No rat race for Jackson Grayling III. No job to force him into the shower, and on to the subway. No mortgage, no bills. As yet, he had not woken up, either to the morning, or to the realization that the absence of all the above had also equalled no life.

His life was just fine by him. His parents had sprung for this apartment a couple of years ago, anxious to remove his brooding bulk from their own pied à terre. Their main home, for tax purposes, was a detestable behemoth in West Palm Beach, Florida, but they had apartments in at least four other American cities, and they spent time in each, as sanctioned by their accountants, as well as a home in the Bahamas, and one in the Alps in Europe. All through his childhood they'd had a

town house on the Upper East Side, with a garage and a roof terrace, but they'd sold it a couple of years ago, and bought one of the new apartments in the Plaza Hotel, half of which had been converted into private homes. His mother called herself 'Eloise – like in the book', delightedly, when she told people. He'd liked the town house, and would happily be lolling around there now, had he been permitted, but he loathed the Plaza apartment, and seldom went there unless summoned. His father wasn't that keen either, on the Plaza or on New York in general. Martha often used it alone or with her clone-like girlfriends from the South, leaving Jackson's father golfing or sailing or tax planning somewhere else. It had been years since he'd called either of them on a conventional landline. He never knew where they were, and he got tired of house-keepers telling him. Not that he called them much on their cellphones either. They had all conspired in creating a life where he really didn't need to.

Most of his money was in trust, of course. They weren't stupid enough to let him have the bulk of his fortune until he was thirty. They had bought the apartment outright. His mother and her decorator from Palm Beach had descended, reinventing the previously drab apartment into a middle-aged woman and a gay Cuban's idea of a young man about town's place. It looked like a Ralph Lauren show house, but Jackson didn't really care. Girls seemed to like it. His monthly maintenance charge and utilities went directly through his father's office. He couldn't have told you how much

they were, actually. He'd had to attend the board interview the co-op had demanded, of course. His father had demanded a blazer and tie, and his mother had hissed at him, in the elevator on the way up to the fifth floor that he wasn't to blow it with any of his stupid 'jokes' about late-night parties and drum kits. He wasn't an idiot – he could play along when playing along was required. The sixth generation of men in his family to attend Duke, the civic responsibility bullshit, the deciding which part of the family business to go into stuff – he could talk a good game, but the only game he actually played was basketball, once a month or so, down on the courts under the West Side Highway by the river. And by and large, he did behave himself – in the apartment. The night doormen might be able to tell a tale or two about him but the Kramers upstairs and Dr Stern downstairs couldn't complain about him. If the Board President he met on the landing between their apartments from time to time with his boyfriend had regrets about letting him in, they didn't show.

His father paid him an allowance for his other living expenses, and he always had the black American Express card, for emergencies (he and his father had a very different definition of what constituted an emergency, but he usually got away with it). They paid for a maid who came in, with a basic grocery shop, two or three times a week and cleaned away most of the detritus left over from the last shop she'd done.

Two or three times a year he was questioned, closely and with some exasperation, about his plans for the

future. Christmas, Thanksgiving, Memorial Day. He had time between these encounters to plan answers that sounded plausible, even to him. He was looking into this area, talking with people about such and such, considering another college course. Thinking about something philanthropic ... that was always a good one.

His mother was a softer sell than his father. He was her only child, and she believed whatever he told her, staring at him, all the while, with adoration and love. Jack 2, as he insisted on calling his father, much to his irritation, was not so easily mollified. He prided himself on a great bullshit antenna and it gave him no pleasure to have it twitch constantly around his only child.

The family money was old by American standards. It was Jackson's great-great-grandfather who had begun to accumulate it in serious amounts in the mid nineteenth century. By the time of the Civil War he was already seriously rich and, despite being from the South, had somehow managed to come out the other side of that conflict even wealthier. There were definitely murky decades, morally, in the Grayling family vault, but the twentieth century had drawn a veil of respectability over them and, by the time Jackson went to college, he was taking classes in buildings bearing his family name. His whole life, all his father had done was manage the family money, which had increased with his marriage to Martha, who came from her own fortune in horse breeding, and, Jackson knew, it was all of their expectations that he would one day grow up enough to

be entrusted with the same. The thought bored him as only the truly privileged can be bored. And the money, which he had spent freely his entire life, perversely, did not interest him in the slightest. This, he knew, incensed his father, and that was the most fun part. Last Christmas his father had lost his temper as much as he ever did, and called him a ‘ne’er do well’. Jackson was trying hard to rise to the challenge.

His mother had only managed, despite her family’s success in breeding other animals, to produce one child – him. How he had longed for a brother or even a sister who could toe the line, take over from his father, so that they would all leave him alone.

Apartment 2A

Madison knocked on Charlotte’s door. ‘Hiya, Charl!’

Charlotte pulled her candlewick dressing gown tighter around her, and opened each of the three locks on her door. Madison was wearing hot-pink and white Lycra – a sleeveless vest and short shorts. She had been to the gym. Of course. She went five times a week. She had that post-gym glow. Madison had several glows that Charlotte had come to know well. Post-gym was just one of them. She was more familiar than she might have chosen to be with post-coital, too – although that was usually at the weekends. And that big hair, with its expensive caramel highlights. And that perfectly applied make-up, the kind that looked like you didn’t have any

make-up on at all. She wore make-up to the gym, because you never knew who you might meet there, she'd confided to Charlotte. Not that Madison Cavanagh needed make-up. Charlotte should know. She'd seen her without it often enough. Madison Cavanagh looked gorgeous in sweats, in rollers, in a towel. In her apartment.

Charlotte wasn't sure why Madison was in her apartment as often as she was, although she suspected that her neighbour hated being alone. In the absence of a gaggle of girlfriends, or a romantic conquest, she supposed that she was the next best thing. They'd moved in around the same time to the 650 square feet, one-bedrooms on the second floor. Both apartments were owned by the management company, and rented. When they'd begun, both empty spaces were a symphony of innocuous beige and taupe. Within weeks, Madison's had been transformed, Charlotte's merely disguised a little. Madison had a big turquoise sofa and expensive-looking cushions with graphic prints on them. A wenge wood console with a dozen photo frames. Madison was in each of the photographs, smiling her big white smile. Here against a backdrop of sand dunes with her parents and her brothers, there hoisted on to the shoulders of two big men in football uniforms. Raising a cocktail glass among identikit girlfriends. Centre stage was given to Madison in graduation robes, her hair perfect under the mortar board. The first time Madison had seen Charlotte's chaste single bed, dressed with a quilt and a small lace

pillow, she'd twittered about how sensible it was to leave more room for storage and clothes and stuff, and how, with her queen bed, she'd barely enough room for her shoes.

She'd come, borrowing milk, in her gym kit, one morning in the very early days, and she'd been coming ever since. She'd wanted skim, expressed disappointment at Charlotte's 2%, but taken it anyway. Charlotte didn't think she had ever knocked on Madison's door. The pattern of their friendship – if that was, indeed, what it was – was that Madison came to her. Whenever she needed anything, be it milk for her cereal (and Charlotte bought skim now – how silly), a needle and thread to sew a button on, or a conversation to make her feel better about her place in the universe again. They had never been out together, and Charlotte knew that they never would. That was not what she was for. She didn't mind. She was ambiguous about Madison in general. She supposed that Madison, if she ever stopped and thought about it, might expect Charlotte to be desperately jealous of her, envious of her looks, and her ease, and her place in the world. But Charlotte was smarter than that. She was curious, and sometimes mildly alarmed or vaguely amused. If Charlotte had had a pen pal back home that she wrote to about the big bad city (although she did not), her letters would have been full of the adventures of Madison Cavanagh.

Madison was the first promiscuous person Charlotte had ever known. (And the first adult person besides herself that Charlotte had ever seen entirely naked,

Madison having once stripped off completely while seeking Charlotte's opinion on which short and sparkling outfit she should wear to some party or other.) Sex was, for Madison, something completely separate from love. On one, she considered herself a talented expert. As for the other, she claimed to have had several misadventures and been left wounded and vulnerable, although Charlotte wasn't convinced. Her own virginity was a subject they never touched upon. Charlotte didn't volunteer, and Madison didn't probe. If it wasn't about Madison, it wasn't really worth discussing, and virginity hadn't been about Madison for many years.

It had been shocking to Charlotte, at first, to hear details. 'Play by plays', Madison called them, laughing. But she was used to it now.

Madison had a new theme recently. Jackson Grayling III. Trip, as he was known. She'd been out with some college friends from Wall Street, who'd been joined by some guys who worked nearby. They'd been connecting the dots of their lovely lives, as young people like that did. And she'd found out that Trip, the scruffy but undeniably good-looking, nocturnal guy who lived on the fifth floor, was this filthy-rich trust-fund guy whose parents owned half of Texas, or something.

Madison didn't link sex with love. But she sure as hell linked love with money. Charlotte didn't care much about money, so long as she could pay the rent and bills and buy books. She sent about twenty per cent of what she earned home, where it helped cancel out the debt she owed her parents for college. And she saved, more

than might be expected, from her salary at the library. She didn't crave things the way Madison seemed to.

Madison earned more than twice what she did, working at a fashion magazine. And Charlotte knew that her mother sent her cheques almost every month, and paid the air fare when she was going home for the holidays. But she was always claiming penury, usually because she'd have spent her food money on shoes in Barneys in her lunch hour. She had what she called a 'wish board' in her apartment, propped up against the kitchen cabinet next to the sink. She said she got the idea off *Oprah* once, when she'd been home with a cold and watching daytime television. Oprah had told her she should put pictures of all the things she dreamed of on a board, and that this would help her visualize them, and thus come closer to attaining them. Charlotte suspected that Oprah – even if you didn't consider the idea to be hokum, as she did – had loftier ideals for such a board, and hadn't particularly meant it for an YSL Muse bag and a three-carat, princess-cut Tiffany diamond necklace. But those were the things that Madison dreamed of.

Madison talked about marriage a lot. It was inevitable, clearly, in her mind. This part of her life – the time when she dated lots of men and slept with almost all of them without ever knowing things about them – this was just now. When the time came (and Madison thought that twenty-seven was about the right time) she would get serious in her search. And the guy she found (a guy who wouldn't mind at all that she'd spent the

previous five years working her way through the male population of Manhattan, apparently) would be wealthy or, at the very least, have spectacular prospects, from a good family, tall, athletic, handsome and generous. Fate would take care of it all. There was a little girl's heart beating far beneath the Agent Provocateur-clad bosom of Madison Cavanagh, and it dreamed of Prince Charming.

Who may or may not currently be sporting a slightly lazy goatee and living on the fifth floor of this very building . . .

Since the story had first been told, around February time, Madison had been on what Charlotte called (only in her own head) 'Trip watch', which was a somewhat frustrating game, since Trip rarely appeared. She'd cornered him in the elevator once or twice, and talked to him about the friend of a friend they had in common, but he hadn't taken the bait. She'd commandeered a package she'd seen Raoul signing for once, and taken it to Trip's door, but he'd been on the phone when she rang the doorbell, and though he'd winked and mouthed thanks at her when he'd taken the envelope, nothing more had come of it.

Charlotte wished she was so certain there was a happy ending in her future. She sat, every day, on the subway, and looked at the men in the carriage, none of whom, it seemed, were ever looking back. Most of them, she wouldn't want. But one . . . just one, one day . . .