

Out Late With Friends And Regrets

by

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Dedication

For Jean, who lit the blue touchpaper; and my mother, who always had an exaggerated opinion of my abilities.

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A YEAR AGO

A flicker of movement caught Fiona's attention. The voice of the all-purpose cleric conducting the service was without rise and fall, and he was evidently trying to spin out the patchwork eulogy constructed from the notes she had given him. There wasn't a lot of material to work with, admittedly. It had been difficult to offer an appropriate description of Paul's personality, let alone supply an anecdote fit for public consumption. The vicar had been somewhat creative in making up the shortfall, and she found herself feeling quite detached from its appraisal.

That flicker again, in the corner of her eye. She looked up, and saw a tortoiseshell butterfly fluttering in a spider's web slung from one corner of the heavy curtains which framed the gateway to the hereafter. She looked away quickly, down to the flowers on the step, some of them already appearing weary and superfluous. The chair was hard, despite its upholstered seat. Not much longer, surely.

She stared at the rollers on which her husband's coffin lay, and wondered about the hidden mechanics which in a few minutes would propel the ugly box into the consuming flames. She thought of his vulnerable body, inside.

Then the drone of more words, and a hymn to camouflage the hum of the motor, and the final, irrevocable valediction. The massed shuffle out to the dark line of sober cars. She didn't remember anything of the journey to Cantlesham Park Hotel.

A life of disappointments had left its mark on the face of Paul's mother. It was a face that settled naturally into brooding, with a watchful victim behind the eyes.

"Did you make sure Paul had the last rites?" she asked. Then, in case her daughter-in-law had forgotten the term, "The Sacrament of the Sick?"

Mary Hay, her skin greyer than usual against her black coat, almost certainly already knew the answer to her question. She just seemed to need that extra little jab of suffering.

"I'm sorry, er, Mum. Paul always insisted that he- he didn't want any of.. that sort of thing." Mumbo-fucking-jumbo was the way he had usually put it.

"You could have insisted. And we could have had him buried in the Church, instead of- *that* place."

Fiona felt bad for her; her faith was really all she had. Although it was hard to imagine a deep and loving relationship between Mary and her God, somehow. But Mary clung fiercely to the observances.

"Really, Mum, he- he made me promise. He even said he didn't want anyone at his funeral, only me."

"And when would this be? He was in a coma, wasn't he?" Just a hint of a challenge.

Of course she knew. She *knew*. She might have tried to obliterate from her memory the sight of Paul after his own father's funeral, inappropriately merry, mimicking Father Jered's facial tic and shaky hands, and declaring that neither this silly old priest

nor any other would be carrying on such a bloody pantomime over *his* dead body. Mary would have tried to overcome with long-distance, forceful prayer his denial of everything she considered important.

“He said it many times. Many times. I couldn’t...”

Paul’s mother looked away, bit her lip, and moved away to speak to others of the small gathering, those whom she, the matriarch, had insisted ought to be there. They included the slummocky uncle with the strawberry nose who had pressed his way into Fiona’s buffer zone, enquiring, “No tears from the grieving widow, eh? Ah, you’ll need a bucket for ’em later, I expect.”

Fiona could feel her knees wobbling to such an extent that she looked for the nearest vacant chair at the edge of the room. Her head felt muzzy, and she kept having to swallow. Oh, please, let it be over. She had put down her glass of unpleasant white wine somewhere, but didn’t want to get up again to seek it out. The mourners wouldn’t stay too much longer, surely. They’d witnessed Paul’s last exit, and the bought-in canapes provided by the hotel were down to the last crumbling few.

“Here. You look as if you could do with it.”

The fumes from a brandy balloon under her nose were fragrant and comforting. Fiona looked up, murmuring her thanks.

“Mind if I sit down?” said Janet, Paul’s older sister, sitting on the next chair. She was a little like him to look at, but not as attractive. She smiled with a mouth that was like Paul’s, but it was a thoughtful, measured smile, not like his reckless grin. Fiona took a deep breath. She didn’t know Janet at all well, and wished she didn’t have to speak to her. She told herself to sip the brandy slowly; the last thing she needed was to get maudlin and weepy. But its sharp fire helped, and numbed the sickly hollow in her stomach.

Janet turned her own chair towards her, and Fiona braced herself.

“You’re coping well.” Janet’s direct stare was uncomfortable.

“Um, thanks, Janet. Thanks for the drink, too.”

“How are Patrick and Anna?”

“Patrick couldn’t come. He’s doing well, though, my brother’s taken him on at his winery, in Australia. I can’t see Anna just now, but I know she’s here, somewhere...”

Fiona had seen Anna creep into a rear pew of the chapel, late. At least she had come.

“Yes, I knew about Patrick, of course.”

“Of course. Yes, sorry.”

“He and Paul didn’t get along.” It was a statement.

“Uh, well, there were... some problems...”

“It’s all right. There was only ever space for one ego that big.” Janet’s mouth twitched at one corner. “I should know.”

“Oh.”

“And what’s Anna doing now?”

“She’s got a job in an office, but she wants to go to London to be an actor. She got a scholarship to The Beryl Linecar School of Speech and Drama last year, but Paul – we -

didn't like the thought of her living away. They don't have student accommodation or anything. But now, I suppose she'll go. Now that he's - now that she's older."

"At least she'll be around to support to you over the next few weeks."

"Yes, oh yes. That is, she doesn't actually live at home, she's got a flat with another girl, in Cantlesham. Likes her independence, I'm afraid."

"I see."

Fiona suddenly wished for an end to this unexpected intimacy. She had said too much, given too much away. The brandy was a puddle the size of a two pence piece in the bottom of the oversized glass. She wished she hadn't said anything.

"Excuse me, please, Janet, I have to go to the Ladies."

"Yes, of course, I'll go and have a word with Anna, I think I saw her in the bar."

Fiona sat on the lavatory, head in hands, until her elbows made aching pits in her thighs. She mustn't stay in there too long, someone might come looking for her. She washed her hands, noting that the touch of lipstick that she had applied earlier had worn off. She didn't look too good, but it didn't matter. Paul had liked her to have a pleasing appearance in public, neat and calculated not to attract too much attention. In the shop, though, she could wear jeans and one of her own T-shirts designs, because it was good for trade, and that was liberating. And when Paul's health first began to deteriorate he became less interested in the running of the business anyway, which was a relief. She loved the shop.

She carefully tissueed away a smudge of mascara. That would do. She took a deep breath, and returned to the function.

"Oh, there you are. We're just off. Hope things go all right for you, dear."

"Thank you- " Oh, God, what were their names again, Paul's other uncle, "Charlie, and, and-" Mind blank.

"Bella. That's all right, dear. We understand. At a time like this..." They squeezed her and kissed her cheek with kind smiles. Nice couple. Their Christmas cards usually featured cosy fireside scenes, with laughing children and sparkly snow on the sills of leaded windows. Paul used to be so scathing about their dull little lives.

Then two more left, and then Strawberry Nose and his wife, Paul's mother hostessing them on their way as soon as they had made their goodbyes to the widow. And then Mary herself.

"I'll have to be going, Fiona, my taxi's here. You can ring me sometime, if you get round to it. Perhaps the children will write, I did say hello to Anna, but she was busy talking to Janet. Well... goodbye, then."

"Goodbye, er, Mum. And-" Yes, needs must. "Thank you for... organising all this."

"Yes, it went well, I think. At least it was something I could do for my son." Her cheeks seemed to sag, and she turned away quickly.

Fiona heaved a sigh of profound relief. Perhaps she could go now, tear off the indifferently-fitting black jacket and skirt she had last worn ten years ago, soak in the bath and go to bed. Well, not just yet, as it was only five o'clock, but she wanted so very badly to be rid of the damned day.

Somebody waved from the bar area. Janet. Sod it. She stared at the pattern of the corporate carpet swirling round the tables, its waves drawing her like a broken-masted ship towards the rocks. She sat obediently in front of a second brandy, between her daughter and Janet.

"Thank you." No question of driving home now; she would have to take a taxi. She hoped she had enough money with her.

"Anna's been telling me about her life. And about her move from the family home," said Janet.

Oh, God.

"I think it's clear that she'll do anything to take up that place at drama school," she continued, "and I want to put this to you, Fiona. I know we haven't been that close for one reason and another, but since my divorce I've been thinking of getting a lodger. If we could come to some fair arrangement, I'd be happy to have Anna; I'd sooner have family than a total stranger - you just can't tell who you're going to get when you advertise, can you?"

"It's a great idea, Mum, Auntie Janet's isn't far from the Northern Line, I could be into town in no time, and I've told her I can do her ironing as part of the deal..."

Quite a bit of ground had been covered in Fiona's absence, clearly.

"Well, yes, I'm sure we could afford it -" No mortgage to pay now, and a fraction of the booze bill.

"I'd get an evening job, anyway." There was a hard little stone in Anna's look that said, I want to do this myself, I'm eighteen, you won't stop me, and why should you think I need you now?

"You'd be learning lines in the evenings, wouldn't you dear?" said Janet, "You might want to earn a bit of pocket money at the week-end, and that's up to you, Anna. But the arrangement would suit me well enough, ironing or not! And it seems Anna's happy with the idea, so what do you think, Fiona?"

"Yes, I'd be fine with it." One less resentment. "But you're sure, Janet? I mean, a teenager... it might be quite, well..."

"Anna seems like a very mature young woman to me."

Yes, so she was. Very grown-up. Aloof, almost. Separate now, not coming back to her father's house, ever. Never aware of intercessions made on her behalf, or her brother's.

Anna rose. "Sorry, Auntie, I really have to go, you got my number, didn't you?" she said, smiling. Then her composed face, for her mother. The kiss, the goodbye, the turn, the exit. Fiona watched her daughter's youthful perfection walk out. No wave from the door.

Janet's silence was long enough for Fiona to take a few long, controlled breaths, and swallow the constriction in her throat.

"She's a lovely girl, Fiona."

"Yes, she is."

"I'm guessing you had a hideous time with my brother."

"Oh, no... not really..."

“You know, I sometimes think he was born with something a bit wrong with him. He was my brother, and nothing changes that, but God, talk about Jekyll and Hyde. He could charm the birds down from the trees... and then wring their necks.” Janet gave an abrupt laugh.

“Yes, it’s funny how everybody was drawn to him,” replied Fiona, the image of Paul’s roguish smile immediate and vivid in her mind, “but he never wanted to *be* with them. Unfortunately, he, er, he always said that he couldn’t stand people.”

Except me. He always loved me.

“Oh well. Whatever his demons were, he’s at peace now.” Janet sighed. “I’d better order a taxi, I don’t want to miss my train. Can I give you a lift?”

“No. Thanks.” Just home, protect the soft shell under a familiar stone.

“I’ll be in touch, Fiona, I’ll ring you in a day or two, about Anna. Just get plenty of rest. It’s going to take a long time to adjust to things. If you get a bit frazzled, just call me, OK?”

“Yes, I will.”

No, I won’t.

Janet kissed her cheek, and when she left, Fiona sat staring into space for a very long time.

CHAPTER 1

“Gaahshit!”

The empty glass exploded with a shrill chish as it shattered against the door jamb, the sound followed closely by the whump of her own body crashing down on the rug. The rug that had tripped her up.

She gasped for breath for a number of jerky inhalations, then exhaled with a groan. She clung to the thick pile with one hand, groping for a tissue in her pocket with the other, and gave in to a proper, self-pitying blubber. Her rug, too. Not the one Paul had bought. Her own rug had tripped her.

She gave herself a few minutes to sob, curling into the rug’s softness and running her fingers over the soreness of her shoulder, which had caught the stern coffee table off guard as she fell.

Eventually she sat up, leaning against the sofa. At least the glass had been empty, and only a small carmine scar marked the woodwork. As if it had cut itself, thought Fiona. At least I won’t have to repaint the whole thing. Sweep the bits up later.

She clambered to her feet and made for the kitchen, pouring the last of the bottle into a fresh glass. Hardly any. She opened another bottle, filled the glass, and kicked the corner of the rug flat as she came back into the sitting room.

What a bloody awful Sunday. It was only last night she had realised it was a year since Paul’s death, and the sense of daring and achievement in making changes to her surroundings had pretty much run out of steam. Early on, she had painted the interior of the house white, with a concentrated energy and speed that surprised her, recruiting the black bedsheets as dustcovers and paint rags. Banished from the walls were the moody seascapes and the bleak monochromes of Scots pines which had become part of the closed landscape of the marital home. She had hung a huge, glorious abstract over the fireplace, a crusty burst of flame, ochre and scarlet which lifted her joy levels every time she looked at it. She felt guilty about the purchase initially, and equally in trading in her small saloon for a sporty two-seater, but the resulting pleasure damped down the discomfort. In the garden she ripped out the insipid roses (“I’m sorry, but you’re seriously under-performing and I’m just not prepared to keep you on,” she told them) and replaced them with marigolds and nasturtiums, enthusiastic plants which knew how to make the best of their opportunities. Paul’s CD collection had gone to the Oxfam shop in Cantlesham; the sentimental Nashville compilations would probably appeal to some local buyers, but less so the obscure, tortured-introspection stuff, the music he claimed held the key to his being, and which, according to him, she could never be expected to understand.

Well, bollocks to him. Rest his soul.

But despite the heady thrill of thinking and acting independently which had at times neutralised a decent sense of loss, she was now looking at a blank wall of a future. Some future, if she didn’t do something, make changes beyond the décor. And it needed to be soon, before her thirties became her forties, fifties, sixties and up, and she became the funny old dear in the cottage, with nobody to know or care if her decomposing body

behind the front door were being covered, little by little, in junk mail. Party time for the rats, she thought with a grimace.

She stared out of the window. Grey sky, over the dun clods which had replaced the scratchy stubble of the harvested crops. A few yellow leaves riding the eddies of wind. A crow ripping at something in the corner of the next field. She took two long mouthfuls of her wine, and huddled into the fluffy blanket forming around her brain.

God, it was quiet. She fumbled a CD into the slot, clutching her glass tightly in the other hand. "Reading", said the green message. It seemed to be taking ages. Must get an Ipod sometime. Oh, stupid. She pressed Play, and a dance track launched into its irresistible rhythm, the percussion crashing jubilantly under the itchy synth top line.

"Heyyyyy!" she yelled, rolling her hips and stamping her feet. Great, to dance. Feel good. Sing Za, za, dabbeda-dabbeda, wa, wa, wa, wa...

Rain began dotting the window, and she turned off the player. Sat down. Drained the glass. Sat.

The phone rang.

Ignore it – sales call.

Bugger it, shut up.

Ring ring.

"Yeah?"

"Hi. Is that Fiona?"

"Uh, yes, who's that?"

"Fiona, it's Rosemary."

"Rosemary."

Rosemary?

"Yes, from school, *that* Rosemary! I used to be your best mate, remember? Are you OK?"

"Oh Rosemary... God. Sorry. Bit drunk, I'm afraid."

"I can call another time if you like."

"Don't go. Please."

"Course I won't. How are you doing, Fiona? I would have been in touch after the card you sent after – after Paul, but I thought I'd lost it - it's only just turned up, and it's the anniversary this weekend, isn't it? Are you on your own?"

"Yeah, I'm, I'm, that's normal. Sundays, well, quiet; quite, quite - quiet. Nice break. From the shop."

Fiona took the phone into the kitchen as she picked her words, and poured herself some water. The rain had upped to a rattle, and the hedge opposite the kitchen window was already dripping.

"You know what, Fiona," said Rosemary, "for all the years it's been, you sound just the same, I'd have known your voice anywhere."

"Yeah, me too! Yours." Well, almost. Fiona looked around for her wineglass, before remembering she'd got water. She took a gulp. Tasted foul after the wine.

"So... how have things been for you?"

Fiona took a deep breath as she prepared an answer. The two collided:

"You don't have to-"

"Actually, I-"

Pause.

"Oh I'm-"

"Sorry, I-"

"Go on. Sorry."

"I've been *ever* so, busy. Done up the house. Mm, changed everything around. Yes, I made the garden different." She frowned; sighed. "I'm happy with it now."

Then she added, in a rush before she could forget, "And the shop's doing OK – I think I wrote on one of my Christmas cards that I've got a shop, tiny little shop, mini-business, sell T-shirts..." The words tailed off.

"So you've made your house the envy of the neighbours, and business is going well – that's really good," said Rosemary.

"Actually, haven't got neighbours out here. It's a converted farm cottage. Bit isolated, to be honest." It's what had attracted Paul to the place. It could be beautiful, in summer.

"It's awful, the way we haven't been in touch in the meantime," said Rosemary, "you're not in the phone book, and you never put your number or email address on till the announcement about Paul, did you?"

No, never. News carefully edited. Nothing requiring a reply. Fiona took a long swig of water and concentrated on her throbbing shoulder, in an effort to get her head together.

"No, that was silly of me. Too much of a rush, I expect. You know how it is."

"We all lead such busy lives, true enough," said Rosemary, "did you get the one about Donal getting a post at Harford Uni? We moved to Woodside, just the other side of Harford. I suggested perhaps we could meet up sometime, as it's barely a couple of hours away."

"Oh yes! Must have been the Christmas before Paul died. I'm so sorry, it must have gone into the recycling. By mistake."

She had put that year's card out of sight, agonized by its challenge, embarrassed by needing to leave its question unanswered. Creeping sobriety was making her alert, anxious.

"Fiona?" Rosemary's tone was tentative. "I honestly don't want to put you on the spot. But would you be up for a visit? It's OK if you'd rather not, and you mustn't feel you have to."

"Sounds – great."

What if it didn't go well. What if they didn't get on any more, if Rosemary found her too different from the Fiona she remembered? Perhaps she had made the suggestion because she thought her friend had become an alcoholic, and out of decency, for old times' sake, felt she ought to see her? Oh well, at the very worst it would be one awkward encounter, and things could slide as they had before. Nothing to lose.

Except the precious little thought that there *had* been a friendship, one that would always be there, could not be destroyed or compromised, remaining encased and preserved forever in the glowing amber of memory. Oh well.

"I'd really like that. I'd really, really like to see you."

"Is Sunday a good day for you?" asked Rosemary.

Fiona looked out at the fields, now completely empty and still.

"Yes," she said. "I'm in the shop on Saturdays, and I usually just, well, flop about the house on a Sunday. Do you want to come here, or shall I come over to – Woodside, did you say?"

"I think you might like a change of scenery, by the sound of it. And you've never met Donal – you couldn't make the wedding, unfortunately." Fiona tried to remember what excuse she'd made; it was so long ago. "So why don't you come to ours? It'll have to be, let's see, three weeks from now, we're in Ireland for the next ten days, and then Donal's got a conference..."

Fiona was surprised at her own sense of disappointment at the delay.

"That would be great. It'll give me something to look forward to."

"Settled, then. It'll be fun getting out the school photos. I've got the one from the year we were both in the hockey first eleven – are you still sporty?"

"No. Not at all."

"Bloody shame. You were amazing. In fact I'm surprised you don't live at the local gym. You were always first back from the cross-country runs, minutes before the rest. And nobody could shin up the ropes like you."

"God," replied Fiona, I doubt whether I could pull myself two inches off the floor, now. Maybe I should take myself in hand."

"You should, Fee, you really should. You'll feel so much better for it, especially as it was always your thing."

"Yes, I just might. I'll definitely think about it."

"And you're on for coming to see us three weeks today?"

"Yes."

Oddly, it felt almost like fear.

"And in the meantime, promise me Fiona."

"What?"

"Get thee to a sports centre!"

She could do that. She could go along after work tomorrow, see what was on offer. Or the day after. After goodbyes, she biroed a big red box around the date of the visit.

She passed the place every day, on her way to and from the shop, but this time found herself hyperventilating as she indicated left and then at the last minute failed to turn into the leisure centre car park. Tomorrow, perhaps. She was never a pretty sight in her underwear, and the thought of displaying her neglected, scraggy body in sports kit was intimidating. Legs too long and too white, and no real shape to her, as Paul had remarked on many occasions.

So it was three days later that she first saw the girl with the perfect bottom. It was unusual to have to deliver customised goods in person, but late ordering had resulted in Fiona having to take a case of T-shirts direct to Cantlesham Leisure Centre. This would save the face of the Judo club leader, who planned to present them to newly-graded pupils, thus helpfully advertising his business on the street.

As she waited in the foyer, a burst of laughter caused her to look round towards the reception desk. A beautifully peach-shaped bottom, covered in stretchy powder-blue fabric, was pretty well all that could be seen of the laughing girl as she leaned across the desk, trying to snatch papers from the receptionist's hand. Their animated exchange appeared to be over customer comment slips, but Fiona wasn't really listening. As the girl straightened up, Fiona sneaked a sideways glance. The rest was in perfect proportion to the bottom, skin-tight blue sports trousers and matching vest emphasising the smooth curves of the thighs and breasts, complemented by a clutch of well-defined abdominal muscles. The girl's fair hair was pulled back from a finely-boned face in a ponytail, and although she wore no make-up, her skin was enhanced by a golden tan. Fiona was just close enough to spot a small pale area below the corner of the jawbone, and smiled to herself. The tan was fake, of course, and the girl had missed a little bit. It was almost undetectable, but Fiona felt an odd kind of intimacy towards her, having detected it.

"O-T-T-shirts?" enquired a voice. "Great. Thanks for bringing them along." Business transacted, the customer carried away his purchase.

Out of the corner of her eye, Fiona saw the girl clip a microphone pack to her waistband and connect it to a headset worn casually, like a doctor's stethoscope, around her neck. She watched her stride away from the desk with further mock admonitions to the receptionist, and push through one of the portholed doors leading off the reception area. "Studio 2" read the sign above it. After a few minutes' hesitation, looking around to see if anybody was watching, Fiona wandered across the busy concourse, casually moving up to the porthole to look inside. The instructor was conducting an aerobics class, it seemed; and Fiona watched, fascinated, as the girl performed and demonstrated, lunging, leaping, pointing; and apparently giving a running commentary of instruction, full of smiles and exhortations to spur on her charges to greater effort. This was accompanied by music unheard from outside, but with a thumping bass she could feel through the soles of her feet, making her heart pound.

"Thinking of having a go?" asked a friendly voice at her side. She jumped, with a sudden intake of breath. Michael, Senior Leisure Attendant, said the laminated badge.

"Oh sorry! Didn't mean to startle you," he said, "I'm not actually supposed to frighten off potential clients!"

She tried a smile, and swallowed. "I don't - I don't think so," she said. "Too old. Too late. I couldn't do -" she nodded at the porthole - "*that*."

Michael's eyebrows raised, and she thought for a moment he was about to laugh at her. But his voice lowered confidentially.

"I shouldn't tell you this," he said, "but one of the regulars in that class is pushing seventy. And she only started coming this year."

"Oh. Well, I suppose I *could* try it."

“Wonderful!” said Michael, sounding genuinely pleased, “You’ve nothing to lose by having a go, have you?” A fitness missionary, evidently. “Come over to the desk and I’ll get you signed up; we’ll book you a fitness test and you’ll get a card you can use for all council facilities.”

“Oh, maybe I won’t bother, I’m a bit busy.”

He looked her in the eye, and put his head on one side. Despite the good footballer’s legs and broad shoulders, Michael had a slightly camp way with him, the mobile eyebrows enhancing his enthusiastic manner, and Fiona warmed to him. It was nice to meet a nice man. She giggled, feeling stupid, and said, “OK, then, could we get it over with now? I know I’ll be terrible.”

There were lots of tests. When she finally emerged from the MOT room, function and flexibility pronounced above average, Michael took her over to the desk to fill in forms, then waved as he left her.

“What’s that teacher called?” she asked the receptionist, “The class in Studio 2?”

“That’s Lynn,” said the girl, folding back a copy of the activity programme and pointing at “Freestyle Aerobics”, they’re due out now, why not have a word with her?”

At that moment, the portholed door opened, and class members streamed out, followed by Lynn, patches of sweat darkening the pale blue kit, and her face glistening. She strolled towards the desk, as Fiona stared.

“No!” she said, looking away, then added, “I’ll just book, thank you. What other classes does she do?”

If I stayed at the back, she thought, no-one would notice how rubbish I am... I want to be fit again, like her... How good would it be to *look* like her... move like her...

Reluctant to wait a week, Fiona opted for another of Lynn’s classes two days later, a weights class. She followed the other participants, picked up the same equipment as they picked, selected a corner spot, spoke to no one. Surprised by her own strength and potential power, to see forgotten muscles working in the studio mirrors, body under control, breathing under control, was surprisingly enjoyable. Yes, she did look weedy, but she had worn joggers to hide the long white legs, and she would improve. Oh yes, she would improve. Her eyes followed Lynn’s every movement. The girl was in pink this time, a colour for which Fiona had a particular dislike, but on Lynn it looked good.

Instead of going straight home, Fiona stopped off at the High Street, and bought a set of weights and a DVD.

Aerobics day came round again, and this time she would be part of it. She found it unexpectedly taxing; she was embarrassingly unfamiliar with the moves, and reached the limit of her stamina rather sooner than expected. So that’s what “out of condition” meant. Perhaps she had been too hasty in thinking it was for her. But Lynn didn’t seem to focus on the mistakes, but encouraged everybody in an engaging, jokey way. Watching her was mesmerising, albeit to the detriment of Fiona’s already poor performance. Lynn’s outfit was pale grey, in the same clingy material as before. She could not possibly be wearing anything under those trousers, not even a thong. Perfect, proud posture. A vision of beauty and strength.

“Grapevine right!” roared the vision. “Box step right and left! Shoulders and hips square to the front, and KEEP THOSE KNEES SOFT!”

Fiona floundered through the session, and at the end, dribbling with sweat, vowed that next week she would not be the class klutz. Several participants, she noticed, appeared to be coasting through the harder moves, and she suspected she could be better than that. She would go for a run every morning before breakfast, that would help. Rosemary was right; she had been good once. She recalled how it felt; it would be really something to feel like that again. Almost three weeks before she saw Rosemary; she could improve quite a bit before then. It would be great to be able to tell someone how she was doing. Someone who was interested.

CHAPTER 2

Rosemary looked very nearly the same, although the plump, pink-cheeked bloom had gone, as had the tumble of unruly fair hair, now in a short, neat style. But the excitement in her eyes was identical to the mental photograph in Fiona's memory.

"Stick your coat on the hook and come through," said Rosemary, "we'll sit in the conservatory for a cuppa before lunch. Oh, this is Donal." He was tall, angular and tweedy, with a lovely smile, and had a breath of Ireland in his voice. No wonder Rosemary had fallen for him. He shook hands and disappeared to the kitchen, bringing in the teatray before retiring to his computer upstairs.

"This is comfortable," said Fiona, settling into her armchair, "your garden's lovely."

"Small, but it suits us," said Rosemary, "do you still take a heaped teaspoon of milk in your tea?"

"Oh. You remembered!"

"So. How have you been, stranger?" asked Rosemary.

"I, yes, very well, thanks."

It sounded strange and forced, even to her own ears. Her best friend, once, and it was like trying to speak a long-unused language. It had been OK on the phone, but that was with Rosemary leading the conversation from a distance.

"So did you manage to get to the gym?" asked Rosemary with a smile.

"Yes, yes, I did. And you were right, it's brilliant."

"Tell me," said Rosemary, as she poured.

"There's this instructor called Lynn who's totally wonderful, and I've been doing a run round the lanes every morning. I'm sure it's made a difference, I can feel it already."

"Told you," said Rosemary, "I knew you'd soon get back into it. It always helps to have a good teacher."

"God, yes, Lynn's very pleased with me, I think, not that she's said much, it's the way she nods at me, although I know that sounds ridiculous. At least I'm not keeping to the back row any more. I can't wait for class days."

"Hey, now that sounds more like the Fiona of old. Got your competitive spirit back!" said Rosemary.

So much easier, now.

"It makes you want to be good, when you've got someone who really inspires you. I can't tell you how much I dreaded going into that place for the first time, but she made me feel so part of it all."

"That's Lynn the paragon, I take it. What's she like?"

Fiona cleared her throat, and swallowed.

"Beautiful. Gorgeous, in fact. Her figure, the way she moves, and well, everything. One of those smiles that makes you feel good for the rest of the day. And fires you up."

"Yes, so it would seem!"

"Oh, you're laughing at me, Rosie."

"Only in a good way, honestly. I think you needed to come out of your shell a bit."

“Thank you for putting the idea in my head.”

Fiona wondered if she should ask for a second cup of tea, or if she should wait for Rosemary to notice that the cup was down to the bottom.

“Pleasure. How are you managing otherwise? Without Paul, I mean. You don’t mind me asking, do you?”

Fiona shifted in her chair.

“Could I have another cup, please? Thanks. Well. Some things are actually better, if I’m honest.”

“Oh really? What sort of things?”

Fiona gazed into the golden tea, breathing carefully.

“It’s all right, I’m sorry,” added Rosemary, “I’m being very nosy.”

“It’s OK, really. I’m finding it easier to manage – financially, I mean. There were debts. Quite big. Comparatively speaking, that is. But they’re all sorted now. I know exactly where I stand, these days.”

Traitor. Telling tales over his dead body. He’d have gone apeshit. But God almighty, he was so bloody extravagant when he was in one of his exuberant moods, and it had taken dogged determination to chip away at the unweildy sum on their joint credit card. Now she loved having control over her modest budget, the freedom from that perennial worry. That and others: in the evenings she could put in an unhurried hour or so on her designs and commissions, without the pressure of knowing she was stealing from their Quality Time in front of the telly, and the nag of how much drink he’d have got through before she could join him.

But Paul *had* cared for her. She was everything to him, as he often told her, the love of his life, the most important thing that had ever happened to him.

“Well, that’s good,” Rosemary was saying, “I think being your own boss suits you.”

“I miss him in some ways.”

Rosemary eyed her, without speaking.

“He could be a laugh at times. I helped him rewire, plumb and repair everything in the cottage when we moved in. We were like mates, a lot of the time.”

It was true. Her favourite times, the jokes, the bawdy language, the send-ups and the familiar tennis of exaggerated insults. More intimate than sex.

“But I don’t seem to be much good at the grief bit,” she added, “maybe it’ll hit me with a bang some day, but meanwhile – comfortably numb, I guess.”

Not that she’d dream of burdening anybody in any case. People didn’t want to be embarrassed. Having mastered the art of iron self-control over the years, she could handle it, if it happened.

“Everybody’s different, Fee. You don’t have to howl and tear out your hair.”

“Not a good look,” Fiona agreed, with a wry smile.

Rosemary got up and came over to Fiona’s chair, and kneeling, gave her a hug.

“You’re on your way to recovery, now. You’ve taken the first step, with your fitness classes, and you’ll soon find you’ll make friends and do stuff with them, *you* see.”

“I just can’t talk to people.”

“You talk to your customers in the shop, don’t you?”

“Yes, that’s easy. No problem. I even feel as if they regard me as some sort of T-shirt expert!” She laughed self-consciously. “But I sometimes have coffee with girls from the class afterwards, and they’re all so confident. I’ve tried the odd remark, but I’m definitely the outsider.”

“You seem easy enough talking to me. Even after all the years we haven’t spoken.” After a moment, Fiona said, “That was – my fault.”

Rosemary opened her mouth to speak, then closed it. She stood up, and said, “It’s going to be a very late lunch, if I don’t get those potatoes on - the beef will have shrunk to a walnut.”

“It smells fantastic,” said Fiona, “I don’t bother with a joint just for myself.”

“We need to feed you up.”

“Can’t wait. Can I help with anything?”

“Yes, come on.”

Fiona added a combat class to her schedule, and began to make a point of saying hello to fellow exercisers. A few smiled and replied, which was nice; and she tried to look interested when the girls from Lynn’s class discussed their relationships and children. Still the outsider.

Lynn was different, though. Fiona was sure she would be able to talk to her, share things with her, if she only she could get her on her own. Lynn had a boyfriend, it seemed, but didn’t mention him much. Fiona hoped he was good to her. He would need to be strong, but also tender. He should have a quick sense of humour, to match the crackling one-liners which punctuated the instructor’s harangue during class. They must have a great sex life. Sex with that fantastic body. Did he know how lucky he was, she wondered. Maybe it was time to look for a boyfriend of her own. This thought somehow failed to ignite her enthusiasm. Maybe it was the endorphins stirred up by the physical activity, giving her an almost constant feeling of suppressed excitement.

And then, one evening after class, she saw the man in Lynn’s life. He was just a vague shape in the gloom, standing by a low sports car, and Lynn’s unmistakable silhouette ran up to embrace him. The figure stepped back, pushed her away. Fiona could not make out the angry words, but there were plenty of them. She just made out the phrase “- NEVER to phone!”, and hoped that she could not be seen behind her own car, under the trees. Lynn was apparently pleading with him, her tone far from that of the confident, sassy instructor. The man’s voice took on an aggressive tone which raised the hairs on her skin, and the last word of his diatribe was plainly “SLUT!”

Lynn turned and walked back to the Centre building, shoulders shaking. Fiona found her heart pounding with an almost audible thump. She gasped for breath; her head swam. To her shock, she felt an almost irresistible desire to seize the man by the lapels, bend him backwards over his car, knee him in the balls again and again, until they were pulp; to run after Lynn, put her arms around her, comfort her, and - well, comfort her.

She stood, trembling, until the man had driven away and her own irrational adrenalin rush had subsided.

He must be married. The tabloids would call him a love-rat. Poor Lynn. And what a stupid, fucking cliché. And that's all there was to it, really; the light-footed goddess had been dragged down to earth, by a cliché.