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Love On
the Rocks



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One

Lisa Jones was struggling desperately to minimize her cleavage. Breathing in only enhanced it; hunching her shoulders had a similar effect. No matter how hard she tried, sixty-five per cent of her bosom was on display. Which wasn't surprising, as she was a 36DD and her jacket was a size ten.

She was convinced Milo had done it on purpose. The single-breasted red jacket with matching skirt was a departure from the usual skimpy outfits promotions girls wore at motor shows, but Lisa refused to conform to the stereotype. That wasn't what she was about any more. If Milo wanted her on his stand, then he had to accept that she would dress like a businesswoman, not a glamour model. On her thirtieth birthday, six months before, she had decided she was too old to have everything on display. Those days were over. From now on she was to be fully clothed, on or off camera, and if her clients didn't like it they could choose someone else to promote their wares.

Milo obviously disagreed with her decision and bringing her an outfit two sizes too small was his idea of forcing her into a compromise. Once she'd managed to squeeze herself into it, Lisa decided she looked more voluptuous and inviting than if she'd been wearing one of the gold bikinis sported by the girls on the next stand. The jacket acted like a corset, squeezing her waist in and her breasts out. Had Lisa had time she would have gone and bought a polo-neck jumper to go underneath, but thanks to the traffic on the motorway she only had fifteen minutes to get ready before the show opened.

She struggled with the skirt zip, tutting as she discovered that the skirt only just reached mid thigh. She was grateful that she had worn tights and not hold-ups, otherwise she would have spent all day tugging the hem down to cover the tops of her stockings. She surveyed her reflection in the mirror and narrowed her eyes at Milo, who nodded in approval.

‘You look gorgeous,’ he reassured her. Milo had a large showroom on the outskirts of Coventry, selling ‘previously enjoyed’ prestige motor cars. This show was the high point of his year, his chance to show off to the general public.

‘Don’t think I don’t realize you did it on purpose,’ Lisa retorted, tying her mass of brunette ringlets back into a ponytail in a vain attempt to look businesslike. Even wearing flat shoes wouldn’t help. Lisa sighed as she slipped on her black suede courts with the three-inch heels. She didn’t want the clients towering over her. There was nothing worse than having to look up at someone who was leering at your décolleté.

Lisa was used to men staring. She was only five foot two, with creamy, luminescent skin, wild dark curls, dancing brown eyes with incredibly long upturned lashes, and rosebud lips that were generally curved into a smile guarded by two of the deepest dimples. That she was ravishingly pretty was the icing on the cake, however, for her real attribute was her hourglass figure, the ultimate glamour girl proportions. It might not be fashionable to have such generous curves – she would never in a million years make the catwalk or the pages of a fashion magazine – but for promotion work, she was ideal: she attracted custom like a magnet. And of course the warmth of her personality, her infectious laugh, her irresistible charm combined with her total professionalism meant she was much in demand.

Despite her misgivings, ten minutes later she was on the stand, smile at the ready, leaflets in hand. The exhibition hall was boiling hot and airless, and she could barely breathe in her restrictive clothing. The bones of her bra were digging in; there was sweat trickling down her back. A burst of music

from a neighbouring stand blared out as four dancers writhed around a low-slung black sports car to rapturous applause, drawing an instant audience of middle-aged men who weren't sure which to lust after more, the motor or the girls. Sadly for the majority of them, both were out of reach. The show peddled wares attainable by only a few, but dreaming, as everyone knows, is free. Thus men strode around the exhibition hall looking knowledgeable; surveying the vehicles with arms crossed, nodding their heads sagely in agreement as they debated their various merits, pretending to themselves and those around them that they could actually afford what they were looking at; that it was just a question of weighing up the pros and cons before making their final choice. It was for the most part a charade. Ninety-five per cent of the people attending the show couldn't come close to affording as much as a spare tyre. But that didn't matter: it was the remaining five per cent the exhibitors needed. The five per cent who stood back and kept their counsel, not wishing to look too eager. Although there was always one who couldn't resist showing off, doing a deal in full view of the other visitors, anxious to display their usually new-found wealth and revelling in the envy of passers-by.

By midday, Lisa was dealing with just one of those. In his late fifties, wearing a petrol-blue washed-silk shirt under a leather waistcoat and sporting a neatly clipped grey beard, he was hustling Lisa for a price on a mouthwatering navy-blue Maserati.

'There's no point in trying to negotiate with me. Mr Sweet will be back in a moment,' she said politely, willing Milo to reappear. He always spent most of the show networking, bartering with other dealers. They swapped cars like little boys in a playground swapping Dinky toys, apparently oblivious to the sums of money involved.

'Come on,' he persisted. 'If you can get me some discount, I'll see you right.'

He leaned right in to Lisa, and she breathed in a noxious layer of aftershave.

'I'm sorry. But I'm nothing to do with negotiations. I'm just here to hand out leaflets.'

'Now don't do yourself down. I'm sure you've got influence. And I bet a bit of extra cash wouldn't go amiss, would it?' His eyes gleamed behind his tinted glasses as he gawped at her chest. 'Get yourself something nice to wear.'

Lisa smiled a smile that anyone but a fool would see meant 'back off'.

'Mr Sweet will be back in a moment.'

The man pursed his too-red lips into a little moue of disapproval. Then he gave Lisa another appraising glance. He obviously liked what he saw, as his apparent sulk dissolved and he gave her what he thought was a charming smile.

'Why don't you come out for dinner with me after the show finishes?'

'I don't think so. But thank you.'

'Come on. Admit it. That's why you work here, isn't it? So you can meet someone rich? You'd love to go out in one of these, wouldn't you?'

He indicated the Maserati. Lisa tried hard to bite her tongue, but she'd had enough. Enough of being ogled and propositioned.

'Not if it meant being seen next to you.'

The man stared at her in disbelief.

'What?'

'If I wanted a car like that, I'd buy it. I don't need to prostitute myself.'

'There's no need to be uppity.'

'Yes, there is. You seem to think that I'm for sale.'

'Hold on a minute. I only offered you dinner.'

'And what were you expecting back? A quick grope in return for steak and chips at the nearest gastropub?'

The man opened and shut his mouth like a goldfish. Lisa

realized that people were staring, but she was in full flow. Nothing was going to stop her now.

‘Why don’t you go to that stand over there? I know for a fact that some of those girls aren’t fussy, if you’re that desperate.’

By now, Milo had reappeared.

‘What’s going on?’

The bumptious little man turned on his heel to confront Milo. Lisa stood her ground patiently.

‘You’ve just lost yourself a sale. I was about to buy one of your motors, and if this jumped-up little cow hadn’t been so rude to me—’

He turned to glare at Lisa, his eyes baleful. She stood with her hands on her hips, knowing that her stance was probably accentuating her embonpoint more than ever, but she was beyond caring. She’d had enough. Enough of peddling dreams to people who couldn’t afford it or, worse, to people who could and thought she was part of the package. She didn’t want to dress up any more, spend half an hour doing her face before a job because, although she didn’t need it, full make-up was expected and you could never look anything less than done up. She didn’t want to be a slave to fake tan and pedicures and leg waxing, because you never knew what the job might entail and an even tan, painted toes and smooth skin were expected. Even fully clothed, she was still being treated like a piece of meat.

‘I’m sorry, Milo.’ Her voice was calm. ‘I can’t do this any more.’

Milo, desperate to retrieve his sale, smiled at the two of them, poised like prize fighters either side of him.

‘I’m sure it’s just a misunderstanding. I’m sure this gentleman didn’t mean to be rude.’

‘Me? Rude? I just wanted to buy a car. I didn’t expect to be insulted.’ The man looked self-righteously indignant. ‘Not that I’m going to buy it now. No bloody way.’

‘Don’t be rash.’ Milo was alarmed. Selling the Maserati

would cover several of the rather disconcerting invoices piled up in his in-tray. ‘We can talk about it. That’s a beauty, that is. It’s got a host of added extras and only eighteen thousand on the clock. I’m sure we can do a deal.’

‘I’m sure we can. But I want an apology first.’

Triumphant that he had the upper hand, the man squared his shoulders and tilted his chin, challenging Milo, knowing that extracting an apology from Lisa was less likely than the Maserati sprouting wings and flying out of the exhibition hall. There was no doubt he was enjoying the scenario.

Milo looked pleadingly at Lisa.

‘Lisa . . .’

‘No way.’

Milo took her by the elbow and led her out of earshot, speaking sotto voce.

‘I’ll make it up to you. I can’t afford to lose this sale.’

‘I’m sorry, Milo.’

‘Please, Lisa. I can make the best part of fifteen grand. Just apologize.’

‘You can’t be serious.’

‘Oh yes I can.’

‘You’re expecting me to grovel to that patronizing, lecherous lowlife?’

Milo swallowed. ‘Yes.’

Lisa took a deep breath in. The situation encapsulated everything she hated about her job. The bullshit, the posturing, the egos. The fact that money was the driving force, that all morals were jeopardized in its pursuit. That Milo, who she’d done shows for on and off for nearly ten years, cared more about his profit margins than her feelings. Yes, she could have swallowed her pride and apologized. But she would have felt degraded and belittled and worthless – even though Milo would have bunged her a couple of hundred quid as a sop.

Lisa decided that she was worth more than that. She shook her head defiantly, her curls springing loose from their ponytail.

‘I’m off.’

‘You can’t just leave.’

‘I can.’

‘You won’t work for me again.’

Lisa looked him in the eye.

‘Milo,’ she said gently, ‘I don’t want to.’

Milo blinked once as he debated how to retrieve the situation. Bribing Lisa wasn’t going to work, so he tried a threat.

‘I’ll do you for breach of contract. And loss of business, if I don’t get this sale.’

‘I’ll do you for sexual harassment.’

‘I’ve never laid a finger on you!’

‘Expecting me to wear this uniform is degrading and humiliating. I’m sure a good solicitor would find a case.’

Milo looked shocked.

‘Lisa – I didn’t mean to offend you. I never knew you felt so strongly—’

‘Well, I do. I’m a human being, you know. Not just an impressive cleavage.’

She took off her jacket and threw it at him, well aware that now she was in full view of the entire hall in just her best Rigby & Peller bra and a tiny skirt.

‘There you go. Is that what you want?’

Milo’s mouth was hanging open. Lisa put out her arms and did a twirl for the audience that was gathering round his stand.

‘Happy? Now you’ve got everyone’s attention?’

A flash went off, followed by another, and Lisa struck a Page Three pose to tumultuous applause, then turned on her heel and stalked through the screens at the back of the stand to the tiny cubicle which acted as both changing room and office. With shaking hands she pulled off the red skirt and tugged her jeans and T-shirt back on as quickly as she could.

‘Well, Lisa Jones. I think that’s called making an exhibition of yourself,’ she said to her reflection, before putting on her coat and dashing for the exit.

*

Twenty minutes later, she flung her parking money at the startled attendant and was out of the car park before the barrier was fully raised. As she drove back down the motorway, her mobile chirruped into life. She pushed the hands-free.

‘Hi.’

‘Lisa. What the hell do you think you’re playing at?’

As she’d expected, it was her agent.

‘I’m sorry, Tony. But I’ve had enough.’

‘You can’t just walk off a job. You’ll never work again. You know what this business is like. I want you to turn your car straight round and get back on that stand.’

‘Not if you paid me a million pounds.’

‘What happened?’

Lisa knew that being ogled by the entire exhibition centre wouldn’t be a good enough reason. She sighed.

‘Nothing. I’ve decided to jank it in, that’s all.’

‘You could have picked a better moment. You could have picked a less important client to do over. Milo Sweet’s one of my best customers. And he’s got the biggest mouth in the West Midlands.’

Lisa felt a momentary pang of guilt. But then she recalled how Tony had strong-armed her into the job against her will in the first place. She wasn’t going to be manipulated any longer.

‘Get one of your other girls to help him forget,’ she said tartly.

‘You won’t get paid.’

‘Of course I won’t. I’m not that stupid.’

‘And you’re off my books. You’re fired.’

Never mind that it was the first time she’d let him down since she started working for him when she was seventeen. Never mind that she had stood in for his less reliable girls time and again, when they hadn’t been able to make it in because they had drunk too much the night before or needed to rush to the chemist for the morning-after pill. She knew that when

he'd calmed down he would remember this, that he would be back on the phone pleading with her.

She grinned, revelling in the sweetness of the realization that he needed her more than she needed him.

'Actually, no, Tony. *You're* fired.'

She cut him off, turned on the CD player and flipped through the changer until she found her favourite Fleetwood Mac album. The music was of another age, soothing and reassuring. She put her foot down, eager to put as many miles between her and the exhibition centre as possible. On the other side of the motorway she saw an Aston Martin zip effortlessly past all the other vehicles. The driver was obviously on his way to the show, perhaps to choose a replacement for his status symbol. Well, good luck to him. She'd be home by four. Just time to nip into Marks & Sparks for something to eat. Not to mention a bottle of wine to drown her sorrows.

Before she sat down and decided what she was going to do with the rest of her life.

In his office, George Chandler had his head in his hands. He was on speaker phone. The tone in his boss's voice was not to be argued with.

'You're not to make any contact at all. Don't phone the hospital. Or his wife. We don't want to make any move that will incur liability.'

'For heaven's sake, Richard, that's totally callous,' George protested. 'He's worked for us for over ten years, and we're not supposed to show concern?'

'You've got it in one.'

'You mean the guy might die and I can't even call his wife? Give her my condolences?'

'George. You know the score. Lawsuit. Litigation. Liability. It's the world we live in, I'm afraid. Anyway, you're going to have enough to deal with. We'll have the insurance guys swarming all over us before we know it. And Health and

Safety. Questions will be asked and it's your head on the chopping block.'

'But he wasn't wearing his safety harness.'

'That's not the point. The balcony gave way. Our fault. Or to be more specific, your fault. I'm sorry.'

Richard hung up. George put his head on his desk in despair. He felt sick. What a perfectly hideous situation.

It was George who was responsible for the maintenance of all the commercial buildings his company managed. Colin, currently lying in hospital with severe head injuries, held the contract to clean all their windows. Flouting all the safety guidelines and regulations, he had failed to wear a safety harness while cleaning the windows of a fourth-floor office. He had slipped, fallen and grabbed on to the balcony which, being merely ornamental, had given way. Colin had plunged four storeys on to the concrete below. And George, it seemed, was liable. He should, it turned out, have ensured that every ornamental balcony they owned could take the weight of a falling man.

When he thought about Colin, he wanted to retch. He had three kids, George knew. The stupid man. Why hadn't he worn his harness? He'd be here now, instead of a bloody mound of broken bones and teeth waiting for a brain scan. Meanwhile, George couldn't even go down and comfort Colin's wife in the hospital corridor while she waited for the results, in case he inadvertently admitted liability. It was a mad world.

George rubbed his hands wearily over his face. Then he picked up his jacket from the back of his chair, scooped up his car keys and walked out of the office. It was only half past two, and he had an important meeting scheduled for three, but he didn't care.

'Cancel my three o'clock,' he said to his secretary, with an uncharacteristic lack of warmth. 'I'm going home.'

'Don't you feel well?' she asked, concerned.

'No,' he said. 'I feel sick. Sick to bloody death of it all.'

Traffic in Bath on a Friday afternoon was notoriously horrendous. Whether people were trying to get in or out of the city, George couldn't be sure. He only needed to cross from one side to the other, but he had sat in a jam for fifteen minutes now, rather detracting from his dramatic exit as it gave him too much time to reflect on whether he had been wise to flee the office like that. He realized that it was the first time in his life that he had skived. Well, adult life. At university skiving had practically been part of the curriculum. Now, he wasn't sure how he felt, knowing he'd left chaos in his wake. His absence at this afternoon's meeting would be a major irritant. Richard would be livid.

But did he care?

On balance, he thought probably not. Over the past few months he had become increasingly overwhelmed by boredom. Disillusionment. Stagnation. After four years in the job, a pattern had set in. He was doing the same things over and over again, following the same old routine. The names and the places might change, but the motivation never differed. The only alteration was the rules and regulations, which became more and more complicated, petty and impossible to work to. Which was why a situation like today had evolved. To George, Colin's accident and its repercussions summed up his frustration with where he was in life.

The future had once been exciting; the world his oyster. At eighteen, he was brimming with promise, and getting into the school of architecture was widely regarded as a ticket to success. He'd be able to do whatever he wanted. Visions of glittering skylines peppered with the curves of his masterpieces filled his dreams. He imagined iconic museums, headquarters that were the jewels in the crowns of international conglomerates, developments that represented the status of the entrepreneurs whose businesses they housed. He foresaw awards and accolades; respect and awe; waiting lists . . .

Reality was somewhat different. He graduated with an

underwhelming second-class degree. The world he had moved into was tough, competitive, and he hadn't lived up to his original promise. Too much partying, maybe. Together with a lack of ruthlessness. An inability to think laterally and provide the spark of originality needed to make him stand out from the rest.

And so now here he was, not someone whose name was bandied about in hushed, reverent tones, but a salaried hack worrying about disabled access; wrangling with the local council over green-field and brown-field and change of use; bartering with them over low-cost housing and mixed development, which he knew meant pleasing no one. Colin's accident epitomized how he had found himself repeatedly compromised and unable to follow his heart, penned in by policies and red tape and EEC directives. It was the last straw.

George knew that, on closer analysis, he was being rather a spoilt brat. In most people's eyes, he would be perceived as successful. His job allowed for quite a few nice lunches, and being dragged round a golf course occasionally. His salary was generous. He found the job easy, if tedious. What was there to moan about?

As he finally made his way past the roadworks that had amplified the Friday traffic jam, and sped up Lansdown Hill, he came to the conclusion that what he wanted was freedom. Freedom to make his own decisions. Creative freedom that wasn't held in check by the whims of bureaucracy. Where he was going to find that, God only knew. George knew he'd be tempting fate by jumping ship – especially when he didn't have another ship to jump to. But today's events highlighted the fact that he owed it to himself to make a decision. Put up and shut up. Or take a risk. And one thing he did know. This was his last chance. He was soon going to be nearer to forty than thirty. Only just, but that made him no spring chicken. If he didn't make a bid for freedom now, he would be trapped for ever.

By three thirty he had reached his house. Amazingly, there

was a parking space not far down the road – one of the benefits of coming home earlier than usual. By the time he got back the spaces were usually taken up and he often had to park two or three streets away. He reversed neatly into the space, knowing that it had probably been vacated by a mother on the school run who would spit tacks when she got back and found it gone.

The house was in a terrace of Georgian houses that were typical of Bath. The street was by no means as grand as the gracious proportions of the Royal Crescent only a few hundred yards away – the most prestigious address in Bath and one George had long aspired to, but that was definitely out of reach. He consoled himself that the houses there were far too large for a single man, and he wouldn't have wanted a mere flat. He'd bought the house in Northampton Street when he'd moved from Bristol five years ago, and it had been badly in need of some tender loving care. Over the years he had given it just that, restoring it to its former glory, obsessively replacing the period detail but at the same time incorporating mod cons. The project had taken up most of his spare time and a large proportion of his wallet, but now he was safe in the knowledge that he had an immaculately restored home that purchasers would be falling over themselves to buy.

He opened the pale grey-green front door, deactivated the essential CCTV and burglar alarm that was sadly all too necessary, even in supposedly genteel Bath, and made his way through into the kitchen. Sparkling stainless-steel appliances were softened by the lustrous cherrywood of the units, built square and no-nonsense and chunky with outsize bun handles and topped with a high-gloss work surface. He pulled open the refrigerator, took out a bottle of Tiger beer and sat down on a chrome bar-stool at the island, swinging his legs casually as if to convince himself that he was relaxed and off duty. In fact, he was as tense as a piano wire.

He wondered about picking up the phone to Lisa, then remembered she was working at some motor show. It was a

pity. He felt like taking off somewhere for the weekend, somewhere he might be able to forget the day's dreadful events. If he stayed at home he would be waiting for the phone to ring with news. Or he might be tempted to call the hospital, or even sneak in there to see how Colin was. He'd have to be inhuman not to care about the outcome. And what on earth would his wife think? He couldn't even call her to explain that he couldn't call her.

The trilling of the phone suddenly broke the silence. George didn't answer it in case it was Richard ordering him to come back to the office – he'd already switched his mobile off. He let the answerphone intervene, and was surprised to hear Lisa's voice cut through the silence. Her accent was tinged with a Gloucestershire burr that she always protested she hated, but George thought was charming. It summoned up images of milkmaids dropping curtsies. Or *Cider with Rosie*, which had always been one of his favourite books. But she thought she sounded like a Wurzel.

It brought a smile to his face now, to hear her.

'George! It's me. I just phoned your work and your secretary told me you'd walked out. She seemed to think you were upset about something. What's going on? Give me a ring as soon as you get this message—'

George crossed the room and picked up the handset.

'Hi. It's me.'

'George! What happened? Did you really walk out?'

'Yep.' He quickly filled her in on what had happened.

'What bastards!' She was suitably outraged. 'I don't blame you for walking.'

'No. And I'm tempted not to go back either.'

'Well, you can join the club. It's you and me both.' Lisa sounded defiant. 'I've just told Tony to stick it up his Prada jumper.'

'You're kidding?'

'No. I've had enough. I'm not putting up with it a minute

longer. I've had enough of dirty old men gawping at my chest and thinking I'm easy—'

George chuckled. He knew for a fact that wasn't the case. He should know. He'd been dating Lisa for nearly six months before they'd finally ended up in bed.

'Don't laugh at me. I mean it!' She sounded indignant. George could imagine her eyes sparking dangerously, her chin tilted in the air.

'I'm not laughing at you. I'm laughing because I know you'll have given them what they deserve,' he reassured her swiftly. 'And you're quite right not to put up with it. What are you doing now?'

'I'm still on the motorway. Heading back home. Stuck in the Friday-afternoon traffic.'

'Why don't you carry on and come straight here? We could go away for the weekend. Somewhere we can reflect on our rash behaviour. Sounds like we've both got some thinking to do.'

'That sounds great. I think I'd go mad if I had to stop at home all weekend.'

'Where do you fancy going?'

Lisa thought about it for a moment.

'The seaside. I'd like to go to the seaside.'

'Why not?'

'But I'll have to go home first. I haven't got any clothes with me.'

'Don't bother. I can lend you some stuff. You can sleep in one of my T-shirts. We can buy you some clothes in the morning.'

Lisa giggled. He loved her giggle. It was an elixir. A tonic. If you could bottle it and sell it, it would lift your mood quicker than any prescription.

'I'll borrow a pair of your boxers. I'll be with you as soon as I can.'

As soon as she finished speaking to George, Lisa put her foot down and swooped into the fast lane. She felt better already. It

was as if she and George were partners in crime, the pair of them sneaking off, skiving. Instead of turning off for Stratford, where she lived, she stayed on the motorway, grateful that now she was away from the outskirts of Birmingham, the traffic was less heavy. She could be in Bath in less than two hours.

While he was waiting for Lisa, George changed into jeans and a thick olive-green ribbed sweater. He ran his hand through his hair, inspecting it in the mirror. Had he been staying in Bath for the weekend, he would have taken a trip to the barber the next day – he kept it cropped fairly short nowadays, even though it was still thick, because he knew from his friends that once you hit your thirties, hair had a habit of suddenly thinning without you noticing, and the longer it was the worse it looked. So to preclude that ghastly eventuality he went with the regular precision cut, experimenting with his sideboards to ring the changes – long, short, pointy, blunt. He had a special razor for keeping them in trim. This weekend, however, he toyed with forgoing a shave as well as a haircut, going for the unkempt look. Wow, thought George. He was really rebelling.

Casting his appearance to one side, he swiftly packed a leather holdall, sticking in a couple of extra Fruit of the Loom T-shirts for Lisa to sleep in, then got out his road map of Great Britain to look for inspiration. It would be five by the time Lisa got to him, so if they wanted seaside, they'd have to step on it. He traced his finger along the coastline, until it finally came to rest in North Devon.

Mariscombe. He remembered it from his childhood, and he immediately felt a flutter of fond nostalgia. He'd gone there one summer, when he was about eight or nine. Not with his parents, for his mother wouldn't have been seen dead somewhere like Mariscombe. It was far too working class, full of caravans and string vests and chip shops. She wanted yachting types and delicatessens and tasteful pubs – Salcombe or

Lymington were more her scene. It was his uncle and aunt and his noisy brood of cousins that had taken him there, in their clapped-out old camper van, the summer it became clear to George his parents really weren't getting along. Up till then, holidays to him had meant gîtes in the Dordogne, thoroughly boring for a boy of eight who had to plough through plates of unspeakable innards mixed with bitter salad leaves while his parents bumbled their appreciation.

So Mariscombe, with its miles of golden sand, the diet of chips and ice cream and the occasional crab sandwich, had been bliss. They'd pitched their three sagging, smelly tents on a gloriously unspoilt cliffside campsite. The farmer who owned it had gone round all the pitches on his bike each morning, bringing fresh eggs and foaming milk. George had put on weight that week, gorging himself on the cooked breakfasts rustled up on the calor gas stove, cream teas, packets of crisps and 99s. A real bucket-and-spade holiday, with sandcastles and rock pools and fishing nets. Even the downside – sunburn and jellyfish and torrential rain – hadn't marred his memory.

Of course, his holidays now were more sophisticated – city breaks in Prague or Budapest, scuba-diving in Egypt, skiing in Canada. Resorts like Mariscombe held few charms for a sophisticated man about town. But seeing it now on the map jogged his memory about an article he had read in the *Sunday Times* only a few weeks ago. An article that was pinpointing property hot spots, predicting what was on the rise, and Mariscombe had been top of their list for holiday investment.

'Surfers' paradise and guaranteed family fun, the article had proclaimed. *'Mariscombe is rapidly shedding its kiss-me-quick image; the old Victorian guest houses are being transformed into chic apartment blocks, presumably by those developers who can't afford Sandbanks or Rock. It's hot, it's hip. Get in now before it's too late. Mariscombe is next on the map.'*

In his head, George was an entrepreneurial property developer with interesting projects dotted all over the

countryside. In reality all he had was the house in Bath – although to say ‘all’ was to diminish its worth, which was probably tipping three quarters of a million. Not a bad return on his money. Nevertheless, he liked to keep his eye on which areas of the countryside were flourishing, just in case he one day decided to throw caution to the wind and extend his mortgage.

The article about Mariscombe had intrigued him. And there was no doubt it was the perfect place for him and Lisa to blow the cobwebs away. He imagined long, bracing walks along the beach and the clifftops, scrumptious cream teas by a roaring log fire in some cosy tearoom, a gourmet supper somewhere followed by sweet dreams in a luxurious four-poster bed . . .

Suddenly the doorbell broke his reverie. Lisa was on the step – he could see her red Mazda MX5 double-parked outside.

George opened the door with a wide smile.

Lisa threw her arms round his neck.

‘It’s so good to see you. I want to get away. Shall we go in my car? I filled up with petrol.’

‘Sure. But you better let me drive. You must be exhausted.’

He picked up his bag, his Australian wax jacket with the nubuck collar and cuffs, punched the code into his security system and led the way out. Lisa followed him.

‘So where are we going?’

‘Mariscombe. I used to go there when I was a kid. I read an article in the *Sunday Times* about it the other day. They predicted it as the Next Big Thing. Property hot spot.’ He chucked the map at her. ‘It’s on the North Devon coast. It’ll only take us a couple of hours to get there, with the wind behind us.’

‘Do we need to book a hotel?’

‘No. Let’s just wing it. There’s bound to be places to stay. We’ll take pot luck when we get there.’

He turned the key in the ignition, suddenly excited. This felt like a real adventure, and the fact that they had both

walked off their jobs that afternoon gave it an extra frisson. Next to him, Lisa pulled her seat belt across her chest.

‘Drive on!’ she commanded. ‘I’ll put on the Beach Boys.’

‘It’s not exactly California Dreamin’,’ warned George. ‘It’s the British seaside in February.’

‘I don’t care,’ said Lisa. ‘Anyway, that was the Mamas and Papas.’

George took it steady on the motorway. Rain began in earnest as they inched past Bristol in the rush-hour traffic. By the time they drove down the hill into Mariscombe two hours later, the wind was howling, the rain was lashing the windows and neither of them could see a thing.

‘We’ll try the Esplanade first,’ decided George. ‘There’s loads of hotels along there.’

They crawled past the houses that lined the seafront, peering to see if there was a vacancy, but there wasn’t a glimmer of welcome anywhere.

‘I suppose it is off season.’ George upped the speed of the windscreen wipers but it had no effect; the rain was coming down faster than the blades could cope with. They were now heading up the steep, winding hill that led from the centre of the village to Higher Mariscombe. George knew from memory that there was a treacherous drop to their left-hand side, and strained his eyes to ensure they didn’t leave the road.

‘There!’

Lisa pointed excitedly to a white sign with ‘The Rocks’ badly painted on it, and underneath another notice proclaiming ‘Vacancies’. George drew to a halt and they peered out of the window in vain.

‘How do we know what it’s like?’

As they hesitated, the rain redoubled its efforts. Lisa shrugged.

‘I really don’t care. Let’s go for it. It’s either that or sleep in the car park.’

George pointed his car cautiously up the vertical drive.
‘Are you sure? It doesn’t exactly scream Rocco Forte.’
‘How bad can it be?’

George didn’t answer. The trio of gnomes peeping out from behind the gatepost said it all.

The car park of The Rocks was empty, apart from an ancient Peugeot presumably belonging to the owner. The hotel loomed in front of them, a large Victorian house, grey and forbidding, but a light gave them a glimmer of hope. They stood in the porch, unable to see through the frosted glass, and rang the old-fashioned brass bell.

‘It’s like a Hammer Horror movie,’ whispered Lisa, clinging to George’s hand. ‘And nobody knows we’re here. We might never be heard of again.’

‘Come on. Let’s drive back to Exeter. We’ll get the number of a decent hotel. We can phone ahead and book a room—’

‘Too late. There’s someone coming.’

A shadow had indeed appeared through the glass and someone fumbled at the locks before flinging open the door triumphantly.

‘There we go. Sorry, ducks. Didn’t hear you. I had the telly turned up that loud to drown out the sound of the rain. Come in, come in – you’ll catch your deaths.’

Lisa and George exchanged dubious glances. Their prospective hostess loomed in the doorway, nearly six foot tall and three foot wide, a rose-pink quilted dressing gown wrapped round her and held in place with a mismatched towelling belt. Her iron-grey hair was enveloped in a net which met an enormous pair of spectacles halfway down her forehead. Her grin was welcoming; her tombstone teeth leaned at alarming angles.

‘Are you . . . open?’ faltered Lisa, hoping fervently the answer would be ‘no’ and they could revert to plan B.

‘My dear, I’m always open. Nearly everyone else closes after the Christmas break till Easter, but not me. No skin off my

nose. I'm here anyway, after all. No point in turning good custom away. What do you want, a double room for the night? Or two?

'Um, just the one.'

'Come on in. I'm Mrs Websdale. But you can call me Webby. Everyone does.'

She ushered them inside. George and Lisa followed uncertainly in her wake. The entrance hall was cavernous, the floor covered in acres of brown and orange patterned carpet, the elaborate wallpaper barely visible behind items that represented a lifetime of collecting: stuffed fish in glass cases, a shelf full of reproduction Victorian dolls staring blankly into space, a display of silk fans, all illuminated by the stingy glow of some heavily tasselled wall lights. In one corner stood a large, ugly grandfather clock; in the other a suit of armour.

'It's the Addams Family,' whispered Lisa.

'Freaky.' George shuddered. He couldn't cope with kitsch that wasn't tongue in cheek.

'I always keep the two main bedrooms made up, in case of passing trade,' Mrs Websdale informed them cheerily as she climbed the stairs. 'I'll give you the one with the best view.'

She stopped outside a door with a white plastic number three stuck on and threw it open dramatically. The room was extremely large, but somehow made to feel small because of the overpowering decor. What really frightened George was that someone had given it considerable thought. The wallpaper was green and pink embossed stripes up to dado rail height, above which was a profusion of flowers which matched the curtains. The buttoned Dralon headboard was green and the eiderdown pink, trimmed with some of the material left over from making the curtains. The attempt to coordinate everything stopped at floor level, however, as the carpet matched the one in the hallway, clashing swirls of brown and orange. The furniture was large, heavy and ugly – salerooms all over the country were groaning with similar items that never got a bid.

‘The bathroom to this room isn’t technically en suite, which is why I can’t charge as much as some of these places that’ll give you a room no bigger than a shoebox.’ Mrs Websdale tutted. ‘The tourist board have got funny ideas. But, anyway, it won’t matter to you because there’s no one here tonight to share with, so you’ll have it all to yourself. Unless you want me to come and scrub your back.’

She winked at George and gurgled with laughter as she led them further down the corridor to a door. An enamel sign depicting a lady reclining in a mound of bubbles hinted that this was the bathroom. Firmly in line with the house colour scheme, the suite was pink, the carpet tiles on the floor green. At the bottom of the bath lurked a plastic mat, and clinging on to the surface with suction cups was a blow-up pillow. A curling bar of Wright’s coal tar lay in the soap dish. There was a shagpile bath mat in luminous shrimp.

‘There’s constant hot water so feel free to have a bath each, deep as you like. And help yourself to bubbles.’

Mrs Websdale proudly held up a supersize bottle of super-market own brand bubble bath.

‘Lovely,’ said Lisa faintly.

She escorted them back to their room. Moments later the door was shut behind them, and George and Lisa looked at each other in disbelief.

‘Don’t say I don’t spoil you.’

Lisa grinned.

‘Listen, I’m so exhausted I could sleep on a clothes line.’

‘I’m sorry it’s so awful. We should have carried on looking. Or perhaps we should have just stayed at my place.’

Lisa put her bag on the bed and looked round the room.

‘Don’t be silly. I’ve stayed in worse places than this.’

George looked horrified.

‘Really?’

‘You should see some of the dumps they put us up in at exhibitions. At least this is clean.’

George looked at the white and gold melamine dressing table and shuddered. Lisa thumped him on the arm.

‘You are such a snob.’

There was a tap at the door and Mrs Websdale popped her head round.

‘I don’t suppose you’ve eaten, have you?’

‘We thought we might pop out. We wondered if you could recommend somewhere local. Perhaps a fish restaurant?’

George felt certain that, given Mariscombe’s meteoric rise, the equivalent of Rick Stein’s would be only five minutes’ drive away. Mrs Websdale pursed her lips thoughtfully, as if mentally perusing the suitability of several local Michelin-starred eateries, before delivering her verdict.

‘There’ll only be the Mariscombe Arms open. But they stop serving at half eight in winter, and to be honest from what I’ve heard the cooking’s not up to much at this time of year. The chef goes off to his villa in Spain come New Year. Or there’s the Jolly Roger but Friday night’s karaoke night and I don’t think that’s quite what you’re after, somehow.’

‘No . . .’

‘I don’t mind. I love karaoke.’ Lisa was always one to look on the bright side, but George looked more than alarmed at the prospect. Mrs Websdale smiled at him kindly.

‘Don’t worry. I can do you a bit of supper if you like. I don’t usually do evening meals but I’ve got a couple of chops left over.’ She patted George on the arm reassuringly. ‘Come down to the dining room when you’ve freshened up. I’ll make sure you don’t go hungry.’

The door shut behind her before they could demur. George picked up his bag with determination.

‘Right. Let’s just get in the car and go.’

‘We can’t offend her. She’s been so sweet.’

‘We can pretend we’ve had an urgent phone call.’

‘It’s not going to kill you to stay here. Just for one night. We can find somewhere extra special tomorrow. I’m too tired to go and find somewhere else now. And I’m ravenous.’

‘You’re not seriously going to eat her chops?’

‘Yes, I am. You can stay up here and starve if you want to.’

George relented, putting his bag back on the bed.

‘You’re a hard woman.’

‘No, I’m not. I’m a tired and hungry woman who doesn’t want to hurt an old lady’s feelings. So come on.’ Lisa poked him mischievously in the ribs. ‘Freshen up.’

The dining room was spectacularly dreary. And brown. Full-length brown velvet curtains fell to a brown carpet, and heavy brown furniture loomed in every ill-lit corner. More glass cases full of truculent fish were interspersed with amateurish seascapes and rather incongruous prints of African wildlife. The air hung thick with the smell of tinned soup, which duly arrived in mock earthenware tureens decorated with smiling root vegetables.

‘There.’ Mrs Websdale stood back proudly, then peeled the cling film off a plate of white sliced bread and butter. ‘Lovely minestrone. That should warm you through. Would you like a nice sherry to go with it?’

George bit back the urge to reply that yes, a crisp, dry Monzanilla would be perfect, as it was obvious that his and Webby’s idea of a nice sherry were two different things.

Lisa beamed at her, anxious to avert an incident.

‘Actually, Mrs Websdale, what I’d really love is a nice cuppa.’

‘Webby, remember.’

‘Webby.’

‘And I only do Typhoo. None of your herbal rubbish.’

‘Good thing too,’ Lisa assured her. ‘Just a splash of milk and two sugars, please.’

‘Strong and sweet, eh? Like your man?’

Webby waddled off, cackling. George raised his eyes to the ceiling, then wished he hadn’t. It was Artexed to within an inch of its life, with a monstrous false ceiling rose from which hung a heavy wooden chandelier with red tasselled lampshades.

‘Where are the taste police when you need them?’

Lisa kicked him under the table.

‘Get real, George. You’ve been in Bath too long. You can’t be surrounded by perfection all your life.’

‘I don’t see why not. You do realize there are proper encaustic tiles under this ghastly carpet?’

‘For heaven’s sake, just relax. We can find somewhere else tomorrow.’

George ploughed his way reluctantly through the lukewarm soup, then tackled the subsequent pork chops, boiled potatoes, frozen peas and puddles of Bisto as best he could. Lisa was beside herself with mirth. George, who was an inveterate foodie and had never touched a gravy granule in his life, tried not to mind that he was having the mickey taken out of him.

Webby cleared the plates away.

‘The best I can do for dessert is tinned fruit cocktail.’

‘My favourite,’ said Lisa, before George could decline.

Moments later two metal bowls brimming with squares of peach, pineapple and the odd cherry were deposited in front of them, along with an aerosol can. George looked askance as Lisa picked it up and squirted a whirl of cream on to her fruit with a flourish.

‘For heaven’s sake, don’t look so po-faced.’ She brandished the can playfully. ‘Do you think she’d notice if we took this to bed with us?’

She gave her best dirty chuckle and George managed a smile, despite himself. Although he didn’t show it, he was grateful for Lisa’s chirpy optimism. She’d managed to make him see the funny side of their situation, and he knew he deserved it when she teased him. She was right, after all. He did live in a perfect little world of his own making. He needed bringing down to earth from time to time, and she was just the girl to do it. He watched her spooning the fruit cocktail into her mouth, as if it was the finest selection of fresh tropical fruits prepared by a top chef. She ran her tongue over her bottom lip, licking away the last of the cream, and George felt his heart beat a little faster.

He put his hand over hers.

‘Come on,’ he said. ‘Let’s go and crash.’

She put down her spoon.

‘Good idea,’ she said. ‘I’m exhausted. It’s been a crazy day.’

Ten minutes later, he cuddled her to him. She was deliciously warm and snug. She smelt gorgeous, of the cocoa butter body cream she rubbed on religiously every night. He could feel her skin through his T-shirt. He ran his hand up her inner thigh, stroking her gently.

‘How exhausted are you, exactly?’ he whispered.