

Acknowledgements

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Chapter One



Nel's arm was beginning to ache. The mistletoe, heaped about her feet, was selling well. She'd already run out of the bunches she had tied together with red ribbon and was now selling the larger Stately-Home-size boughs, which had been too thick to separate into smaller sprigs. It was one of these, held above her head in an encouraging way, that was proving a strain.

She was just about to replace it for a smaller sample of her wares when a man came towards her. She'd been faintly aware of him standing at the next stall, considering mulled wine syrup and the little bunches of dried flowers and herbs known to their creator as tussie-mussies. She had time to take in that he was tall, wore a navy blue overcoat and looked Cityish, when he put his hand on the mistletoe she was holding and kissed her.

She couldn't quite believe it was happening. People don't kiss strangers on the lips in full view of half the world; or, at least, they didn't kiss Nel. It was over in a moment, and yet the feel of his cool, firm lips on hers sent a strange feeling shooting down from the underwiring of her bra to her knees. It made her catch her breath and she felt as if she had flu – all swimmy in the head.

It was amazing how many people spotted that kiss.

Nel didn't usually sell things at the market – she didn't have time, she was always rushing around organising it. But this time, she was pinned down by her wares and at that moment it seemed every stallholder and every shopper had their eyes turned in her direction. She tried to pretend she wasn't blushing, took the coins he offered, handed him the bunch, and watched him walk away, relieved he didn't engage her in conversation or anything.

Her daughter skittered over, eyes sparkling. 'Oo-er,' she said in a way that Nel felt made everyone stare at her even more. 'Mum! Who was he? A bit tasty!'

Nel brushed a hand over her face, apparently getting the hair out of her eyes, but actually giving herself a moment to pull herself together. 'He was just buying mistletoe, Fleur. Now, how are you doing? Are you ready to take over for me here yet? I've been here since seven this morning and I have to speak to loads of people.' Was she still bright red, she wondered?

Fortunately Fleur had stopped looking at her mother and was searching her tight trousers and pale blue fleece for her mobile. 'I know, I know. In a min. I've just got to text Anna about something. We're supposed to be going out tonight.'

Fleur, eighteen, blonde and lovely, eventually unearthed a phone hardly bigger than a credit card and tapped away. Why someone who found writing the shortest essay such a Herculean task should prefer texting to phoning, Nel didn't understand. That was probably (her daughter had told her) because Nel thought you had to spell everything out: she didn't know the shorthand and hadn't heard of predictive text. Fleur's kindly if unintelligible explanation had been

delivered to Nel when she was attempting to remonstrate with Fleur about the size of her mobile phone bill. As often happened with Nel and her children, the roles got reversed and they ended up telling her things they felt she should know, and no parental remonstrance had gone on at all.

Lavender, who appropriately sold wheat bags and lavender-filled products, 'out of self-defence, because of my name', didn't leave her stall, but she waved and winked approvingly.

Sacha, who produced beauty creams and potions in a very small way and sold them in blue glass jars, gave her a thumbs-up sign.

The trouble with knowing everybody, Nel thought, was that it made you vulnerable to people keeping an eye on you. When she had first moved here, as a young and distraught widow, she had been glad of the concern and care of the small town, but it did have its down side. She could see Reg on his fruit and veg stall giving her a saucy look, too. Living in a small community was indeed a bit like living in a goldfish bowl, and Nel occasionally felt she was the only goldfish.

She stopped trying to sell mistletoe and cast her eye over the stalls that were ranged in a horseshoe shape on the fields in front of Hunstanton Manor. It looked lovely, the stalls full of Christmas fare. There was one selling poultry and game: huge bronze turkeys in all their glossy black plumage hung next to bunches of brightly feathered pheasants, ducks and geese. Further along, strings of sausages looped up between fat bouquets of fresh herbs decorated a stall selling organic pork. Then there were what Nel thought of as the 'dippy-hippy' stalls selling brightly marbled wrapping

paper, home-made candles, and nativity scenes modelled (she'd discovered after enquiry) out of wine bottles and plaster-soaked muslin, and then painted. The results were quite realistic, if somewhat sinister biblical figures.

Everyone was there, and for once, everyone had been happy with their appointed places. They all knew that this was the last market until after Christmas and were determined to appreciate it. Some of the stallholders, the ones who produced food, went to other markets as well, but few venues allowed non-food products and so for the crafts people, the Paradise Fields market here at Hunstanton was a valued outlet. And the variety of people and products made it very popular with visitors.

Simon, the man Nel's children referred to as her boyfriend, had also seen Nel selling the extra-large sprig of mistletoe. Simon and Nel had been going out in a gentle way for about six months, and even Nel had to admit he was not particularly exciting, but at least he did little jobs for her, the sort that Nel found awkward and time-consuming, like cleaning out the gutters. Now, she spotted him negotiating the crowds, and could tell he was annoyed.

'Who was he then?' he demanded.

'Hello, Simon. How are you? I didn't know you were going to be here today.' Seeing that he wanted an answer, she added, 'He was just a man buying mistletoe. The kiss was only Christmas spirit. Look!' She shook her apron, the pocket of which was full of money. 'I've sold loads.'

'And you're going to give all the takings to Sam, I suppose?'

'Well, he did risk his life cutting it down off the tree. It's only fair that he should have the money.' Nel always stuck up for her eldest son, who had been addicted to tree-climbing since childhood and now climbed mountains as well.

'Mm. If stealing apples is scrumping, what's the word for stealing mistletoe?'

Ignoring the question, she twinkled up at him, 'Be a love and buy me a burger. They're organic beef and the smell of them cooking has been driving me mad. I want mayonnaise and a gherkin, and just a smear of ketchup. Please! I'm starving. I didn't have time for breakfast and it's nearly two.'

Simon returned her look gravely. 'I checked your tyres and they're all right now.'

'You're an angel. Or a Father Christmas, one of those.' She pulled down his head and kissed him, fleetingly aware that she felt nothing except his smooth cheek under her lips. 'Now, the burger?'

He frowned. 'I'm not sure they're hygienic. They're cooked in the open, they're probably loaded with salmonella.' His distaste was evident in the involuntary curl of his lip and the anxious glint in his eye.

Nel's feeling of warmth towards him dimmed. 'That farm sells meat at all the farmers' markets. They can't do that unless they have food-handling certificates. So, are you going to let me die of hunger?'

He shrugged and walked away.

Vivian had obviously dressed up specially. She was a physiotherapist and carried herself beautifully. As she came over, she looked magnificent with her flame-coloured hair and dramatic velvet cloak. Although a bit younger than Nel, she was her closest friend, and the

reason Nel and the children had moved to the Cotswolds when her husband died.

Now, Vivian tucked a strand of hair behind an ear. 'I've sold the last of my honey, and almost all my beeswax and turpentine polish. People buy loads of it at Christmas. Does that mean it's the only time they clean their houses?'

'Personally speaking, yes,' said Nel, who had several jars of Vivian's home-made polish, mostly unopened, at home. 'It smells heavenly, though.'

'I know,' said Vivian. 'And that is not a coincidence. I've been talking to Sacha about providing her with beeswax for her lip balm, but I don't think I could ever get it pure enough. Everything has to be perfect for her stuff.'

'It's why it's so good,' said Nel, relieved that her friend appeared to have been looking the other way when she was swooped on from on high.

Her relief was shortlived. Vivian peered suspiciously at her. 'Have you been holding out on me? Who was that man who kissed you? You've been keeping him dark.'

'No, I haven't. He's a complete stranger and he bought some mistletoe. As have plenty of other people here today.'

'Did everyone who bought mistletoe kiss you?'

'Lots did. It's an occupational hazard. Although I suppose it's mostly been people I know, who would have kissed me anyway. It's no big deal.'

Vivian, who enjoyed an active and varied love life, disapproved of Nel's casual attitude. 'You should have maximised your opportunity. He was the most gorgeous man I've seen in weeks.'

‘And I have a boyfriend, as you very well know.’

‘Simon, yes.’ Vivian didn’t approve of Simon, and although she never said so, Nel was perfectly aware of the fact. ‘Oh well,’ she went on, ‘he must be a commuter, down for Christmas. Or staying with his parents, possibly. He looks young enough to still have parents. Oh, sorry, Nel.’

‘It’s okay, mine died decades ago. But I am still young enough to have them.’

‘What d’you reckon?’ said Vivian. ‘Has he hired a cottage to spend Christmas in the Cotswolds with friends? He was on his own, so probably not with a girlfriend.’

‘I have no idea and couldn’t possibly speculate!’ Nel said defensively.

‘Well, I certainly haven’t seen him before, I would have remembered.’

Actually, Nel had seen him before, playing squash at the leisure centre. She had been going home from Weight Watchers on Monday and had looked into the squash courts to see if her son was there, possibly wanting a lift. Instead of a couple of sweaty teenagers, she had seen this stranger, hammering ten bells out of a large blond man. They were both galumphing about the court like young bulls, shoes squeaking, squash balls ricocheting bullet-like around the court. At the time Nel had wondered if this sort of squash would be better for losing weight than the low-cal kind she occasionally made herself drink instead of wine. But as her hand-eye co-ordination was atrocious, it probably wasn’t a great idea – although it might be more fun than queuing for hours each week to find that, in spite of all her efforts, she had stayed the same weight

as last week, and was still on the plump side of size fourteen.

She didn't say any of this to Vivian, who disapproved of dieting even more than she disapproved of Simon. 'Well, when you've found out everything about him, including his collar size, let me know, will you?'

Vivian laughed. Her ability to extract huge quantities of information about people, men in particular, in a very short space of time, was a skill she had been honing for years.

Harry, Nel's younger son, who looked so like his father it was almost uncanny, arrived, panting slightly. Like Sam, he was down from university for Christmas. 'Hey, Mum – Oh, hi, Viv – Mum, I've just overheard something that might interest you.'

'Oh?' asked Vivian. 'About your mother's bit on the side?'

Harry frowned in bemusement. 'What? No! That friend of yours who's on the council?'

'Fenella, yes?'

'She was talking to a woman while they were picking over the apples – God! People are so fussy! There I was with my paper bag open and ready and they were looking at each apple as if they might have worms in them.'

'Well, they might,' said Nel, 'but what did you overhear?'

'Apparently there's a planning meeting. And they mentioned Paradise Fields – that was when I pricked my ears up. Something to do with planning permission. Anyway, it's tonight. I asked Fenella and she said anyone could go. I said you might be interested, and she said, yes, she thought you might be. So are you?'

Nel and Vivian both frowned, trying to cut their way through this confused report. 'You didn't pick up any other bits of information, did you?' asked Nel. 'I mean, I don't understand. The hospice owns these fields. We've been using them for years. I really don't think anyone could be building on them.'

'Is Fenella still here?' asked Vivian, looking about her. 'We could ask.'

Harry shook his head, his floppy brown hair landing in his eyes. 'No. She said she had to rush. I told her I'd tell you about the meeting. She said ring her to find out the time. She couldn't remember offhand.'

'Oh God! It sounds ominous!' said Nel. She was mystified and rather concerned. 'But thank you for telling us, and for finding out. I'm sure there isn't a problem, but we'd better check. Are you busy this evening, Viv?'

Vivian nodded. 'Hot date. New man. Could be fun.'

Nel sighed. 'OK, well, I'll tell you if I discover anything exciting.'

'Oh yes. I'd hate to miss out. I wonder if Simon knows anything? Being an estate agent, he might well.'

'We could ask him,' said Nel.

'No, thank you.'

Anxious to get off the subject of Simon before Viv could imply yet again that Nel could do better for herself, Nel quickly changed the subject. 'So, what are you doing for Christmas, Viv? I don't think I've asked you.'

'Going to my aunt in the Highlands. It'll be roaring fires, whisky galore, and long walks. I might take the hot date, if he's up for it. What about you guys?'

'The same old same old, I expect.' Nel smiled to

cover the dread the word held for her. She liked the Christmas carols she sang with the hospice choir, she liked fairy lights and she liked – no, loved the Christmas farmers’ market where they now stood. But since her husband had died, all other pleasure in Christmas was feigned. She was so good at pretending, she doubted even her children knew how she really felt about it.

‘What, at yours, with Simon and your cousin and her husband? What about the kids? Are they spending it with you?’

Nel knew perfectly well that soon the children would want to spend Christmas with their various love interests, but so far, they hadn’t said so. Nel didn’t know if this would make it better or worse. If they weren’t around, she could go away too. Perhaps if she weren’t at home, the space by the fireside, unmentioned but always there, would be less obvious.

‘Simon’s going to his mother’s, but I think all mine will be there,’ she told Viv. ‘I’m a bit worried about your goddaughter, though. She’s got this new boyfriend. He’s from London.’

Vivian laughed. ‘It doesn’t mean he’s a rapist, you know. London is really quite civilised these days. They have policemen and everything.’

Nel made a face. ‘They met in a club. It’s the first time she’s gone out with anyone whose mother I don’t know. Or, if I don’t know her myself, I always know someone who does. It’s a growing-up experience.’

‘What? For Fleur?’

‘No, for me. Oh good, here’s my burger.’

‘Hi, Simon,’ said Vivian. ‘I’d better go back. I left your Sam in charge of my stall,’ she said, turning back to

Nel. 'If I leave him to get bored, he might take the money and buy drugs with it.'

Nel laughed as she looked across at her son, persuading someone who obviously did not want them to buy a pair of beeswax candles.

Simon looked down at Nel. 'I don't understand you,' he said, pretending to take offence. 'You get huffy if I suggest the boys shouldn't put their feet on the sofa when they're wearing shoes, but Vivian accuses Sam of theft and illicit substance abuse, and you don't bat an eyelid.'

Nel smiled at him, to acknowledge he was joking. 'Have you smelt their feet without shoes?' The truth was often disguised as a joke, and had been this time, but she didn't want this conversation now, so she bit into her burger. The mayonnaise oozed delightfully. 'This is so good! It may be the most delicious thing I've ever eaten, and you are a hero for bringing it to me. And you got yourself one. Good choice! Have a bite.' Ensuring his mouth was full and he was therefore unable to speak, she went on, 'But I'm glad Sam's around. I'll ask him to mind the shop for me while I have a last gallop round the stalls. I still haven't done all my Christmas shopping, and I've got to break it to people that there's a mountain of red tape to go through when we go official. Fleur's obviously gone off somewhere, and God knows where Harry's got to. Oh bugger! That'll never come off.'

A large gloop of ketchup-tinted mayonnaise had landed on the front of her waxed jacket. Muttering and scooping it up with her finger, out of the corner of her eye she caught sight of the man who had kissed her. He was holding his mistletoe bough as if it was a major

embarrassment, watching her lick off the mayonnaise. He smiled. Nel had no choice but to smile back; to appear standoffish now would just make her look even more ridiculous than she felt. After she smiled, she blushed. Oh for a tenth of Fleur's confidence with boys, she thought. Not that he was a boy, exactly.

'Here.' Simon handed her a handkerchief. 'Why do you have to make such a mess?'

Nel wiped her finger and then started on her coat, scrubbing at the stain. 'I don't do it on purpose. But it's an old coat, it's no big deal.'

'You'll have to have it dry-cleaned,' said Simon. 'You really should be more careful.'

Nel was about to say that it was impossible to eat a burger without the contents going everywhere when she noticed that he was halfway through his, and not a drop of anything had gone anywhere but in his mouth. 'Would you like me to wash your hanky for you?'

'No, thanks. I don't want it pink.'

A little offended, but trying not to show it, Nel tucked Simon's handkerchief back into his pocket. 'Thank you for feeding me, Simon.' Then she stuffed the rest of the burger into her mouth.

'I could do it again. Come for a meal with me tonight? There's a new place opened, I hear it's really good.'

Nel chewed hurriedly. 'It sounds lovely, but I'm going to be exhausted. I think I'd rather just slob out in front of the telly. When I've finished here I've got to deliver my local Christmas cards. That takes for ever.' She didn't mention the meeting. He would want to come with her, and it would make everything more complicated.

'You could just put a stamp on them, you know.'

'I know, but it's a chance to catch up with people.'

I'm always so busy when we're setting up, I don't get time to chat. There are bound to be things they want to ask me about the changes we need to bring things up to standard and become a properly recognised market.'

'That'll mean a lot of work. Is it really worth it?'

Nel took a deep breath, swallowing her irritation. 'There are grants we could apply for, websites to go on, advertising ourselves. As an official farmers' market, we'd get far more publicity, far more people. Fenella thinks that if I present a proper plan to the council, tell them how everyone will be following all the rules, having the right scales, stuff like that, they'd go for it. The more stalls we have, the more money the hospice gets in rent.'

'Just because Fenella works for the council, it doesn't mean she knows everything,' Simon replied huffily. He didn't really like Nel having sources of information other than him. 'And do we really want all the extra traffic?'

'It's only going to be once a month to start with!'

'That's hardly viable, financially.'

'Oh Simon, stop being so cheerful all the time. It's really wearing!'

Simon laughed, acknowledging her teasing. 'I just think upgrading this market into a properly recognised farmers' market will be a lot of work, and no proper money. Now your children have practically left home, you could get a proper job.'

Nel didn't want a proper job. Mark's insurance had left them adequately provided for and she enjoyed working at what interested her and not having a career. As they'd had this conversation many times and now wasn't the time to have it again, she just smiled.

He regarded her crossly, annoyed at his inability to interest her in earning money. 'And you could have just brought your Christmas cards with you and delivered them now.'

In fact Nel had intended to do just that, but there'd been so much on her mind when she'd rushed out into the pre-dawn that they'd got left on the hall table. 'I said, I need to talk to people. And organising the market will be a lot of work, but it's very worthwhile, and could be huge fun.' She frowned as the thought of planning permission on Paradise Fields floated into her consciousness. Surely the hospice owned them! Harry had probably got the wrong end of the stick. He was a lot more dreamy than the other two. 'But as I said, I want to talk to everyone.'

'You live for chat,' said Simon.

'I do, I do!' agreed Nel. 'What better motive in life is there? And here's someone who needs mistletoe. Hey, Adrian! Buy some of this for your wife. This big bit would look lovely in your hall.'

'We have home-grown mistletoe at the farm, Nel.' Adrian Stewart farmed a few miles away from the town. Nel knew him because she used to work for his wife in her catering business.

'I'm sure, but I bet you just leave it on the trees. It's no good if you don't bring it into the house. No one will kiss you in the middle of a ploughed field.'

Adrian laughed and put his hand in his pocket. 'How much will you sting me for, then?'

'You decide what it's worth. Here's a nice big bunch. Let's say a pound. It's for a good cause.'

'I thought you said Sam was getting the money,' said Simon.

‘Sam is a good cause. Thank you, Adrian. Give Karen my love. I’m planning to pop over later with my Christmas card.’

Adrian kissed Nel’s cheek. ‘She’ll be pleased to see you. She was struggling with a Christmas wreath last time I saw her.’

‘Oh, I’d love to help her with that! In fact, next year, if there is a next year for the market, I might make them. They’re such fun to do.’

Adrian picked up his mistletoe. ‘For you perhaps. Now I’ve got to carry this all round Tesco’s.’

Nel took it from him. ‘I’ll bring it round with the card.’

‘If you didn’t spend so much time doing favours for people, you’d have more time to go out with me,’ said Simon, who never quite understood her ability to be so friendly with everybody.

‘I love going out with you, Simon. You know that.’ She took a breath. ‘Look, why don’t you come over to me this evening? I’ll cook us something – or better still, buy some fish and chips – and we can rent a video. Have a bottle of wine.’ This invitation took a bit of effort to make. Simon didn’t really understand the concept of ‘slobbing out’, and Nel still felt she had to tidy the house before his visits. Still, with luck the meeting wouldn’t go on too long, and she’d have time.

‘Are you allowed fish and chips on your diet, Nel?’

‘It’s Christmas! Or nearly. Do you want to come or not?’

‘Actually, I’ve got things of my own I should sort out. I’ll take you out for Sunday lunch tomorrow, instead.’

‘Lovely. Somewhere not too fattening, please.’

‘I thought you said it was Christmas.’

'It is and it isn't,' said Nel, wondering if Simon would ever understand about dieting, or if, like slobbering out, it was beyond him. Extremely fit himself, and able to eat anything, he just thought people were overweight because they ate too much. Only people who suffered from it realised there was more to it than that. Seeing someone she knew turn away from the cheese stall, which sold among other products a local cheese known affectionately as Tom's Old Socks, she hailed him.

'Here, Ted! Have you got your louverly mistletoe yet? Roll up, roll up, buy your mistletoe here.'

'Hi, Nel. Give me a sprig then. Keep the missus happy. Good market, eh?'

'Excellent. But it should be even better next year, when we're official.'

'So we don't know what's going to happen to the old place then?' He indicated the house, rambling and huge, which overlooked the fields. 'I mean, Sir Gerald's heir and his wife may object to having a market on their front lawn, so to speak.'

'It's not their front lawn, and there's no reason why they should object. The market is a thing of beauty and a joy for ever. Anyway, if they were likely to be worried, they should have come back from America sooner.'

'So you haven't heard anything about what they're going to do with it, then?'

'No,' if you discounted the ugly rumour about the fields, a bit of gossip she was not going to spread. 'But there's no real reason why I should. I worked for Sir Gerald, but his son doesn't have to tell me his plans. I imagine it will cost a fortune to put back in order.'

'At least a million, I reckon. Apparently the old boy just moved from room to room, as each one began to leak.'

Nel sighed, finding the conversation depressing.
'Let's hope they've got plenty of money then.'

'Well, can't stand here gossiping, I've still got to buy the wife a present. Any hints, Nel?'

'Diamonds always work for me,' she said seriously.

He laughed, as he was supposed to. 'She'll be bloody lucky!'

'I hope she is!'

Chapter Two



‘Christmas is such a bloody nuisance sometimes!’ said Nel. ‘I mean, this is a fine time to find out that Paradise Fields has had planning permission granted on it for years. When there’s no one around to do anything about it! It’s unbelievable! I mean, I was sure the hospice owned those fields. God! The market has even been paying them rent for it! The thought of executive homes on them is unbearable!’

Vivian, who was just as upset as Nel but was being a little more philosophical about it, said, ‘That’s probably why they reapplied now, hoping everyone would be too busy to notice.’

Vivian was watching Nel decorate a Christmas cake with little figures Nel had moulded herself. Nel’s mind being elsewhere, she kept making mistakes. From above them came the distant throb of music which announced there was a boy home. She didn’t know which one, because although they constantly argued about the relative merits of breakbeat versus drum ‘n’ bass, she couldn’t distinguish between them.

‘So why is Christmas a nuisance? I thought you loved doing all this stuff,’ said Fleur, indicating the table covered with fondant icing and biscuit cutters.

‘Not the cake, sweetheart, I meant the fact that this has come up when every office in the country has closed

down for a fortnight. I stormed in to see the solicitors to find out who this Gideon Freebody person was, only to be told there wouldn't be anyone in the office until after the New Year.'

'Oh.' Fleur picked up a bit of scarlet icing that a moment before had been Father Christmas's hat, and began turning it into a rose.

'It's a pain,' said Vivian, 'but I shouldn't think it's serious. No one else is going to be doing anything either. Do we know who first applied for planning permission?'

Nel shook her head. 'I talked to Fenella about it and she said anyone can apply for planning permission anywhere. You could apply for it in my garden.'

'That's awful!'

'I know. I keep telling myself not to panic, but until I know what the situation is, I can't stop thinking about it. You should have seen the plans, Viv! They want to cram untold numbers of houses in. I couldn't believe it. I still can't. Although I feel I would have known if it was Hunstanton land. I worked for Sir Gerald for years! And Michael's away too.'

'Who's Michael?' asked Fleur, trying to find a suitable place for her life-size rose on a snow scene.

'Our finance man at the hospice. He's a lawyer or an accountant – something boring like that. He should know all about it.'

'It's not just that we'd lose everything we've done to make it possible for the children to have access to the river,' said Vivian to Fleur, 'it's such an important area for wildlife, too. I simply can't believe someone has planned to build on it without any of us knowing. God knows how many creatures would lose their habitat if it went through.'

Even after knowing her such a long time, Nel was still often surprised by Vivian. She combined enormous glamour with a fondness for earthy activities like keeping bees, rambling, and birdwatching on remote islands. It was because she didn't look as if she did anything more muddy than shopping that Nel tended to forget about her trips to the Galapagos, treks across the rainforest and nature conservation holidays.

'Have you noticed that we're just assuming the hospice doesn't own the land, after all?' said Nel. 'Why is that, do you think?'

Vivian shrugged. 'It's because it's sod's law that official people are always right. The bank has never made a mistake; you always are overdrawn. Do you mind if I put the kettle on?'

'No, I'd love a cup of tea, but I do wish you two would stop picking. I don't mind you eating the rejects, but that was a perfectly good snowman you've just put in your mouth, Fleur.'

'So, how's the diet going, Mum?' asked Fleur, bored with icing and water meadows. She picked up a gadget Nel hadn't seen before and proceeded to iron her hair with it. In a little while she was going to London on the coach. Knowing her mother was worried about this, she was spending some quality time with her and Vivian before she left.

'It doesn't go, it sticks. I lose a little, gain a little, and end up the same.'

'I don't know why you bother,' said Vivian. Tall and well built, with creamy skin and flashing green eyes, she ate what she liked.

'It's all right for you, you can afford not to think about what you put into your mouth. Which is just as well,'

Nel went on, 'considering how much sugar you've been eating.'

'But you're lovely, Nel. Isn't she, Fleur?'

'Mm. Cuddly and mummyish.'

Not really liking this epithet, Nel said, 'If I was six foot six, I would be the perfect weight. Sadly, or happily, even, I'm not. Besides, it's all about self-respect and keeping your standards up.'

'It's Simon, isn't it?' said Vivian. 'Because he's so skinny, he thinks you should be too.'

Nel blushed. 'No, it's for me!' She didn't want the subject of Simon to come up.

'Have you got cellulite then?' asked Fleur. She had stopped ironing her hair and was now smoothing her trousers over her hips. 'You know, orange-peel skin?'

'I know what cellulite is, Fleur, and I don't think orange peel quite covers it.'

'What do you mean?' asked Fleur and Vivian together.

Nel considered. 'Well, it's more, say – imagine if you had an ice-cream scoop, and lobbed gobbets of mashed potato at the top of my thighs. That'd give some idea of what we're talking about. Orange peel is just too small a scale.'

There was a horrified silence, and then Nel's daughter and friend both inspected her trouser-covered legs to check if this was true. Nel was slightly prone to exaggeration.

'What about your bum?' asked Fleur.

'One of life's small mercies,' said Nel, 'is that I can't see my bum. I expect that's covered with mashed potato, too.'

Vivian, having spotted nothing untoward beneath

Nel's black bootleg jeans, shook her head. 'What does Simon say about it? In my experience only paedophiles and closet gays like very skinny women. Real men like flesh.'

'Simon hasn't seen my flesh. At least, not that bit.'

'What?' Vivian shrieked in shocked amazement. 'You mean you haven't slept with him? But you've been going out for over six months!'

Fleur gulped, obviously undecided as to which was weirder, her mother having sex at all, or the thought of going out with someone that long and not sleeping with them.

'I know, but Simon's been very considerate, and doesn't push me.'

'That's not considerate! That's a low sex-drive!' Vivian, who wore a column of ex-engagement rings on her right hand, was the acknowledged expert.

'No, it's not. It's me. I just find it hard to think about sleeping with another man.'

'What do you mean, "another man"?' said Fleur brutally. 'Dad's been dead for years!'

'You mean there's been no one since Mark died?'

Nel shook her head. She was older than both of her companions: why did they make her feel so naïve?

'So, Mum, what's your number?'

'What do you mean? My telephone number? If you don't know that by now, poppet, you can't possibly go to London on the coach.'

'Derr! I mean your number, the number of men you've slept with.'

'Oh,' Nel murmured.

'Well,' Vivian admitted, 'I was trying to think of mine the other night, when I couldn't sleep, and realised I

could hardly count that far without a calculator. Yours can't be as bad as that.'

'Well, no.' In some ways, it was worse.

'So, what is it? More than the fingers of both hands?' Fleur persisted. Now she'd accepted her mother as being sexual, she wanted the details.

'You mean more than ten? Nope.'

'One hand then?' suggested Vivian.

'Not that either, really.'

'Then what do you mean?' They both spoke together.

She thought they might as well know the worst. 'Darlings, I can count my sexual partners on the *thumb* of one hand. I don't need my fingers at all.'

Both the other women needed a moment to work out what this meant.

'Oh, that's so sweet!' said Fleur.

'It's seriously strange,' said Vivian. 'And probably unhealthy. You should rectify the situation immediately.'

'Well, I'll tell Simon what you said.'

'Simon—' Vivian started to say, and although Fleur didn't so much as glance at her godmother, Nel knew they were both thinking the same thing. 'It doesn't have to be Simon,' Vivian finished.

'Yes, it does! We're going out! Who else would I sleep with?'

'What about that man who kissed you in the market?' said Fleur.

Nel blushed. She'd had exactly the same thought herself. 'I couldn't. I couldn't sleep with anyone I wasn't totally committed to.'

'Or fancied the pants off,' said Vivian.

'I don't fancy people like you do! I need love,

commitment, time, all those things. Anyway,' she added, wondering if she'd ever feel sufficiently passionate again, 'I'm not showing my mashed potato thighs to anyone. The moment my prospective partner saw them, he'd make his excuses and leave.'

'Nonsense! Physical appearance is only part of it,' said Vivian. 'Get yourself laid, girl!'

'Sometimes I wonder why I chose you to be godmother to my daughter.'

'Honestly, Mum, she's right. People take sex far too seriously.'

Nel's mother's heart sank. 'I hope you take it seriously, darling.'

'Don't start! I know all about sexually transmitted diseases and everything. And I have not slept with Jamie, so don't get your knickers in a twist.'

Nel, who'd had a hard job accepting that her daughter was no longer a virgin and indeed already had a higher number than she had herself, subsided. Accepting what you can't change was an important lesson in life, and Fleur seemed to have been put on earth to teach Nel *all* the important lessons in life.

'What you need is some sort of body-confidence-building course,' said Vivian.

'It sounds like the gym to me, and let's not go there!'

'Well, I never do,' agreed Vivian, 'far too boring. Although some of the men are cute. No, I meant some sort of therapy. "I am a beautiful woman and all men find me sexually attractive,"' she intoned.

'The trouble is, I'm not,' said Nel.

'Yes, you are!' Fleur and Vivian spoke as a team. 'You're lovely. Especially since you had highlights put in,' added Vivian.

'Look, I'm all right! I know I don't frighten the horses or anything, but no one is going to convince me that "all men" or even "any men" are going to find me sexually attractive at my age! Anyway, I found a grey hair the other day.'

'But that's not a problem with the highlights,' said Fleur. 'The grey doesn't show.'

'I know that, but it wasn't in my head!'

There was yet another horrified silence. Nel had never been one to shock people on purpose, but she seemed to be doing it a lot today.

'Age has nothing to do with it,' went on Vivian. 'Women can be sexy in their eighties.'

'Really?' This time it was Nel and Fleur sounding amazed.

'Of course, I don't know that from personal experience,' went on the thirtysomething Vivian, 'but I'm sure it's true. It comes from within.'

'There's no point in my going on a course, then,' said Nel.

'That is the point I am trying to make, sweetheart. If you *felt* you were the sexiest woman on earth, you would become her.'

'Would I?' The man who had kissed her batted back into her mind like a persistent moth on a lightbulb. She realised she had taken in the fact that he had very curly eyelashes as well as the ability to affect parts of her she'd forgotten she had.

'Well, it would make a difference,' said Vivian.

'I'll have a look in the bookshop and see what they have in the self-help line.' Vivian and Fleur were still regarding her in the way that made Nel feel nervous. They did tend to gang up on her rather. Any minute

now they'd insist on her having her colours done and she'd never be allowed to wear black again. To distract them, she said, 'What I really need, of course, is a book called *Fit for an Affaire*. You know, that would tell you what to do to your body if you're thinking about having sex again after years without it. I bet it doesn't exist.'

'Mm, I could write it, though,' said Vivian thoughtfully. 'I could think of all sorts of good tips. And not just the ones everyone else would think of.'

'What like?' asked Nel.

'You know, like putting leave-in conditioner on your pubic hair. Or in your case, a little hair dye.'

Nel ignored this dig. 'You don't do that, do you? Put conditioner on it?'

'Yes! And why not? We all spend a fortune on our other hair. Why not pay some attention—'

'Honestly!' Fleur, who by now had finished putting on her make-up, forced the zip of her bag closed and got up. 'Sometimes being with you two is like living in an episode of *Sex and the City*.'

'Yes, you may take my eye-shadow to London,' said Nel, who had spotted it in Fleur's stash, 'if you promise to ring me the moment you get there.'

'To London, or to Jamie's house?'

'Both. And—'

'I will. I'll phone, I'll be the perfect houseguest, and I will be careful in London, and I'm only going for two days. Sam's taking me to the bus.' Fleur laid her cool cheek against her mother's. 'Love you. See you later. Well, Christmas Eve.'

'I think it's time to move on to wine, now,' said Vivian when the sudden quiet told them the house was now empty except for themselves. 'Have you got any, or

shall I pop out for some? There's none in the rack.'

'There's an emergency "bogof" behind the cornflakes in that cupboard. I have to hide it, or the children keep taking it to parties. People say life is too short to drink cheap wine. I think it's too long not to. I'll just finish this, then I'll try to find a corkscrew.'

'The day I can't find a corkscrew, I'll become teetotal. It's in this drawer, isn't it?'

'It might be. It should be, but it doesn't necessarily follow,' Nel said doubtfully.

'It is!' Vivian was triumphant. 'So, are you and the kids going to eat all that cake?'

'Good Lord no! It's for the hospice Christmas raffle. Viv, you don't think there's anything different about Fleur, do you? Not extra jumpy, or anything?'

'No. She's lovely as ever, and getting more like you every day.'

As Nel and Fleur were constantly told how alike they were, and as neither of them could see it, she ignored this. 'It's just that Simon thought she was the other day, and asked me if she was on drugs.'

'I think it's highly unlikely.' Vivian paused for a minute. 'Are you just worrying because her boyfriend lives in London? They have drugs in Bristol, you know. Here, too, actually.'

'I know! It's just that round here, if anything happened, I could be with her in minutes.'

'Do the boys smoke dope or anything?'

'Probably, but they don't do it here, and don't let me know anything about it.'

'They're very protective.'

'Yes. But what about Fleur? You really don't think there's anything different about her?'

'No, I don't. I think Simon worries too much. And he makes you worry too, which is worse.'

'He means well.'

'I always think that's the worst thing anyone can say about anyone.'

Nel ate a misshapen holly leaf she didn't want. 'I didn't mean it in a bad way. Simon is a good man. He's concerned for my family.'

Vivian patted her friend's arm. 'I know. But I'm sure he's got lots of good points as well.'

Later, alone, Nel, waiting to wash the floor after the dogs had licked up all the spilt icing, thought about the water meadows.

She had taken the children there the first summer they arrived. It was the school holidays, and she was struggling to do something nice with them. Something normal.

There were children already playing, ranging from toddlers to school-age ones. Some of the older ones were organising the younger ones into a game of rounders. A group of mothers established round a bench smiled at Nel, encouraging her to place her rug next to theirs. They asked her if she was new to the area and clearly felt a little awkward when she told them she was a widow.

'Oh God,' said one. 'We've just spent the last half an hour complaining about our husbands and their irritating ways.'

'It's all right,' said Nel. 'My husband used to think it was helpful if he rinsed out his coffee mug, completely unaware that he hadn't washed the rim at all and there were drips all down the side.'

‘And now you’d do anything to have him leave drips down the sides of the mugs?’ said another woman.

‘And hear him snoring, and farting in bed, and all the other disgusting things that men do.’ Nel paused to regain her composure. ‘But it was still very irritating at the time.’

‘What did he do?’

‘Something in the City.’ Nel shrugged. ‘To be honest, I always wondered if the pressure of work had something to do with him getting ill.’

‘Oh? Was it a heart attack?’

Nel shook her head. ‘Cancer. It was very quick.’ Then she smiled, to keep back the tears which were threatening. ‘Very good insurance pay-off though!’

A woman, who perhaps saw how close to weeping Nel was, said, ‘So you can afford the chocolate therapy then?’

Nel nodded, biting her lip. ‘Unfortunately, my hips can’t.’

It had been a golden afternoon, a turning point for Nel and her family. From then on they felt embraced by the community, and while their grief was still omnipresent, it became more livable with.

At last the dogs, a trio of Cavalier King Charles spaniels, having made their ears disgustingly sticky, decided that there wasn’t anything left on the floor, and Nel started with her mop. Once she had washed one bit of floor, she decided she might as well do the rest. Simon had said he might pop round and ‘might’ often meant ‘would’, so Nel really had to make the necessary adjustments to the house. She would have preferred a quiet evening on her own.

She had told Simon early on that she couldn’t bear

the thought of a stepfather for her children, not while they were living at home. Her two sons were away most of the time, at university, or travelling, or just out, but she knew they would resent a man in their house, telling them what to do. Nel wasn't sure she liked the idea either. She might have to make changes, and she didn't want to. But Simon was kind, took her out for meals, and did the sort of jobs that were easier for taller, stronger people. Being on her own had made her very independent, and able to tackle most jobs around the house, but sometimes it was nice not to have to drag out the ladders, but simply hand over the appropriate tools instead.

Her cosy kitchen had been partly built by her (in that she had put the flat-packs together herself). She had also created a wine rack out of a crate, and a useful cubby-hole for cleaning materials out of a painted wooden box which the Girl Guides had thrown out. It was cluttered, but that was how she liked it. A twelve-year-old Fleur had stencilled flowers round the ceiling, but fortunately they had now faded to an acceptable dimness. When it was tidy, which was hardly ever, it was extremely attractive. In fact, people would never get out of it, which was trying if Nel was cooking for a dinner party, and didn't want to be watched. It was sunny in the mornings; and big enough for the family if everyone was in a good mood, and to entertain in (just about), provided people weren't too formal. Fortunately, Nel didn't know any formal people.

Through the door was the sitting room. It had two sofas, an armchair, a fireplace and a television: too much furniture really, but the lavish number of table lamps, pictures and books made it snug in winter. And in

summer, the window, which ran the width of the room and had a deep window-seat in front of it, filled the house with light. Of course, it too looked better when it wasn't littered with newspapers, drinks cans, games machines and pet hairs, but when she lit the candles on the mantelpiece (in spite of Simon pointing out her habit was turning the ceiling black), it gave Nel a lot of pleasure.

Upstairs there were four small bedrooms. Hers was almost full of the double bed she had shared with Mark, her husband. After his death, when the family had moved into the house, they had all shared it, clinging together in their grief, until, worn out with weeping, they decided it was time to get on with their lives.

The kitchen floor clean (at least where it showed), Nel moved on to the sitting room and hoovered up the worst of the dog hairs. She didn't really have the energy for entertaining, having spent all day icing Christmas cakes, but her last telephone conversation with Simon had ended badly. She had been annoyed with him for not reacting suitably when she rang him to tell him about planning permission being reapplied for on what she had always thought was land belonging to the hospice. He had said – rather sarcastically – that she could always lie down in front of the bulldozers. He had also made her worry, possibly unnecessarily, about her daughter. As Vivian had pointed out, Nel's worrying gene was quite well developed enough without him agitating it. But to assuage her guilt, if he did come round, she would offer to cook him a meal.

She dialled his number, hoping something had cropped up, and that he couldn't come. It hadn't.

'It's not going to be anything exotic,' Nel warned him,

trying to put him off. 'But the children are all out of the way, so we can have a bit of peace.'

'You should be able to have peace when they're home, Nel. It's a lovely house, or it would be if it wasn't so full of their clutter. They've all got bedrooms. And they're not really children any more.'

There was a silence. Even if Nel had wanted Simon to move in, her non-interventionist child-rearing methods would have put him off. Fleur was due to go to university next autumn, like her brothers, and Nel was aware she'd have to make a decision about him soon. But now didn't seem the right time. 'Children are always children to their parents, Simon. Think of your mother.'

He chuckled. 'I do, frequently. Now, what time do you want me to come round?'

'About eight. I'll make us a cheese soufflé.'

'A man could marry a girl for her cheese soufflé, you know.'

Nel laughed awkwardly and said goodbye. After her chat with Vivian and Fleur, while she'd been sweeping and plumping cushions, she'd thought about her moribund sex life, and whether, or how, she should revive it. But having a sex life was one thing, getting married quite another. Besides, Simon's mother would be the sort of mother-in-law bad comedians made jokes about.

Now she fetched kindling to light the fire, wishing there was a child around to do it for her. Nel was perfectly capable of lighting a fire, but long ago her children had decided they were better at it, and as she was hopeless at getting them to do chores, she was grateful for any they undertook for themselves.

When they first began to get to know each other,