

Divas

by
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Prologue

Carin Fitzgerald was sitting naked in front of her dressing-room mirror, cutting her hair. It fell in white-blond swatches over her shoulders, and as she cut, she shook each lock off contemptuously so it slid to the floor. She was using a big pair of scissors, impatient for it to be done, cutting it short to her head. Frédéric, her hair stylist – he was too expensive to be called a hairdresser - could tidy it up later today. But she couldn't wait for him. She wanted to do it now. Before she killed her husband.

She surveyed herself in the mirror. Her short fair hair, her translucent white skin, made her look eerie, otherworldly, especially with the gleam of intent in her pale blue eyes. The haircut suited her more than any she had ever had before. She'd always wanted to cut it this short, but when she was modelling, they'd told her no-one would book her with boy-cut hair. And then her husband, that tub of lard, had insisted that short hair was unfeminine. She rolled her eyes and stood up, pushing back the upholstered stool, wiping off stray hairs from her shoulders as she crossed the room, pulling on a white velvet robe as she went.

She loved white. It was so simple, so pure.

Double doors connected her dressing room to her bedroom. She took hold of the handles and pulled them open, enjoying, as always, the drama of the doors soundlessly sliding apart. Barefoot, she strode through her bedroom and into the huge bathroom, with the sunken bath that her husband no longer used and the wet-room, so large even his bulk could fit into it comfortably. She had chosen the Brazilian slate flooring and Carrara marble walls herself, but she might have it all stripped out later on today, just because she could. She might remodel the whole house.

She was smiling at the thought as she exited the bathroom.

Her husband was lying in his gigantic bed, snoring faintly. The heavy curtains had been drawn, but the perfect New York spring morning outside – bright sunlight, clear blue sky - had failed to wake him. She wasn't surprised. It took a

great deal to wake him these days, apparently. The room, large and opulent, was the complete opposite to hers: brocade hangings, swagged velvet curtains, Oriental carpets. Everything that would catch and hide the dust. Revolting. She had never spent any time in here, so she had had no interest in redecorating it to be calm and serene like her own suite, with its white carpeting and blond wood furniture, its elegantly simple, though extraordinarily expensive, Japanese lighting.

Beside the bed stood Joe Scutellaro, the day nurse. He looked nervous, which didn't surprise her. In fact, she preferred it: had Joe been nonchalant, that would have indicated he wasn't taking this whole business seriously enough. As it was, his quivering lower lip, the frequency with which he was clearing his throat, showed that he had fully taken in exactly what they were about to do.

"He's still asleep," he said unnecessarily of the snoring bulk in the bed.

"Good," she said. "Just as we planned. Is it ready?"

Joe reached down to the small metal trolley that stood next to the bed, and held up a syringe in a hand that was shaking a little. His dark eyes were wide with strain, his mouth taut, but he still looked very handsome. It had been his looks, as much as any other factor, that had got him the job as her husband's primary nurse. Italian men, in her opinion, should always be pretty. Some races – the Celtic ones particularly – could be more stocky, more brutal-looking, which she liked just as much, in a different way; but Italians only worked if they were pretty. She surveyed Joe's long lashes, his carefully-groomed dark curls, with great approval. Oh yes, it was definitely time to do this. She was tired of sneaking around, tired of pretending to be an ice queen so that her husband didn't pester her for sex because he thought she wasn't interested in the entire proceeding. She'd made sure he didn't suspect she had any passions at all, let alone the amount to which she was enjoying herself with most members of the household staff.

She preferred to have sex with men she employed. She always had.

"I'll do it," she said, taking the syringe from Joe.

His eyes widened still further.

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely." She smiled at him. "My hand's much steadier than yours."

Joe had already rolled up the sleeve of the pyjama-clad arm closer to them. The skin – mottled with ill-health and faint fading needle-marks – was so unpleasant to her that she could hardly bear to look at it, but she took the syringe from Joe,

motioning him out of the way so that the daylight, pouring through the high window of their townhouse, illuminated her field of activity. In one swift, confident motion, she put the thumb and second finger of her left hand into the crook of his elbow, stretched the skin taut so she could see the old puncture marks, and inserted the tip of the needle into the centre of one, pressing the plunger down. As she slipped the needle out again, her task accomplished, she noted that she had left no new mark at all, nothing to indicate that an injection had just taken place.

She handed the needle back to Joe.

“Good,” she said, smiling at him. “That was easy.”

He nodded, his eyes still wide, his hand still shaking a little.

This wasn't good. Joe would certainly be questioned, at least by the doctor, perhaps by others. Now that it had been done, she needed to take the edge off his fear. Some nervousness would be more than understandable, of course: but too much would raise a red flag.

Oh, who was she fooling? Certainly not herself. She was dying for it. That had been one of the most exciting things she had ever done in her life, and now she was on fire to celebrate.

Not that she'd ever needed much.

“Now,” she said to Joe. “Take your clothes off, and fuck me.”

She slipped off her robe and stood there naked, slim and pale, almost six foot tall, her physique flawless. The sight of her nude body was all the encouragement Joe needed; he was already fumbling with the waistband his trousers, his rising excitement making the task of unzipping himself harder than usual.

“And make it quick,” she said, turning away from the body on the bed. The last thing she wanted to see as she came was her husband's face. “I've got a long list of things to take care of today.”

chapter one

“Miss Fitzgerald?” The receptionist was so apologetic it sounded as if she were about to cry. “I'm really sorry, but your card's been declined.”

But Lola Fitzgerald wasn't listening: she was too busy examining her face in the huge gilt-framed mirror that hung in Dr Block's reception area. The mirror was tactfully placed so that Dr Block's clients had to take a few steps to approach it. This avoided them having to catch more than a glimpse of themselves if they didn't want to.

If you came in with a burgeoning spot that needed cortisone injected right into the middle of its nasty little swelling white cyst to kill it dead, or lines around your mouth that seemed to have deepened overnight and were desperate for some collagen to fill them up, you could swoop past the mirror without turning your head to see your shame. But if, like Lola, you had just had vitamin C injected all over your face in a stinging series of tiny needle pricks, you couldn't help wanting to see if this apparently miraculous new treatment did actually make you look like you had the glowing skin of a fourteen-year-old who had been brought up on a purely organic diet, gone for long healthy walks every day, and didn't even know what alcohol was.

Any observer would have been amazed at how critically Lola was staring at herself in the mirror. But though Lola Fitzgerald was twenty-nine and naturally drop-dead gorgeous, she was as obsessed with her looks as someone twice her age with a fraction of her own lucky genetic inheritance. Lola Fitzgerald was as beautiful as a shiny gold coin, new-minted and perfect. And it took a walletful of shiny gold cards to keep her looking that way.

Dr Block, the most famous and most expensive dermatologist in London, kept Lola's skin smooth and buttersoft, while, gorgeous blonde Abigail, the owner of BeauBronz fake tan, had visited Lola's dinky little Mayfair mews house earlier that afternoon to spray Lola from head to toe with a perfect gilded sheen. The golden colour, custom-blended for her by Abigail, matched Lola's hair, artfully highlighted by a colourist whose phone number was one of London's most closely-guarded secrets.

Lola's eyes were big and dark and slightly slanted; her nose, while nothing special in itself, had been minimally straightened and shaved down so it was perfectly symmetrical. Her lower lip was markedly fuller than her upper one, but (a) that was actually very pretty, and (b) she had never seen anyone have a successful time with collagen-in-lip injections, so why fix something that wasn't broken?

Ditto with the breasts. Hers weren't large, but they were lovely, small and round, and because they weren't too big, she could wear anything she wanted. She could even wear a frock slashed right down to the waist and look elegant. Sexy, yes: vulgar, no. Which was important, because women envied you much more for looking elegant than they did for looking vulgar.

And Lola's aim was to be envied by every single woman in the world. Women on the street. Women in her social set. Women who bought weekly glossy gossip magazines, or monthly fashion bibles, thick and heavy with advertising, and thumbed through them for insights as to how the one percent of really rich, beautiful people lived. Women who stopped at a picture of you and wished with all their hearts that *this* was how they looked, that they were inside Lola Fitzgerald's shiny, golden body, tossing her mane of gilded hair, living Lola Fitzgerald' sun-kissed, charmed, beautiful life.

"Miss Fitzgerald?" the receptionist repeated, a degree of desperation entering her voice.

After her detailed survey, Lola decided that, to be utterly honest, it wasn't as if her face was really capable of that much improvement. Not after the peels and the fillers and the Botox. It wasn't that she *needed* Botox, but if you had it in your twenties as a preventative measure, you didn't need plastic surgery till your late forties, according to Dr Block. Almost everyone Lola knew had Botox on a regular basis.

She glanced over her shoulder at the reception desk, the nervous tweetings of the receptionist having finally penetrated her consciousness.

"I'm so sorry, Miss Fitzgerald, but your card isn't going through! Do you have another one I could try?"

Sighing impatiently, Lola flipped out another card from the pink calfskin cardholder she'd just bought in a sweet little boutique in St Trop – it would be perfect for this summer, she'd throw it at her cleaning lady after that and get something a couple of shades darker for autumn. With a half-smile and a small bob of the head, the receptionist scraped the card along the desk with her long fingernails till it reached the edge and she could lever it up and insert it into the Chip-and-Pin machine.

Lola tapped in her code with a perfectly-manicured finger. Just then her phone beeped, and she fished it out of her bag.

"Lo? It's India."

"Hi, darling! I'm just finishing up at Dr Block's."

"Well, hurry up! We're all here waiting for you - "

The receptionist was saying something, which Lola found highly annoying. She had her regular appointments already booked in; she was fully-stocked with Dr Block's skin wipes and cleansers and polishes, as the receptionist ought to know, as it was part of her job to send new ones out whenever Lola was due to be

running low; so there was really *nothing* this woman with over-long fingernails needed to say to her at all, especially not in the middle of a very important phone conversation –

“Miss Fitzgerald?” The receptionist’s face was screwed up into a tight little knot, as if she were carrying all the embarrassment on Lola’s behalf. “This card - it’s been declined as well...”

“Oh, for God’s sake!” Lola said impatiently. “No, not you, India! Some stupid – “

But then, by complete accident, she actually caught the receptionist’s eye.

Lola never looked directly at service people. Why bother? It made her feel awkward, because their eyes were always needy. They wanted to be her - they wanted some of her gilding to rub off on them and make them, for one brief moment, as shiny as her. Even if they resented her, even if they downright hated her, they still wanted that touch of gold. Poor things. As if, even if they had it, they’d know what to do with it.

This woman looked needy, of course she did, but she was visibly nervous, too. She suddenly reminded Lola of Devon’s horrible husband’s poor Labradors, who he kicked all the time while loudly announcing that they loved it. So Lola took a breath, changed direction, and continued:

“... Some stupid problem with my cards,” and, to be extra nice, she gave the receptionist a dazzling smile as she removed the card from her clasp and slid it back into the pink calfskin.

“*Oh God, I hate that!*” India was hugely sympathetic. “I had that in St Bart’s in February, there was some sort of transfer that hadn’t gone through and it jammed me up so badly at this boutique – *so embarrassing* - “

“It’s just some ridiculous mistake I don’t have time to deal with right now,” Lola said to both India and the receptionist. “Look, just bill me – I’ve really got to dash, it’s my hen night - “

The receptionist nodded subserviently. She was more than happy to assume that this was a momentary glitch in the extremely well-oiled system that funnelled vast sums of money from Lola’s father’s bank accounts into Lola’s own.

Lola clipped away from the desk, her white jeans so tight it was hard to walk fast in them. The floor of the office was marble, and the atmosphere in here was always reverentially quiet, church-like, every visitor a worshipper at the shrine of artificial beauty. Lola’s Jimmy Choos clicked at the marble in fast, tiny little stabs, like the injections Dr Block had just dotted into her face.

“India? I’m literally down the street. Be there in five.”

After the respectful hush of the dermatologist’s office, New Bond Street was bustling as always with rich old men, young men in suits who worked in galleries and auction houses and perfectly-groomed girls who dated both types of men at the same time. Lola wove through the crowds, drawing her customary more-than-appreciative stares from the men, and noticing, as was second-nature to her, the quality of the brief glances the women gave her. Women wouldn’t stare - that would be paying her too much of a compliment. But they flashed their eyes quickly, up and down, a razorblade slice of assessment of their competition.

The nail salon was half a block down New Bond Street, one floor up. Lola managed to wiggle up the stairs – god, these jeans had no give in them at all – and entered to cries of her name. Her five friends were draped over white leather sofas in the antechamber, looking, inevitably, like one of those photoshoots for the glossies that brings together a group of young socialities and accompanies it with breathless captions about each girl. They all looked as if they had been styled by Italian *Vogue*: bright colours, sparkling jewellery, artfully-mussed hair. There was only one brunettes, and no-one was wearing even a touch of black. You didn’t starve yourself and spray on fake tan and work out to the point of collapse just to hide your trophy body.

“I love it! You managed to *be late for your own hen night!*” Georgia purred.

“I’m so sorry – “ Lola clipped over to Georgia and gave her two enthusiastic air-kisses. “Dr Block was running late and the bloody receptionist bugged up my card or something – “

“Ooh!” Devon’s eyes widened. “You were having the vitamin C shots! Do they work?”

“You tell me,” Lola said, sitting down between Devon and Georgia on one of the sofas and presenting her face under the white-bright lights of the nail salon for detailed observation. The girls craned in, eyes narrowing as they squinted at her.

“I think you look a bit shinier,” Devon pronounced. “In a good way,” she added swiftly.

“Yeah,” Madison agreed. “Kinda glowier.”

“Needles in your *face*,” India whispered in horror. “I don’t know how you can *do* it.”

“India! Your eyebrows are going to *drop right on top of your eyes* when you’re forty if you don’t have Botox now!” Madison said passionately. As the only

American in the group, she was naturally the most evangelical about plastic surgery.

“Crow’s feet, India. Think about it. You blink too much as it is,” Devon added.

India’s round moon-face pulled the kind of face that every other girl present was incapable of making, the crucial facial muscles being temporarily paralysed by Dr Block’s cunning needles.

“I just *can’t*,” she said hopelessly.

There was a mass shrug. They had done what they could. Now India was alone with her incipient wrinkles.

“So!” Georgia announced. “Pedi time! Shoes off, ladies!”

Naturally, Georgia had reserved the whole salon for them, so five minutes later, the anteroom resembled the most exclusive shoe shop in London. Pairs of Jimmys, Manolos and Ginas – all sandals, of course, chosen to show off the incipient pedicure to best advantage - nestled into each other, glittering and glistening, reflected in the floor-to-ceiling mirrors, catching extra light from the ironic mirrorball twirling slowly in the centre of the room. While each of their owners were ensconced in a state-of-the-art padded white leather chair with full massage system, their feet soaking in whirlpool baths of water filled with rosepetals and gold leaf, about to have pedicures with real diamonds applied to their toes, drinking rosepetal martinis.

“Oh, *Georgia*. Best hen night ever,” Lola sighed happily.

“First of many!” Madison said, hoisting her glass aloft. “And may you come out richer every time!”

“*Mad*,” India said a little reproachfully. “You’re so *American* some times. You said that at Dev’s hen, too, and Dev actually loves Piers, you know.”

“Oh, I didn’t mind,” pretty blonde Devon said easily. “Besides, I’m obviously never going to divorce Piers, because of the title.”

“I still can’t believe you’re going to be a *duchess*,” India sighed.

“Yeah, in twenty years’ time,” Devon snapped. “When I’m too old to look really fabulous in the coronet.”

Everyone tutted in sympathy. Devon was very unlucky that her father-in-law, the current duke, was a spry sixty-year-old with no degenerative diseases.

“Maybe he’ll have a shooting accident,” suggested Madison hopefully.

“I love you, Mad,” Devon commented, “you’re always so optimistic...”

“Ahem!” Lola, justifiably feeling that the focus had wandered away from her own nuptials, coughed loudly and wobbled her glass to call the attention back to herself.

“Oh God Lo, I’m sorry!” Devon said. “To Lola and Jean-Marc! First of many and richer every time!”

Everyone giggled, even Lola.

“I *do* love Jean-Marc,” she protested.

“Of course you do!” cooed India. “We all love Jean-Marc!”

“Jean-Marc is the most loveable man in the whole of Europe,” Devon pronounced. “He just has to say ‘*Enchante!*’, and smile at you, and you fall in love with him on the spot.”

“He is so lovely,” Lola agreed complacently. “I do adore him.”

Plus, Jean-Marc was the man that every girl in Europe and New York had wanted to marry, but she, Lola Fitzgerald, had walked off with him without even flexing her perfectly-manicured fingers to beckon him towards her. Jean-Marc had proposed within weeks of their first meeting. He was adorable. She loved him to bits. They were going to have the most wonderful life together. Already they were a staple of the upmarket glossy magazines... they had already had tons of requests to style and photograph the two of them smiling in pre-marital bliss...

“He knows all the best clubs,” Madison said.

“And all the best drugs,” Georgia chimed in.

“And all the best places to buy jewellery,” Devon added. “Those earrings are *unbelievable*.”

“Yellow diamonds,” Lola said smugly, tilting her head so the girls could ooh and aah at the sparkle. “He wanted them to match my ring exactly. He says they’re the same colour as my hair.”

“*Divine*,” Madison breathed.

“You two are going to be so happy!” India exclaimed. “I’m so jealous!”

“Jean-Marc could have had anyone,” Georgia commented. “I went after him hard myself. He doesn’t like redheads.” She sighed, flicking back her auburn locks.

“You *are* a specialised taste,” Madison said seriously. “This complete whoremonger friend of my dad’s – after his third divorce he only dates Russian prostitutes – “

“Bloody Natashas!” Devon exclaimed. “They’re everywhere! And they’ll do *anything* for money!”

“Sluts,” Georgia agreed.

“Anyway,” Madison went on, “he says that the madams don’t keep more than one or two redheads on their books, ever. Because a lot of men just don’t like them. But if they do, they go crazy for them.”

“I’m a niche market,” Georgia said. “Matching collar and cuffs.”

“*Right*,” Madison said witheringly. “Like any of us have any pubic hair left.”

That was so true that the conversation fell off for a moment, a natural pause as they all nodded in agreement and sipped their cocktails.

Lola adjusted her shoulders so that the knobs of the massage chair were kneading her just where she wanted them, and settled back, already blissed-out. She gazed round the room. Here they were, five of the most beautiful, most socially-successful, wealthiest girls in London, each with her own pedicurist in a white uniforms kneeling before her, coaxing one pampered foot after the other out of the whirlpool baths for a long luscious massage. Five gorgeous examples of what happened when very rich men bred with very beautiful women and used their enormous fortunes to ensure that their daughters had the best of everything from the cradle onwards, from nutritionists to personal trainers to plastic surgery as soon as the doctors would agree to perform it. They were the girls everyone wanted to be friends with, the thoroughbreds who shook their manes and cantered through the best parties everywhere, jingling with the sound of tiny bells, shining like stars.

This was where she was born to be.

* * *

Georgia had organised the pedicure party – to perfection, everyone agreed – and Madison, who knew every fashionable restaurateur on three continents, had

taken charge of dinner. Naturally, they had a private room in the Japanese restaurant, with a long table made from a single sheet of black granite with a black glass strip set into its centre, lustrous and smooth, the perfect surface for what Georgia was pouring out of a plastic bag, carefully, making one straight line all the way down the glass, from one end to the other.

“You look like you’re icing a cake!” giggled India, who had had refills on the rose-petal martinis and was already, as Madison would say, lightly toasted.

“*Right,*” Lola drawled, “as if any one of us would get near enough a cake to ice it – “

“Or even know *how!*” Madison exclaimed, horrified that anyone would think she would know one end of a piping bag from the other.

“Mmn, cake,” India said wistfully.

“Oh darling – “ Georgia threw one slender, tanned arm round Siena’s shoulders - “you *can* have cake, just as long as you – “

“Bring it straight back again afterwards!” chorused Devon.

Georgia set out eight narrow, short-cut straws.

“Ooh!” Lola said, reaching for a straw. “Exactly what the doctor ordered when you’re trying to get into a size 0 bias-cut satin Vera Wang wedding dress.”

With a practised gesture, she held one nostril closed with the thumb of the hand holding the straw while inhaling three inches of Georgia’s long line of cocaine up the other nostril, her second hand sliding back to her nape to hold her hair out of the way.

“Whoo!” she said, straightening up and shaking back her mane of hair. “Good stuff, Georgie!”

“Fresh off the plane,” Georgia said smugly. “Only the best for us.”

“Darling! You look so pretty!” came a man’s voice from behind them, and all the girls turned round, flicking their hair and flashing their best smiles.

“Jean-Marc! You shouldn’t be here!” Lola said, shocked. “It’s my hen night - isn’t that bad luck or something?”

“I’m sorry, darling!” Jean-Marc’s smile was just as wide as the girls’, his blond hair just as shiny. In a dark blue velvet jacket, white silk shirt, perfectly-faded jeans and custom-made loafers, he looked like Lola’s exact male counterpart,

glossy and groomed, impossibly handsome, his teeth and the whites of his eyes almost blindingly bright. "I just wanted to drop in for two seconds – Madison told me where you'd be – "

He was holding out a jewellery box to Lola, who cooed: "Oh, you *shouldn't* have..." even as she took it and snapped the lid open.

"Oh my *God!*" exclaimed Georgia, who was standing close enough to Lola to see the contents.

"Just a little something to make you sparkle even brighter," Jean-Marc smiled.

Lola slipped the yellow diamond bracelet out of the box and onto her wrist, where it rippled elegantly, catching the light. Jean-Marc fixed the clasp for her, and they admired the effect together.

"It's your stone!" he said. "Gold diamonds for my golden girl!"

"I'm *so fucking jealous right now,*" India muttered, tipsy enough to say out loud what every other girl was thinking.

"Thank you *so much,* darling!" Lola purred, leaning forward just enough to brush Jean-Marc's lips with hers. "You're so sweet."

"Anything for you!" he said. "And now – " he looked round the room and mimed shock on seeing the cocaine-covered table – "I see you have your appetiser all set out, so I mustn't keep you from dinner!"

A chorus of laughs greeted this, as Jean-Marc produced his own straw and took an extremely long pull of 'appetiser'.

"One for the road," he said, wiping his nose as elegantly as he did everything. "And now I love you and leave you."

"You are *so fucking lucky!*" India complained as the door closed behind him.

"I know," Lola admitted smugly.

"Right then, time for dinner!" Madison announced. Over six feet tall in heels, her pale green silk jersey dress - the precise colour of her contact lenses - clinging to her Amazonian frame as if it were in love with her, she moved to the sliding doors at the back of the room and stood there, commanding everyone's attention. Her pale blonde hair glowed against the black walls. "Everybody ready?" Her grin was wicked. "It *is* a hen night, after all..."

She held up her free hand and tapped once on the sliding doors, still facing the girls, making the scene as theatrical as possible. The doors slid back, guided by unseen hands, and the four girls facing her gasped in unison, and then burst into titters of laughter.

“Oh, *Mad*, you are *amazing!*” Lola cried, teetering across the room to embrace her friend. “Thank you so *much!* Best hen night *ever!*”

In the room beyond Madison was another long granite table with glass running down its centre, just like theirs. But this one, instead of being decorated with a long fat line of coke, was sporting an extremely buff, nude young man, lying on his back, with exquisitely-prepared bite-sized portions of sushi and sashimi decorating his long, smooth, heavily-muscled limbs. Against his skin, which was almost as dark as the table, the raw fish glowed like jewels, coral salmon, cerise tuna, white mackerel translucent as moonstone against its jet background. The girls clustered round their dinner, their giggles deeper, dirtier, acknowledging the sexually-charged treat that Madison had provided, the erotic charge of slowly, ritually stripping a gorgeously-built hunk of manhood of the scraps of food that were partially concealing his nakedness.

“I’m not even hungry,” India announced, “because of all that lovely lovely coke, but I’m going to have a bite anyway!”

And with glee, she picked up a pair of ivory chopsticks and selected a glistening piece of yellowtail, framed by a couple of bright green leaves, nestling right on the centre of his stomach. As she lifted up the sashimi, she squealed in excitement, having revealed his belly button, a dark hollow swirl, mysterious and inviting, the start of a very faint line of black hair leading down to even more inviting places. There was a real gasp in the room, the first piece of real nakedness, of something that was hidden that was now revealed, and the awareness, too, that it was in their power to strip this gorgeous young man of everything. Eyes widened, tongues flicked out to lick lips, and the girls closed in on the table. No-one, after the coke, was hungry: but nobody cared.

“Is he *completely* starkers, *Mad?*” Georgia exaggerated her drawl to sound as if she didn’t care one way or the other, but her eyes were gleaming with excitement.

“I think Lola should find that out, don’t you?” Madison said, smiling wickedly. “She *is* the bride-to-be, after all.”

“What will he do after we’ve eaten everything?” Georgia breathed.

“Oh, honey,” Madison said, “it’s a hen night! He’ll do absolutely anything we want!”

And she reached out and flicked a piece of tuna off the swell of a pectoral muscle, revealing a plump little nipple so pink and pert that everyone sighed in unison, snatched at the chopsticks and dove into their dinner.

* * *

“Ugh, my head’s *killing* me,” Lola mumbled, paying off the cab driver, and looking so pretty, even after a long night and morning spent partying, that he smiled at her sympathetically and waved her away when she started fumbling in her change purse for a tip.

Dying to climb into her cosy bed, don her cashmere eye mask, and take a super-strength sleeping pill to knock her out during the hangover and coke comedown that were well on their way, Lola teetered down the Mayfair mews street. She was pretty good at walking on cobbles in 4-inch heels by now, but that didn’t make the process any less painful. Just a few more steps – ow, she felt like the Little Mermaid when she got her feet, every step like walking on nails – yes, she was at her cute little white house, sliding the key out of her bag, in seconds she’d be inside and kicking off these instruments of torture she had strapped to her feet –

That was weird. Her key wasn’t working.

She pulled it out, looked at it, tipping up her sunglasses to check it was the right one. Even the pale London sunlight hurt her eyes. But yes, it was the right key. Despite the pain to her retinas, she kept the sunglasses propped on top of her head as she re-inserted the key.

And then twisted her wrist uselessly, trying to force it to turn.

Oh! Was she so drunk and coked-up still that she was at the wrong front door? How embarrassing that would be! She took a few steps back to make sure, raising a hand to shade her eyes from the almost non-existent sun.

No, she hadn’t made a mistake: this was definitely her house. Her silvery beige silk curtains at the downstairs window, her pretty little topiary pots on the first-floor wrought-iron balcony. God, she was going to miss this place when she moved into Jean-Marc’s Chelsea penthouse.

One more try with the key. It definitely wasn’t working. And now she looked closer, which of course aggravated her headache even more, she could see that the lock was really shiny. New-shiny. As if it had just been installed. Which wasn’t possible, because she had never had the lock changed, and she’d been living here for three years now...

Through the drug-addled, martini-and-champagne-fuddled haze in her brain, Lola slowly began to connect the strange new lock on her front door to the fact that none of her credit cards had been working since yesterday afternoon at the dermatologist. With the first faint stirrings of disquiet, she fished out her phone and hit the speed dial button for her father's cellphone. It would be 7am in New York – Daddy would be up by now. But frankly, even if he wasn't, she'd be ringing. This was an *emergency*.

"Hello, Lola," came a voice.

Not her father. Her stepmother, Carin.

And for maybe the first time in her life, Lola Fitzgerald felt a faint cold tremor of fear slide down her spine.

"What are you doing answering Daddy's phone?" Lola blurted out.

"Ah, Lola. Always so polite," Carin commented. "I have some bad news for you, I'm afraid."

"What? What is it?"

The headache was really beginning to clamp itself round Lola's temples now.

"Your father slipped into a diabetic coma last night," Carin said as lightly as if she were announcing that she'd had steak for dinner. "Apparently there's no chance he'll come out of it. God knows I tried to get him to diet, but he was always so stubborn."

Lola nearly dropped the phone.

"*What?* Daddy's in a *coma?*" she gasped.

"It was inevitable with his lifestyle, Lola. You know he refused to take care of himself."

"You're talking about him like he's already *dead!*"

"Well, we must face facts, mustn't we? As I said, the doctors say there's practically no chance he'll come out of the coma."

Lola realised that she had never fully before understood the meaning of the phrase 'being unable to get your head round something'. It felt as if Carin's words were bouncing off the side of her skull, failing to penetrate her ears. Her beloved Daddy in a *coma*? He'd had Type II diabetes for years, of course, brought on by the huge amount of excess weight he was carrying, and the doctors had kept

warning him how dangerous that was, but neither he nor Lola had ever believed that he was seriously at risk: how could a man as phenomenally rich as Benjamin Fitzgerald be seriously at risk of anything? Money would buy him the best healthcare, keep him safe, just as money had bought him and Lola everything else they could possibly want.

Money had bought him Carin, too, an ex-model who had put a very high price on her own head. Horrible, frigid Carin, with her white-blonde hair and icy, pale-blue eyes, as cold and frightening as the eyes of a Siberian husky, with a soul even icier than her eyes and an Ice Queen shard of glass for a heart.

“You can’t be serious!” Lola managed to get out.

“Oh, I’m afraid I am,” Carin said.

“But you didn’t – when did this happen? Why didn’t you *ring* me?”

One of Lola’s neighbours, a middle-aged divorcee who managed to look like Lola and her friends from behind, but whose face, despite all the surgeries, looked like a raisin stretched on a rack, walked up the mews, tutting loudly at how loud Lola’s voice had risen. Still, she couldn’t hide the jealousy in her face as she snapped her eyes up and down Lola’s perfect figure in the tight white jeans which would have revealed every imperfection, if Lola had any.

So it was with utter shock that Lola realised that the tables had just been turned. Because, watching Raisin-Face teeter along in over-tight jeans tucked into high suede boots, shifting her Selfridges Food Hall shopping bag to reach for her keys, Lola was flooded with jealousy for her. Because Raisin-Face was about to go inside her own house, and Lola was locked out of hers, which meant she had to stand in the street hearing this appalling, unbelievable news about her beloved Daddy, unable to crumple onto a sofa in decent privacy and cry her eyes out –

“I didn’t want to disturb you,” Carin said, distinct amusement creeping into her voice now. “Weren’t you on your hen night? I was sure you’d ring sooner or later. When you realised there was a problem with the money fountain.”

Lola swallowed hard.

“Did you do something to my credit cards?” she asked in a tiny voice. “And my key isn’t working – “

“Like I said, I was sure you’d ring sooner or later!” Carin wasn’t even bothering to pretend not to enjoy this. “I’m organising something of a financial restructuring, now that I have power of attorney – “

“You have power of attorney?” Lola realised that she wasn’t quite sure what that meant.

“You *do* know that the house is owned by one of your father’s companies for tax reasons?” Carin said. “And your father made me a co-trustee of your trust fund. I’ve suspended payments from that too. I think your withdrawals from it have been unreasonably large for years now.”

Lola’s headache was like a vice now. She was literally unable to process all the information Carin was throwing at her. Grief was bubbling under the panic. She could sense it down there somewhere, far below, but it hadn’t reached her yet. She was barely able yet to realise that Carin was behind her being locked out of her own house.

Which, according to what Carin had just told her, wasn’t her house at all.

“How could you *do this*?” she gasped. “How could you think – Daddy’s really sick and instead of looking after him, you actually got someone here to *change the lock on my house* – “

Carin’s voice sharpened to a point.

“I think I just explained that it isn’t your house, Lola! You have a fiancé – go and stay with him! Your father’s supported you for long enough – it’s someone else’s turn now!”

“But I’ve got *all my stuff* in there!” Lola wailed, too hungover and spongy-brained to come up with any better riposte, though she was dimly aware that there must be hundreds.

“I’ll make arrangements for you to get your things,” Carin said airily. “Now I must go, I’m afraid. I have so much to organise!”

A click on the line signified that Carin had hung up, but Lola, unable to believe it, kept saying: “Hello? Carin? *Hello?*” for at least a minute afterwards. Then, frantically, she hit the button for Jean-Marc’s number. Five minutes later, having left three frenzied messages begging him to call her back as soon as possible, she slumped back against her pretty pale green front door, which wasn’t her front door any more, apparently. Her headache was pounding at her temples with a croquet mallet, and her brain was so overloaded she thought if she had to take in one more unbelievable piece of information, grey ooze would start pouring out of her ears.

She was almost convinced that this was some awful joke Daddy and Carin were playing on her. It couldn’t really be true. Her father couldn’t really be in a coma!

Maybe this was some kind of Swedish custom, messing with the bride the day after her hen night? Some awful, psychotic, evil Swedish custom, of course –

And why wasn't Jean-Marc calling her back?

Across the little mews, a front door burst open and Raisin-Face came running out, waving something. Having changed into slippers and velvet lounging trousers, she reached Lola in a matter of seconds.

"Do you *know*? Do you *know*? Have you *heard*?" she gasped, flailing with the paper.

"It's in the *Standard*?" Lola grabbed the paper. "Daddy's in the *Standard*?"

But the headline that greeted her wasn't about her father.

"PLAYBOY HEIR IN SEX SCANDAL OVERDOSE!"

Lola's legs gave way under her. She sank down to the cobbled pavement, one of her Jimmy Choos twisting and snapping off a heel as she collapsed. But Lola was far, far beyond realising that her last pair of shoes had just broken. She was staring at the photograph on the cover of the *Evening Standard*, which showed someone being carried on a stretcher out of the nastiest-looking council estate staircase Lola could imagine. His face was blurred, but the golden sweep of hair over his forehead was horribly familiar.

Lola realised why Jean-Marc's phone was going straight to voicemail.

"STEEL HEIR JEAN-MARC VAN DER VEER OVERDOSES IN TRANSEXUAL LOVE PAD!" the cover screamed. "FIANCE OF 'IT' GIRL LOLA CAUGHT WITH TRANNY LOVER!"

And just then, from the main street, a woman came running into the mews, her face lighting up as she spotted Lola.

"Lola!" she yelled. "Caroline Francis from the *Sun*! Am I the first to catch you? What are your feelings about Jean-Marc's overdose? Had you heard? Did you know he was seeing a transsexual prostitute?"

Raisin-Face grabbed Lola's arm and dragged her up.

"Run!" she said. "Come on, *run*!"

And so, hopping grotesquely from a 4-inch heel to a flat foot, her head feeling as if it were about to explode, her only refuge the house of a woman she didn't even

know, Lola Fitzgerald ran from the house that wasn't hers any more, pursued by a *Sun* reporter yelling unbelievable allegations about her fiancé.

They barely made it back to Raisin-Face's house in time. She literally slammed the door in the eager face of Caroline-Francis-from-the-*Sun*, and turned to Lola, completely unable to disguise both her excitement at being in the middle of such a juicy tabloid story, and her joy at Lola's humiliation.

"So!" she said, her over-stretched face trying so hard to move that it looked as if it might pop at any moment. "*Did* you know about the transsexual prostitute?"

Lola did the only thing left to her. She burst into a flood of hysterical tears. And then she fainted.