

A silky blue haze of summer smog lay over London. Along New Bond Street slow herds of taxis and delivery vans grunted and roared from one set of lights to another, sending diesel fumes and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and invisible clouds of human exasperation drifting heavenwards to add to the noxious ether. Dispassionately the drivers watched the muscled arrogance of the cycle couriers as they wove and sped through the stationary traffic, and eyed the expensively-clad women clicking along the pavements in tiny heels and summer dresses, faces disdainful and preoccupied behind designer sunglasses. All human traffic seemed to move faster than the lines of vehicles.

The time was ten to one, and office workers were beginning to spill on to the street and into Pret a Manger and Costa Coffee. Down in the cool, chic basement restaurant of Nicole Farhi, at a peaceful remove from the street clamour of crashing gears and hissing hydraulic brakes up above, tranquillity reigned. Here the only sounds were those of tinkling cutlery and murmuring female voices. Stylish young waitresses moved about, sliding plates of salads on to tables and uncapping chilled bottles of mineral water, while the lunching ladies paused their conversation to watch as the water bubbled into their glasses, its discreet fizz heralding the delicious thrill of shared gossip and exchanged confidences.

At one table, and one table alone, was wine being consumed. A bottle of Gavi, light and luscious, and with its own hint of fizz, was already two-thirds empty, and the salads had yet to arrive. Anthea Grieves-Brown lifted the bottle from the wine chiller and glugged the remains into her own glass and that of her friend, Lola Canning. She tucked strands of blonde hair,

straightened and smoothed to the sheen of satin, behind one ear as she leaned forward to murmur by way of addition to her previous observation, 'Four times in one night.' She articulated the sentiment with slow wonder, and a catlike, satisfied smile widened her beautiful features as she waited for her friend's reaction.

Lola made an unimpressed face. Man-less herself at the moment, feigning boredom was the only way she knew to counter the envy and irritation she felt as Anthea recounted the charms of her latest man and his amazing prowess in bed. 'But isn't that rather showing off? Reminds me of the dreadful Cherie telling us that Tony Blair was a five-times-a-night man. Ghastly.' She took a swig of her wine. 'Suggests he has something to prove.'

Anthea deflected this attempted put-down. 'Obviously, darling, if it's the same man you've been with for ages and ages, the last thing you want is to have him jump all over you at three o'clock in the morning. But you could never put Leo Davies in that category. Not in a million years.'

Lola swallowed a sigh and gave a tight, bright smile. The unwritten code of female friendship stated that one was obliged to indulge with forbearance, if not enthusiasm, the raptures of friends newly in love, and so remarks of encouragement and gestures expressive of interest were the order of the day. Little murmurs of envy were generally acceptable, too, but since Lola didn't feel moved to articulate a sentiment which she was in danger of feeling all too sincerely, she merely said, 'Tell me more about this wonderful man. What does he do, apart from make the earth move four times a night?'

'He's a QC – you know, one of those important barrister people.'

'I do know what a QC is – my father used to be one.'

'So he was... Anyway, Leo told me the kind of work he does, but I wasn't really paying much attention. We were in bed at the time.' Another greedy smile lit up Anthea's face. 'God, I can't tell you, Lola – it's *so* absolutely the best sex I've ever had.'

‘That’s saying something, certainly, given the numbers.’

‘I mean, *just* amazing... Anyway, whatever he does is to do with ships and stuff, and other people’s money. Sounds very dull, but it must earn him a complete fortune, because he drives an Aston Martin and has a house near Cheyne Walk. There’s regularly stuff in the papers about QCs who earn squillions, so I assume he’s one of them.’

At that moment lunch arrived. Anthea inspected her salad and then glanced at the little jug of dressing on the side. ‘God, I absolutely don’t want that. Take it away,’ she said to the waitress.

Lola added, ‘And bring us another bottle of this.’ The waitress took the empty bottle and disappeared. A bottle was far more than anyone should drink at lunchtime, Lola knew, but sod it – Anthea, who was meant to be living on a model’s diet of egg whites and mineral water, didn’t care, so neither did she. There wasn’t anything else to do with the day, anyway. Maybe they’d wobble along to the Curzon afterwards and slip into a late afternoon film. Then home for a nap, up at nine to shower and beautify, and out on the town for such pleasures as the rest of the night might yield. A wealthy family and a trust fund did give one a charmed life, but even Lola found it boring occasionally – though alcohol and the odd recreational drug helped take the edge off the tedium. In the long years since leaving her Swiss finishing school, Lola had often thought she should get herself some not-too-demanding job – something involving flexible hours and long lunches, and a stylish office with a PA – but that meant working, and genuine work didn’t really appeal. And to be honest, at thirty-one, she was a bit scared that whatever skills she’d once possessed might be a bit rusty by now. Some of her friends ran fashion shops and glam little businesses, but that took effort, too. And ideas. If she’d had Anthea’s long legs and amazingly slim figure, not to mention her looks, she’d have been able to do a little casual modelling, too. Anthea needed the money, of course, but the job had a certain cachet, and gave her something else to talk about.

‘What does he look like?’

Anthea reflected, fork paused above her salad. ‘He’s sort of moderately tall, I suppose – about five eleven? And rather unusual looking. I mean, he has the most divine face – lovely square jaw and beautiful cheekbones, and the most *utterly*, piercingly sexy blue eyes – but his hair is completely grey. Well, more silver actually. Rather strange, given his age, but really quite cool.’

‘How old is he?’

Anthea shrugged. ‘Mid-forties.’

‘Wife?’

‘Ex.’

‘Kids?’

‘One, little boy of four, lives with mummy.’

‘Psychological flaws?’

‘None I can detect. Unless you count the fact that he’s Welsh.’

‘He shags sheep.’

Anthea tilted her lovely head to one side, and smiled. ‘It’s just the faintest accent. Rather sexy, actually. Gives his voice a hint of menace. Like Anthony Hopkins.’

‘You’re mad. Or in love.’

Anthea lifted her glass and arched her brow. ‘You know me, Lolly. I’m not into love. The original material girl.’

‘So this Leo isn’t a long-term proposition?’

‘I didn’t say that. One can make a mid to long-term investment without being in love.’ She shrugged. ‘In my experience, love just screws things up. People getting all needy and insecure.’

‘So where did you meet him?’

‘You remember Muriel, who used to live with Jeremy?’

‘The sculptress?’

‘Right. Well, she had an exhibition at the White Cube and invited loads of us to the opening, and I met him there. Lust at first sight. He was seriously into the art – I was seriously into the champagne. We went back to his afterwards, and that was it.’

‘Ant, you’re the most terrible old tart, you know – jumping

into bed with men as soon as you clap eyes on them.'

'Believe me, if you'd been there, you would have too. Anyway, I'm not. I've been out with him four times since, and each time *he's* called *me*.'

'Been out with, or been to bed with?'

'Out first, bed after. Twice to the theatre –'

'You? At the theatre?'

'I know. It was just incredibly dull. He's a bit of an intellectual. I think he thinks I am too.'

'He can't possibly!'

'Love you too, Lolly.' Anthea poured more wine. 'It's because we met at an exhibition, and despite what you may think, I can say all the right things without necessarily knowing a great deal.'

'One of your many talents.'

'Indeed. Anyway, it's worth sitting through Proust or whatever for a meal at Petrus and the sex afterwards.'

'He sounds too good to be true. Enjoy it while it lasts.'

'Don't worry, darling. I know how to keep his attention. In bed and out of it. My latest tactic is playing hard-to-get.'

'Isn't it a bit late for that?'

Anthea smiled. 'Trust me – everything I do is timed to perfection. By the time the weekend's over he'll be aching to see me.'