

Prologue

Heavy hems and vicious heels swooped and clacked over the parquet. We crossed the hallway to a set of double doors, the low hum within indicating that the men were already inside. The room was lit with candles, small tables positioned between sofas and low dining chairs. The waiting men were dressed in thick black satin pyjamas with frogged jackets, the sheen in the weft of the fabric offsetting their starched shirts. An occasional heavy cufflink or slim watch flashed gold in the candlelight, an embroidered monogram rippled beneath a flamboyant silk handkerchief. It would have felt silly, theatrical, had the details not been so perfect, but I felt hypnotised, my pulse slow and deep. Yvette was being led away by a man with a peacock feather pinned in his cuff – I looked up and saw another man approaching me, a gardenia like my own in his lapel.

‘So it works like that?’

‘While we eat, yes. Afterwards you can choose. *Bonsoir.*’
‘*Bonsoir.*’

He was tall and slim, though his body was younger than his face, rather hard and lined, with greying hair swept back over a high forehead and large, slightly hooded eyes, like a Byzantine saint. He led me to a sofa,

waited while I sat and handed me a plain crystal glass of white wine, clean and flinty. The formality was arch, but I liked the choreography. Julien clearly appreciated the pleasure of anticipation. The mostly nude waitresses reappeared with small plates of tiny lobster pastries, then shavings of duck breast in a honey and ginger paste, tuiles of raspberries and strawberries. Gestures at food, nothing to sate us.

‘Red fruit makes a woman’s cunt taste so beautiful,’ my dinner companion remarked.

‘I know.’

There was some quiet conversation, but mostly people watched and drank, their eyes moving from one another to the swift movements of the waitresses, who had dancers’ bodies, I saw, slim but strongly muscled, their calves full over their tight boots. Moonlighting from the *corps de ballet*? I saw Yvette dimly across the room, being fed almond-stuffed figs with a sharp-tined silver fork, her body laid out like a serpent’s, one dark thigh a hint between the red silk. Solemnly, the waitresses circled the room with candle snuffers, dimming the lights in a cloud of beeswax, and as they did so I felt the man’s hand on my thigh, circling and stroking, entirely unhurried, and an answering tautness between my legs. The girls set out shallow lacquered trays containing condoms, small crystal bottles of monoi oil, lube decanted into bonbon dishes. Some of the couples were kissing, happy with their matched partners, others rose politely and crossed the room to find the prey

they had selected earlier. Yvette's robe was tumbled about her parted legs, a man's head dipped to her. I caught her eye, and she smiled, luxuriously, before letting her head fall back among the cushions with the ecstatic motion of a junkie nodding out.

PART ONE

OUTSIDE

1

If you asked me how it began, I could truthfully say that the first time, it was an accident. It was about six in the evening, the time when the city churns again on its axis, and though the streets above were full of the sharp wind of another piss-miserable May, the station was stuffy and humid, squalid with discarded tabloids and fast-food wrappings, irritable tourists in garish leisurewear crammed amidst the resigned, sallow-faced commuters. I was waiting on the platform for the Piccadilly line Tube at Green Park after another fabulous start to another fabulous week of being bullied and patronised at my super-fabulous job. As the train on the opposite side pulled away, a low collective groan rippled through the crowd. The board showed that the next Tube was stuck at Holborn. Someone on the tracks, probably. Typical, you could see people thinking. Why did they always have to top themselves at rush hour? The passengers across the line were moving off, amongst them a girl in crippling heels and an electric-blue bandage dress. Last season's Alaïa via Zara, I thought. Probably on her way to Leicester Square with the other rube losers. She had extraordinary hair, a great cascading plum-coloured

mane of extensions with some sort of gold thread bound through them that caught and held the neon light.

‘Judeee! Judy! Is that you?’

She started waving at me enthusiastically. I pretended not to hear.

‘Judy! Over here!’

People were beginning to look. The girl had hobbled precariously close to the yellow safety stripe.

‘It’s me! Leanne!’

‘Your friend’s waving to you,’ said the woman next to me, helpfully.

‘I’ll see you upstairs in a min!’ I didn’t hear voices like hers very often anymore. I’d never expected to hear hers again. She obviously wasn’t going to disappear, and the train showed no sign of appearing, so I settled my heavy leather briefcase across my shoulder and pushed my way back through the crowd. She was waiting on the gangway between the platforms.

‘Hiya! I thought it was you!’

‘Hi, Leanne,’ I tried gingerly.

She tripped the last few steps towards me and threw her arms around me like I was her long-lost sister.

‘Look at you! Dead professional. I didn’t know you lived in London!’ I didn’t point out that this was probably because I hadn’t spoken to her in a decade. Facebook friends weren’t really my style, and nor did I need to be reminded, ever, of where I had come from.

Then I felt like a bitch. ‘You look great, Leanne. I love your hair.’

‘I don’t go by Leanne anymore, actually. It’s Mercedes now.’

‘Mercedes? That’s . . . nice. I use Judith mostly. Sounds more grown up.’

‘Yeah, well, look at us, eh? All grown up.’

I don’t think I knew, then, what that felt like. I wondered if she did either.

‘Listen, I’ve got an hour before work.’ *Werk*. ‘Do you fancy a quick drink? Catch up?’

I could have said I was busy, that I was in a rush, taken her number like I was actually going to call it. But where did I have to get to? And there was something in that voice, strangely welcome in its familiarity, that made me feel lonely and reassured at the same time. I had just two twenty-pound notes in the world, and there were three days before payday. Still, something might turn up.

‘Sure,’ I said. ‘Let me buy you a drink. Let’s go to the Ritz.’

Two champagne cocktails in the Rivoli bar, £38. I had twelve on my Oyster card and two in hand. I just wouldn’t have much to eat until the end of the week. It was stupid, maybe, to show off like that, but sometimes you need to show the world a bit of defiance. Leanne – Mercedes – fished enthusiastically with a fuchsia shellac nail extension for the bobbing maraschino and took a cheerful slurp.

‘That’s dead nice, thanks. Though I prefer Roederer now, myself.’

Well that served me right for being flash.

'I work round here,' I volunteered. 'Art. In an auction house. I do Old Masters.' I didn't, actually, but then I wasn't sweating that Leanne would know a Reubens from a Rembrandt.

'Posh,' she replied. She looked bored now, fiddling with the swizzle-stick in her drink. I wondered if she was sorry she had called out to me, but instead of feeling annoyed I had a pathetic feeling that I wanted to please her.

'Sounds it,' I said confidentially, feeling the brandy and the sugar soothing their way into my blood, 'but the pay's crap. I'm skint, usually.'

'Mercedes' told me she had been in London for a year. She worked in a champagne bar in St James's. 'Reckons it's classy, but it's full of the same dirty old gits. Nothing dodgy,' she added hastily. 'It's only a bar. The tips are amazing though.'

She claimed she was making two grand a week. 'Puts weight on you, though,' she said ruefully, prodding her tiny belly. 'All that drinking. Still, we don't have to pay for it. Pour it into the plants if we have to, Olly says.'

'Olly?'

'He's the owner. Eh, you should come down sometime, Judy. Moonlight a bit, if you're brassic. Olly's always looking for girls. D'you want another one?'

An older couple in black tie, probably on their way to the opera, took the table opposite us. The woman ran her eyes critically over Mercedes' fake-tanned legs, her shimmering

cleavage. Mercedes swivelled in her chair, and slowly and deliberately uncrossed and recrossed her legs, giving me and the poor old bugger next to her a flash of black lace G-string, all the time staring straight into the woman's eyes. There was no need to ask if anyone had a problem.

'As I was saying,' she said, when the woman turned beet-faced to the cocktail menu, 'it's a laugh.' *Laff*. 'The girls are from all over. You could look smashing, if you got a bit dolled up. Come on.'

I looked down at my black tweed Sandro suit. Nipped-in jacket, floppy pleated skirt. It was meant to look knowingly coquettish, professional with a little Left Bank spin – at least that's what I told myself when I clumsily mended the hems for the umpteenth time – but next to Mercedes I looked like a depressed crow.

'Now?'

'Yeah, why not? I've got loads of stuff in me bag.'

'I don't know, Leanne.'

'Mercedes.'

'Sorry.'

'Come on, you can wear my lace top. It'll look ace with your tits. Unless you've got a date?'

'No,' I said, tipping my head right back to catch the last drops of bubbles and angostura. 'No, I haven't got a date.'

2

I read somewhere that cause and effect are safeguards against contingency, against the terrifyingly inaccurate mutability of chance. Why did I go with Leanne that day? It hadn't been worse than any other. But choices are made before explanations, whether or not we care to know it. In the art world, there are only two auction houses you really need to know about. They're the ones who make the hundred-million-pound sales, who handle the collections of desperate dukes and socially anxious oligarchs, who funnel a thousand years' worth of beauty and artistry through their museum-quiet rooms and turn it into hard, sexy cash. When I'd landed the job in British Pictures three years ago, I had finally felt like I'd made it. For a day or two, anyway. I soon twigged that that the porters, the blokes who did the actual lifting, were the only people who cared anything about pictures. The rest of them might have been flogging matchsticks or butter. Despite the fact that I'd been employed on merit, despite my hard work, diligence and generally rather impressive knowledge of art, I was forced to admit that as far as the standards of the House went, I was distinctly not made of awesome. After a couple of weeks in the department, I had realised that no one there really cared if you could

tell a Breughel from a Bonnard, that there were other, more vital codes to crack.

There were quite a few things I still liked about my job at the House after three years. I liked walking past the uniformed doorman into the orchid-scented lobby. I liked the satisfyingly reverent looks the clients reserved for “experts” as I climbed the imposing oak staircase, because naturally, everything about the House looked like three centuries’ worth of imposing. I liked eavesdropping on the conversations of the identikit Eurosecretaries, their French and Italian vowels flicking as crisply as their hair. I liked that, unlike them, I wasn’t angling to snare a passing hedgeie in the tendrils of my blow-dry. I was proud of what I had achieved, winning an assistant’s position after a year of interning in British Pictures. Not that I intended to remain in the department for long. I wouldn’t be spending the rest of my life looking at pictures of dogs and horses.

That day, the day I bumped into Leanne, had started with an email from Laura Belvoir, the deputy head of department. It was headed ‘Action Immediately!’ yet there was no text in the body. I walked across the office to ask her what she actually wanted. The bosses had recently been on a management course and Laura had really got behind the idea of desk-to-desk digital communication, though unfortunately she hadn’t yet worked round to typing.

‘I need you to do the attributions for the Longhis.’

We were preparing a series of conversation pieces by the Venetian artist for the upcoming Italian sale.

‘You want me to check the titles in the warehouse?’

‘No, Judith. That’s Rupert’s job. Go to the Heinz and see if you can identify the subjects.’ Rupert was the head of department, who seldom appeared before eleven.

The Heinz Archive has a huge catalogue of named images – I was to look up which particular English lordlings on their eighteenth-century gap year gaities might have sat for Longhi, as identification of particular individuals could make them more interesting to buyers.

‘OK. Have you got a set of photographs, please?’

Laura sighed. ‘In the library. They’re marked as Longhi-slash-Spring.’

Since the House occupied a whole block, it was a four-minute walk from the department to the library, and it was one I did many times every day. Despite rumours of it being the twenty-first century outside, the House was still run largely like a Victorian bank. Many of the employees spent their days plodding round the corridors delivering scrips of paper to one another. The archive and the library were hardly even properly computerised; often one stumbled across little Dickensian ghosts wedged despairingly into obscure cubby holes between mounds of receipts and triplicate photostatted accounts. I retrieved the envelope of pictures and went back to my desk for my bag. My phone rang.

‘Allo? It’s Serena onna desk. I’ve got Rupert’s trousers here.’

So I schlepped to reception, picked up the vast bag from Rupert’s tailor, couriered over the 500-odd metres from

Savile Row, and took it back to the department. Laura looked up.

‘Haven’t you gone yet, Judith? What on earth have you been doing? Well, since you’re here, please could you get me a cappuccino? Don’t go to the canteen, go to that nice little place in Crown Passage. Get a receipt.’

Coffee fetched, I set off on foot towards the archive. I had five photographs in my bag, scenes at the Fenice theatre, the Zattere and a coffee house on the Rialto, and after working through the boxes for a couple of hours, I’d made a list of twelve positive identifications of sitters who had been in Italy contemporaneously with the portraits. I cross referenced the Heinz index with the pictures so that the attribution could be checked for the catalogue and took them back to Laura.

‘What are these?’

‘The Longhis you asked me to do.’

‘These are the Longhis from the sale six years ago. Really, Judith. The photos were on my email to you this morning.’ That would have been the email with no content.

‘But, Laura, you said they were in the library.’

‘I meant the electronic library.’

I didn’t say anything. I logged on to the department’s online catalogue, found the correct pictures (filed as Lunghi), downloaded them to my phone and went back to the Heinz with a flea in my ear from Laura for wasting time. I’d finished the second lot of attributions by the time she was back from lunch at the Caprice, and got on with

cold-calling invitees who hadn't RSVP'd to the private view for the sale. Then I wrote up the bios and emailed them to Laura and Rupert, showed Laura how to open the attachment, took the Tube to the Applied Arts depository near Chelsea Harbour to check on a silk sample which Rupert thought might match with a hanging in the Longhis, discovered to no one's surprise that it didn't, walked most of the way back because the Circle line was stuck at Edgware Road and detoured to Lillywhite's on Piccadilly to pick up a sleeping bag for Laura's son's school camping trip, reappearing exhausted and grimy at 5.30 to another reprimand for missing the departmental viewing of the paintings I'd spent the morning working on.

'Honestly, Judith,' Laura remarked, 'you'll never make any progress if you're haring about town when you could be looking at the works.'

Twitches on invisible threads aside, maybe it wasn't all that surprising that when I came across Leanne at the Tube station a little later, I really did feel like a drink.

3

My interview at the Gstaad Club that night consisted of Olly, the giant, morose Finn who was proprietor, maître d' and bouncer, looking me over in the lacy nude blouse I'd hastily shuffled on in the loos at the Ritz.

'Can you drink?' he asked me.

'She's from Liverpool,' giggled 'Mercedes,' and that was that.

So for the next eight weeks, I worked Thursday and Friday nights in the club. Not hours that most people my age would welcome, but after-work drinks with the team weren't really a big feature of my career. The name, like everything else about the place, was a dated stab at fake class; the only thing that was real about the club was the truly eye-watering mark-up on the champagne. In fact, it didn't look much different from Annabel's, the has-been nightclub a few streets away in Berkeley Square. Same Sloane-Ranger yellow walls, same bad-good pictures, same collection of tragic paunchy older men, same lounging gaggle of girls who were not quite hookers but who always needed a little help with the rent. The job was simple. About ten girls gathered half an hour before the club opened at nine for a pick-me-up dispensed by Carlo the bartender in his immaculately pressed but slightly whiffy

white jacket. The rest of the staff consisted of an ancient babushka who took the coats, and Olly. At nine sharp he unbolted the street door and made the same solemn joke.

‘OK girls, knickers off.’

After opening, we sat about chatting, flicking through celebrity mags or texting for an hour until the customers started to drift in, almost always alone. The idea was that they would pick the girl they liked and take her to sit in one of the pink-velvet swagged alcoves, which was known rather bluntly as ‘getting booked’. When you were booked, your objective was to get the punter to order as many ridiculously overpriced bottles of champagne as possible. We got no wages, just ten per cent on every bottle and whatever the customer chose to leave. My first night, I reeled away from the table halfway through the third bottle and had to ask the babushka to hold my hair while I made myself throw up.

‘Stupid girl,’ she said with gloomy satisfaction. ‘Is not for you to be drinking it.’

So I learned. Carlo served the champagne with huge, goldfish-bowl sized glasses, which we would empty into the ice bucket or the flowers as soon as the customer left the table. Another strategy was to persuade him to invite a ‘friend’ to share a glass. The girls wore pumps, never open-toed sandals, as another ruse was to teasingly persuade him to sip some out of your shoe. You can pour a surprising amount of champagne into a size 39 Louboutin. If all else failed, we just tipped the stuff on the floor.

At first, it seemed miraculous to me that the place stayed open at all. It seemed positively Edwardian, all the heavy-handed flirting and the exorbitant fee for our company. Why would any man bother when he could order up whatever he wanted on his I-Hooker app? It was all so painfully old-fashioned. But I gradually realised that this was exactly what kept the guys coming back. They weren't after sex, though plenty of them could get a bit frisky after a few goldfish bowls. They weren't players, these guys, even in their dreams. They were ordinary middle-aged married blokes who for a few hours wanted to pretend to themselves that they were on a real date, with a real girl, a pretty girl, nicely dressed with decent manners, who actually wanted to *talk* to them. Mercedes, with her talons and her extensions, was the official naughty girl, for customers who wanted something a bit more racy, but Olly preferred the rest of us to dress in plain, well-cut dresses, not too much make-up, clean hair, discreet jewellery. They didn't want risk, or mess, or their wives finding out, or probably even the embarrassment and trouble of having to get it up. Unbelievably pathetic as it was, they just wanted to feel wanted.

Olly knew his market, and he catered to it perfectly. There was a tiny dance floor in the club, with Carlo doubling as DJ, to give the idea that at any moment our chap might spin us off into the disco night, though we were never to encourage this. There was a menu, with perfectly acceptable steak and scallops and ice cream sundaes – middle-aged

men like to watch girls eat fattening puddings. Obviously, the knickerbocker glories stayed down just as long as it took us to make a discreet trip to the loo. Girls who took drugs or who were too obviously slutty didn't last a night – a Polite Notice by the gents proclaimed that it was Strictly Forbidden to offer to Escort any of the Young Ladies Outside the Club. They were meant to aspire to us.

I found myself looking forward to Thursday and Friday nights. With the exception of Leanne (I couldn't really think of her as Mercedes yet), the girls were neither friendly nor unfriendly; pleasant but incurious. They didn't appear interested in my life, perhaps because none of the details they revealed about their own were real. The first night, as we swung a little unsteadily down Albemarle Street, Leanne suggested I choose a name to use in the club. My middle name was Lauren; neutral, untelling.

I said I was studying history of art part-time. All the girls seemed to be studying something, business administration mostly, and perhaps some of them were. None of them were English; clearly the idea that they were working in the bar to try to better themselves struck some sort of Eliza Doolittle chord with the punters. Leanne was flattening out her raucous Scouse – cushion came out as 'cashion'; I modified my own accent, the one I used at work, which had become the voice I dreamed in, to make it a little less obviously Received Pronunciation, but to Olly's evident satisfaction, I still sounded relatively 'posh'.

At my day job, on Prince Street, there were those million tiny codes. Anyone's placement on the social scale could be calibrated to the n th degree at a single glance, and learning the rules was a lot more difficult than identifying paintings, because the whole point of those rules was that if you were on the inside, you never had to be told. Those hours of carefully teaching myself how to speak and how to walk might have passed the test with most people – Leanne, for instance, seemed bemused and grudgingly impressed by my transformation – but somewhere inside the house was a hidden casket of Alice in Wonderland keys that I would never possess, keys that unlocked ever tinier gardens whose walls were all the more impregnable because they were invisible. At the Gstaad, though, I was the token 'toff' and the girls, if they thought about it at all, believed there was no distinction between the WAGs and the superannuated debutantes who occupied adjoining pages in *OK!* magazine. Of course, in a deeper sense they would have been right.

The chat at the club was mostly about clothes, the acquisition of designer-branded shoes and handbags, and men. Some of the girls claimed to have steady boyfriends, many of them married, in which case it was the done thing to complain about their boyfriends endlessly; others were dating, in which case it was the done thing to complain about their dates endlessly. To Natalia and Anastasia and Martina and Karolina it seemed a self-evident truth that men were a necessary evil, to be endured for the sake

of shoes, handbags and Saturday night trips to Japanese restaurants in Knightsbridge. There was a lot of analysis of texts, their frequency and affection, but any emotional response was reserved for the possibility that the men were seeing other women or failing to provide sufficient gifts. Plots and counter plots – with elaborate iPhone ruses – ensued, there was talk of men with boats, men with planes even, but I never got the sense that any of this involved pleasure. Love was not a language any of us dealt in; fresh skins and tight thighs were our currency, only of value to those too old to take it for granted. Older men, it was generally agreed, were less bother on the whole, though they came in for a good deal of raucous shrieking about their physical deficiencies. Baldness and halitosis and the Viagra-grind was reality, though you would never have known that from the coquettish messaging that formed communication between the girls and their men. This was the way of their world, and they kept their contempt and their occasional tears for the rest of us.

For the first time, in the Gstaad, I had what felt like girlfriends, and I was a bit ashamed of how happy it made me. I hadn't had friends at school. I had had quite a few black eyes, an aggressively haughty attitude, a truanting issue and a healthy appreciation of the joy of sex, but friends I didn't have time for. Beyond explaining that we had met up north, Leanne and I had an unspoken agreement that we had been teenage chums (if not actively taking part in holding someone's face in the lavatory

cistern could count as being chummy) and never referred to it. Apart from Frankie, the department secretary at the House, the only constant female presence in my life had been my flatmates, two earnest Korean girls studying medicine at Imperial. We had a cleaning rota pinned up in the bathroom which we all stuck to politely enough and beyond that there was barely any need for conversation. With the exception of the women I met at the particular kind of parties I liked to go to, I'd only ever expected to encounter hostility and scorn from my own sex. I'd never learned how to gossip, or advise, or listen to the endless rehashings of thwarted desire. But here, I found I could join in. On the Tube, I swapped reading the *Burlington Magazine* and *The Economist* for *Heat* and *Closer*, so that when the talk of men palled I too could fall back on the endless soap opera of film stars. I invented a broken heart (implications of an abortion) to explain my lack of dates. I was Not Ready, and I enjoyed being advised that it was time to Get Closure and Move On. My odd nocturnal excursion I kept strictly to myself. It suited me, I realised, this strange little concentrated universe, where the world outside felt far away, where nothing was quite real. It made me feel safe.

Leanne hadn't lied about the money. Exaggerated, maybe, but it was still pretty extraordinary. Counting my percentage on the bottles as cab fare home, I was making about 600 a week clear in tips, crumpled twenties and fifties,

sometimes more. A fortnight took care of my pathetic overdraft, and a few weeks later I took the Sunday train to an outlet centre near Oxford and made a few investments. A black Moschino skirt suit to replace the poor old Sandro, an achingly plain white Balenciaga cocktail dress, Lanvin flats, a DVF print day dress. I finally had my NHS teeth lasered in Harley Street, I made an appointment at Richard Ward and had my hair recut so that it looked subtly the same but five times as expensive. None of this was for the club. For that I got a few simple dresses from the high street and tarted them up with patent Loubie pumps. I cleared a shelf in my wardrobe and carefully placed most of my acquisitions there, wrapped in dry-cleaner's tissue. I liked to look at them, count them through like a stage miser. When I was little I had devoured Enid Blyton's boarding school books, St Clare's and Whyteleaf and Malory Towers. The new clothes were my gymslip and my lacrosse stick, the uniform of who I was going to be.

He started coming in after I had been at the club a month. Thursday was usually the Gstaad's busiest night, before men up on business went back to the country, but it was pouring outside and there were only two customers in the bar. Magazines and phones were not allowed as soon as the punters appeared, so the girls were listless, popping out to crouch under the awning for cigarettes, awkwardly trying to protect their hair from frizzing in the wet. The bell went and Olly came in. 'Sit up straight,

ladies! It's your lucky night!' A few minutes later, one of the grossest men I had ever seen swung a vast belly into the room. He didn't even attempt a bar stool, but thumped down immediately on the nearest banquette, waving Carlo irritably away until he had removed his tie and mopped his face with a handkerchief. He had that slatternly look which only really extraordinary tailoring can solve, and his tailor had clearly been overwhelmed. His open jacket revealed a taut cream shirt stretched over the gut which rested on his splayed knees, folds of neck swagged over his collar, even his shoes looked over-stuffed. He asked for a glass of iced water.

'Haven't seen Fatty for a while,' someone hissed.

The form was for the girls to talk animatedly, with a lot of hair tossing and glances beneath our lashes, looking as though we just happened to be there, unescorted in our smart dresses, until the client made his selection. The fat man was a quick chooser. He nodded to me, the flabby mottled curtains of his cheeks swishing back in a smile. As I crossed the floor I noted the regimental stripe on the discarded tie, the signet ring embedded in the swell of his little finger. Eew.

'I'm Lauren,' I smiled breathily. 'Would you like me to join you?'

'James,' he supplied.

I sat down neatly, legs crossed at the ankle, and looked at him, all twinkling expectance. No talking until they ordered.

‘I suppose you want me to buy you a drink?’ He said it grudgingly, as though he knew how the club worked but still felt it an imposition.

‘Thank you. That would be lovely.’

He didn’t look at the list. ‘What’s the most expensive?’

‘I think –’ I hesitated.

‘Just get on with it.’

‘Well, James, that would be the Cristal 2005. Would you like that?’

‘Get it. I don’t drink.’

I gave the nod to Carlo before he changed his mind. The 2005 was a violent three grand. Three hundred up to me already. Hey, Big Spender.

Carlo carried the bottle over as though it was his first-born son, but James waved him away, uncorked it and dutifully filled the goldfish bowls.

‘Do you like champagne, Lauren?’ he asked.

I allowed myself a wry little smile. ‘Well, it can get a bit monotonous.’

‘Why don’t you give that to your friends and order something you want?’

I liked him for that. He was physically repellent, true, but there was something brave about the fact that he didn’t require me to pretend. I ordered a Hennessy and sipped it slowly, and he told me a little bit about his profession, which was money, of course, and then he heaved himself to his feet and waddled out, leaving £500 in new fifties on the table. The next night, he came back and did

exactly the same. Leanne texted me on Wednesday morning to say that he had come to ask for Lauren on Tuesday, and on Thursday he reappeared, a few minutes after opening time. Several of the girls had ‘regulars’, but none so generous, and it gave me a new status amongst them. Slightly to my surprise, there was no jealousy. But, after all, business was business.