the Juniper Gin Joint

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ALLEN & UNWIN

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For Eloise, my first gin-drinking pal
and most excellent cousin

Chapter One

A Sunday afternoon in late September, a sniff of autumn in the air, a change in the light. Sunday afternoons used to be about the roast dinner and the lawn, me cooking, Mike mowing. Now it's all veggie sausages, joss sticks, and rapper dudes banging on about stuff I don't even understand. The joys of living with an eighteen-year-old. Only not for much longer.

'Come on, Lauren, get a move on!' I have to yell to be heard above the 'music' pounding from her bedroom.

No response.

Just the shoutiness of DJ Nobber, or whatever this one's called.

Back upstairs then, for the sixty-fourth time today. It doesn't feel like two ticks since I was trudging up these very same stairs to settle her of an evening, what with her colic and Harry's toddler gymnastics. I could've done with a Stannah Stairlift. Which isn't such a bad idea now I come to think of it. Not for me. I'm only a few

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months off fifty. (I have to whisper this number, even in my head.) It's Dad I'm worried about. He's doddery on his legs and I'd hate for him to have another fall.

I take a deep breath, steady myself, prepare to enter Lauren's room.

'Get a move on, Lolly.'

'Calm down, Mother. We've got ages yet.' She's on her hands and knees, searching for something: DNA? A murder weapon? A dead body? It's hard to tell with all her crapaphernalia. Meanwhile, Bob, our creaky old Jack Russell, is languishing on his back in a patch of sunshine on Lauren's unmade bed, oblivious to the fact that his number-one fan is about to abandon him.

'I don't want to get caught in the rush-hour traf—'

'It's Plymouth we're going to, Mum, not Manhattan.'

Plymouth most definitely isn't Manhattan, but it's got a university and that's where I'm taking my daughter. If she ever gets her bloody act together.

'How much more of that stuff are you bringing? My poor old Polo's already crammed.'

'Stop stressing,' she says, using the voice that makes me stressed. She gets up off her knees, her search forgotten, in order to survey her room, hands on hips, hair in plaits, dirt on cheeks, like she's Pippi Longstocking. 'There's just this suitcase. And my sleeping bag. And that lamp. And those Yankee candles I got for Christmas... and... oh, yeah, this box.' She nudges the box with her

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foot. There's a hole in her sock and a glittery toenail pokes through.

'You really need a box of cuddly toys?'

'I might get lonely.' She slumps onto the bed and pulls Bob towards her, nuzzling her freckled nose into his neck.

'Plymouth's barely an hour away.' I'm doing my best to be a model of calm but sometimes, right now, it's not easy. 'Why don't you just take Mrs Pink?'

Mrs Pink, the one-eyed bunny with grubby fur and worn-out ears. She's always been top toy. Goes everywhere with Lauren. School residentials, sleepovers, festivals. Now she's going to be a frigging fresher.

'But Mrs Pink needs Tinky Winky. They're best friends, remember.'

I take a deep breath. I want to say in a very firm voice, *Lauren, you are eighteen years old, about to embark on a chemistry degree, not infant school*. But I can't. 'Just bring Mrs Pink and Tinky Winky. The others can stay here and guard your bedroom from the Bogeyman.'

This does the trick. I go on to say she won't be allowed smelly candles because the powers that be don't want drunk students setting fire to the halls of residence.

'You sound upset, Mum. Are you going to miss me?'

'Course I am, Lolly, but you're going to have the best time. I'm so jealous. Me and your dad never got further than Dingleton Comp. You've done us proud.'

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'Where is Dad, anyway?'

'No idea. He said he'd be here to wave you off.'

'He's probably busy with *her*.'

I want to agree. I want to say yes, he's probably having some afternoon delight with your chemistry teacher, Miss Melanie Barton. Yes, he's probably right at this moment showing her his Bunsen burner. But, no. I am the sensible parent. And Lauren's the last of our babies to leave the nest. Harry's been gone a whole year, bartending his way across Canada. I've adjusted to his being away, to his random middle-of-the-night messages, the occasional FaceTime. But this is my little girl.

It's only Plymouth.

'Let me grab Granddad from the shed. We're leaving in ten. At the latest. Text your father.'

She follows me downstairs, Mrs Pink under one arm, a wriggling Bob under the other, texting her father with her wizard fingers. The fingers that can turn magnesium into gold dust and Snapchat in the dark.

Mike pings back his apologies. Says Melanie needs some emotional support because her cat's gone AWOL. I feel like texting him to say I've kidnapped her bastard cat and it's currently boiling away to a pulp on my stove. But I like cats. And I'm the grown-up.

'Never mind, Lolly. He'll pop down and see you when he's on the road. He's in Plymouth a lot.'

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I release Bob from her grip and shoo him out to the garden for a wee. He can't half bark for a little dog.

Lolly stays put, at the bottom of the stairs, pouting. She's five years old again, standing in her Mulan PJs, sucking her thumb, Mrs Pink's ears nestled one against each side of her nose, waiting for her daddy to come home from work. 'Where's Granddad?' she asks, wiping away a rogue tear.

Here he is, Granddad, wandering out of the kitchen into the hallway like he's forgotten something, or is maybe looking for it. He's not got dementia. He's always been scatty. But now that he's spotted Lauren, a smile spreads over his wizened face and he looks his seventy-four years and yet he's also my dad from when I was a little girl, the spark in his cornflower-blue eyes still fizzing away with awe and wonder.

'Here she is,' he says. 'The brain of Britain.'

'Granddad. Don't,' she half-heartedly protests. 'It's only a degree.' She blushes but she loves it. Laps it up and milks it for all it's worth.

He hands her a bottle of his home-made damson wine. 'This'll make you friends and influence them.'

'Thanks,' she says.

'It's stronger than that cider you drink.'

'You're a legend.'

'I certainly hope so.'

She kisses him and he slips a wad of cash into her

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hand. 'A little something to help you on your way.' He winks. 'It'll buy you a snakebite and a packet of condoms.'

'*Dad!*' He is *so* embarrassing sometimes.

He shrugs.

She stashes the notes in the back pocket of her ultra-skinny ripped jeans that remind me of the venetian blinds we had in the front room back in the day.

'We don't want any surprises. Not till you've graduated and won the Nobel Prize in Chemistry.'

Sexual-health advice from my father to my daughter. What next? I must sigh or look pained as he says, 'Get a move on, Lollipop. Your mother's hit that time of life where she's likely to explode at any given moment.' He hugs her. She hugs him back, tight, so tight she might fracture one of his ribs.

'Don't go losing that money,' I tell her, heading back up to her room. 'You can buy a heck of a lot of condoms with fifty quid.'

Dad does his Sid James laugh.

I can't see my daughter's face from here but I know it'll be the colour of that damson wine.

After several more trips up and down those bloody stairs, and after much faffing and flapping, after she's said her emotional goodbyes to the dog, to her grandfather and to all the rooms and bits of furniture, we get going, Dad and Bob waving us off until we can no longer

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see them even though they're standing in the middle of the road.

'Bye, House,' Lauren whispers. 'Bye, Road. Bye, Park. Bye, Library. Bye, Museum. Bye, Train Station. Bye, Sea—'

'Why don't you put on a CD, Lolly?'

She tuts, like I've suggested she winds up a gramophone, then connects her phone to my car stereo.

Despite DJ Nobber blasting my ears, despite Mrs Pink and Tinky Winky making it tricky to see out the back window, and despite the fact that I keep bashing the lamp with my hand every time I go for a gear change, we've done it. Me and Dad. We've got Lauren on her way. Our little girl's all grown up.

'What's a "snakebite", Mum?' she asks, fingers flying over her phone as she Instagrams every moment of our epic journey down the A38. 'How can you buy a snakebite?'

God, I feel old. God,

THREE HOURS LATER and I'm driving back up the A38, alone in an empty car. All that's left of my daughter is the smell of ylang-ylang and a Quavers packet screwed into a ball on her seat. At least I can listen to the radio. Leif Garrett is singing 'I was Made for Dancin'', a proper tune. I used to have a life-size poster of the gorgeous one, blew kisses at him from my bed, before I even knew

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what a proper kiss was. That happened a few years later, school leavers' disco, July 1984.

Now I'm officially an empty-nester, Harry and Lauren off on adventures, and while I'm pleased for them, proud of them, this isn't how I imagined my future panning out. Thought we were doing all right, me and Mike, not bad for a couple with just a handful of O levels and CSEs between them. We were on course, two relatively functioning children, a semi-detached house with off-road parking, permanent jobs, three more years to pay off the mortgage, and a cruise booked. I never expected to be driving home to my dad in a rattling old Polo, worrying about student loans and pension funds and a marriage breakdown. But then I never thought Mum would go first or that Mike would be such a tosser.

'I'm well annoyed with Dad,' Lauren said earlier once we'd reached her halls and started to unpack the car.

We'd lugged all her stuff – the suitcases, the rucksack, the bedding, the crockery, the sleeping bag, the lamp – into her new room, just Lolly and me between us. And her room, her room is all right. A pod with a desk, a bed and an en-suite. I've never had an en-suite but I don't begrudge her that. She's worked hard. Extra tuition. Which is where Miss Melanie Barton entered stage left and exited stage right with a middle-aged man who happened to be my husband. A man I'd been with ever since school.

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'I'm well annoyed with him too, Lolly. Well annoyed. But you've got a fresh start and it's going to be bloody brilliant.'

I gave her a hug and left her organizing her Sharpies and make-up and socks to go back up the A38 to my increasingly empty life.

'Forty-nine years old, Lief.' I say this out loud, in the safety of my car. 'Forty-nine!'

Lief carries on singing. He's not bothered.

But I am.

The sun is setting by the time I get home and our street is Sunday-night quiet. There's a van on the driveway. Mike. I pull in next to it. Twice the size of my rust bucket and yet he couldn't take his daughter to university. Couldn't even wave her off. Wait till I get my hands on the little ratbag.

I turn off the engine and sit for a while, eyes shut, hoping that when I open them, his van will have disappeared.

It hasn't. I'll have to go in. Besides, I'm gagging for a G and T. Better still, Dad's got a bottle of sloe gin from last autumn. He'll be happy to crack it open. It's almost time to make this year's batch. And today's rite of passage should be marked somehow.

I get out of the car, knees clicking, back sore. I'm

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reaching for my bag on the back seat when I notice something, someone, left behind on the floor. Mrs Pink.

Bugger.

I pick her up like she's a newborn, hold her tight, sniff her, and have to resist the urge to suck my thumb, though I do rub those worn-out ears. They feel like silk. I feel like bawling. But I will not let Mike see me upset. Oh, no.

Mike is fraternizing with my father in the shed. It was newly constructed by Mike last year as an attempt to lure Dad to move in with us after his fall. He didn't break any bones but he was shaken up and riddled with grief because it happened within a few weeks of Mum dying. The existing shed, Mike's, wasn't big enough for Dad's stuff so this clinched the deal for my eccentric father to sell up the old house. When Harry left to go travelling, Dad moved into his room. Not so long after that, Mike moved out. And now Lauren.

I'm not going to mope though I do have the right to feel narked.

This shed might be huge but it's stacked with Dad's stuff: books, vinyl, fossils, mysterious scientific objects, Kilner jars, recycled bottles, an old nappy bucket filled with corks. A home-brewing/distilling aficionado who

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thought nothing of roping in child labour when needed. It's entirely clear where Lauren found her interest in chemistry. Watching her grandfather turn fruit into moonshine, hooch, cider and gin was like being in the presence of an alchemist. A magician. She always loved a trick. The coin behind the ear, the nose in the fingers. She wanted to be Hermione Granger and use real magic, not just sleight of hand or misdirection. Dad's booze-making intrigued her. His ginger-beer plant was the stuff of legends and watered the whole of Dingleton at one point. Chemistry was the closest she could get to this. Though I have no doubt she'd have taken a degree in brewing and distilling if she could have.

I turn my attention to Mike, slouched in a deckchair, one of a pair we used to take on holidays, a traitorous Bob curled up tight on his lap.

'Drinking tea?' I ask, surprised, seeing as he's normally on the beer when he's with my father.

'I'm driving,' he says.

'So you are.'

I wait for him to carry on.

He coughs, that clearing-his-throat cough he does when he's embarrassed. 'Sorry, Jen,' he mutters. 'About the mess-up earlier.'

Apparently the scraggy cat returned at teatime, smelling of lavender and smoke. Mrs Baxter, who lives up the road from the dirty lovebirds, is number-one

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suspect. I tell him, all calm like, that I don't give a flying monkey about Mrs Baxter and her personal habits. But I do care that he wasn't here for our daughter. I tell him Lauren was disappointed and he'd better visit her soon. He says he'll go mid-week.

'Make sure you do.' I am so annoyed I can't look at him so I busy myself hunting down that remaining bottle of sloe gin. It's in here somewhere.

And now Mike's moaning to Dad, about Melanie, about how she nags him which is something I never did. Probably should have. Though I am now. Which is better late than never. And how dare he? How dare he grumble about Melanie, the woman he left me for? It's no use Mike offloading onto Dad. My father's not listening to a word; he's gone elsewhere, deep inside his head. He'll be thinking about stuff most of us never will, such as how many smells your nose can remember (fifty thousand) and which day of the week you're most likely to have a heart attack (Monday).

I do not want to hear about Mike's troubles.

Though I do confess to a certain smugness.

All is not rosy then.

'Ah, gotcha.' I hold up the bottle in a moment of triumph.

'The secret is to use decent gin,' Dad says, back in the room, when I pull the cork out of the precious bottle. 'The sloes are all the happier for it.'

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'Yes, Dad,' I say. 'You get what you pay for.' Life advice from the man who forages in hedgerows and loiters around bottle banks. The man who makes booze that can knock your head off: elderflower fizz, damson wine, blackberry liqueur, and my favourite, sloe gin. I might be the owner of depleted hormones, a diminishing family and zero sex life, but I've got Dad and his home comforts.

I grab a couple of dusty tumblers from the shelf, look in my bag for a tissue and there she is, Mrs Pink. I pull her out, a rabbit out of a hat, hold her up for my audience of three, give them a moment to absorb the significance.

There's an intake of breath.

'Bugger,' the men say in unison as Bob whines.

I use Mrs Pink to wipe the glasses, pour a generous one for Dad and an even more generous one for myself.

Mike looks up, expectant. 'What about me...?'

'You're driving,' I remind him.

'So I am,' he says.

'You'd better take Mrs Pink with you, Mike. Your daughter needs her. She needs you.'

We watch as Mike struggles out of the deckchair and makes for the door, off to his home, Melanie the Moaner's home, Mrs Pink clutched in his hand. If I were a kinder person I might feel a teeny-weeny bit sorry for him. But obviously I'm not and I don't.

'Cheers, Dad.' I chink my glass against his.

'Bottoms up,' he says.

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Chapter Two

I LOVE THE twenty-minute walk to work. It takes me from our house on the edge of town, past the bungalows and retirement flats, down onto the high street, with its pound shops and cafés, then into the park, past the immaculate bowling green, the tatty bandstand, the half-arsed crazy golf. Along the footpath that edges Dingleton Water, a brook famous for its black swans. On past the amusement arcade where I had my first summer job, under the bridge that carries the trains to London, the Great Western Railway carved out of the sandstone cliffs by our hero, Isambard Kingdom Brunel, and down to the seafront with its kiosk, cockle hut and boat trips.

Next to the two-platform station stands Clatford House, a once elegant, now shabby Regency building, overlooking the beach with its red sand where, from the big sash windows, you can watch the sea in its whole spectrum of glory, from stormy grey through to sparkling blue. On a clear day you can see the Jurassic Coast

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as far as Portland Bill. It's a little hazy this morning, the sun yet to burn off the sea mist, but you can smell the ozone, as my mum used to call it.

The house was built by an infamous sea captain, harbourmaster and profiteer, Thomas Clatford, who turned a blind eye to smuggling in return for a cut of the profits. This was back when Dingleton was thriving, fish were plentiful and booze tax was sky high. This was the town's heyday and Clatford House was a symbol of its wealth. At the turn of the last century, Captain Clatford's granddaughter bequeathed the house to the people of the town and it became our museum. I've been full-time assistant manager since the implosion of my marriage. Working here has pretty much saved my life, thanks to my brilliant colleagues. Brilliant, if slightly insane.

We're busy this morning. As well as the usual visitors, there's a run on the computers in the archives room out the back. Upstairs, there's the weekly course on family ancestry run by the manager, Jackie (Exhibit A of brilliant but slightly insane colleagues). Meanwhile, Carol (our part-timer and Exhibit B) is holding the fort at the desk while I am sorting the window display behind her. Across the way, in the Captain's Parlour, there's a school visit, a Year Six class from the local primary where Harry and Lauren went – and Mike, Carol and me before them.

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Carol nods towards the class of ten- and eleven-year-olds who are sitting cross-legged, listening to Tish, our faithful volunteer and local historian (Exhibit C). She's telling them all about Dingleton's smuggling days of yore, hamming up a Devon accent, dressed like a pirate, complete with a stuffed parrot on her shoulder and a patch over one eye. They are slightly terrified of her. Especially the teacher.

'He's a bit of all right,' Carol says in a stage whisper, nudging me in the ribs.

'Who?' I can only see old Mr Bailey filling his carrier bag with leaflets and Trampy Kev outside on the pavement, picking up fag ends, which at least means we don't have to.

'Not Mr Bailey, you numpty. And definitely not Trampy Kev. *Him*.' She points ever so subtly at the teacher, with a stabbing motion. 'That's Mr Winter. The Silver Fox.'

'Is he new?'

'Retrained as a teacher when he hit fifty. Fancied a career change.'

'What did he used to be?'

'Some kind of do-gooder.'

'Oh, right.'

We both linger a while, checking out the Silver Fox, then while I'm balanced on a chair putting up a poster – is Hallowe'en really next month? – Carol attempts to make a spider using pipe cleaners.

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'By the way,' she says. 'I saw your Mike last night down the Co-op.'

'He's not my Mike any more.'

'Maybe not, but he was proper sheepish when I accidentally ran into him. Actually more like mutton.'

'What?'

'He was wearing a hoody.'

'A hoody?' I nearly slip off the chair. 'He hates hoodies.'

'I know.' Carol shrugs like she can't understand how such a thing could happen. 'He looked like a right twonk.'

'He is a right twonk.'

'I can come up with a stronger word if you want.'

'Nothing I haven't called him.'

Carol laughs, lobs the spider at me and I scream so loudly that the class of children look across at me, petrified. However, the Silver Fox smiles. Quite a nice smile.

'It's a mid-life crisis is what it is,' Carol says for the thousandth time.

'Can we change the record? I'm fed up of talking about bloody Mike.'

'Keep your wig on.'

'Sorry, Carol. I'm missing Lauren, that's all. It's making me grumpy.'

'She'll be fine. She'll be out on the town with all

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those freshers having the time of her life. You, on the other hand, are a miserable cow and need some spice in your life.'

'Thanks.'

'We should go out tonight, take your mind off.' She gives me a quick hug and it feels nice, the warmth of another human. It's been a while. 'Let's talk about Dave instead.'

'Dave who?'

'You know exactly Dave who.'

'Oh, you mean Dave-Dave?'

'Yeah, I mean Dave-Dave.'

'Do we have to talk about him? He's another twonk I'd rather forget.'

'Yeah, we do, actually.'

'Really?'

'Yes.'

This is how it always goes between Carol and me, this bickering banter; *me to you*, *you to me*, like a flipping Chuckle Brothers ping-pong match.

'Why do we have to talk about Dave?'

'He's called a meeting after work. Didn't Jackie tell you? We can go straight for a drink after that. I'm sure it's something or nothing. The bins or seagulls.'

I feel the need to look out the window and steady the buffs. Where Dave is concerned, it's more likely to be something rather than nothing.

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Dave-Dave, aka Councillor David Barton, uncle to Miss Melanie Barton, was at school with us, Mike, Carol and me. He was in the same year, but we were in different classes as he was considered 'academic'. And, for whatever reasons, we weren't. Dave fancied himself, thought he was the mutt's nuts with his Morrissey quiff and slim hips. He was good-looking, I'll give him that, but he was also a plonker. A really self-assured good-looking plonker. It's no surprise he ended up as our local councillor, not just because politics (in the broadest and loosest and most Machiavellian sense of its meaning) ran in the family, but also because he was always a leader, always wanting to be in charge, even when he clearly wasn't the best candidate for the job, like the year he was debating captain and the Dingleton team were up against Appleton and the chosen subject was 'Blondes Are Stupid' which ended up with Carol giving Dave a black eye and being suspended for a week.

Bloody controlling show-off.

It was Dave who told me the news about Mike, almost exactly a year ago. He came in here one afternoon and asked to have a word. I assumed it was something to do with work; I was acting up that week, as Jackie was on annual leave. But he had this weird smile hovering around his lips. The lips that were the first lips I ever snogged. Leavers' disco, 1984.

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I took him into the office, grudgingly made him a coffee and somehow resisted the urge to pour it over his head.

'I have some information for you, Jennifer.' He helped himself to a ginger nut and dunked it in his Nescafé. 'Shocking coffee, by the way.'

'You're welcome.'

A moment's silence while he finished his biscuit.

'What did you want to have a word about? Is it the bins? I mean, those seagulls are a right pest but we're doing our best to keep on top of the situation.'

'No, Jennifer. It's not the bins. Or the seagulls. Though if I had my way, I'd shoot every last one of the little bastards.'

'You can't. They're protected.'

'That was a joke, Jennifer.'

'Ha, ha.'

He smiled that smile and I was a schoolgirl again, the burden of virginity weighing me down, him happy to relieve me of it, a snog at the school disco turning into something far more, deluding me into thinking this was as important to him as it was for me. Until he binned me for Sharon Shaw. And I turned to Mike for consolation.

'So what did you want a word about?'

'Your husband.'

'Mike?'

'He is your husband?'

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'You were at the wedding.'

'What a day that was.'

'We can't all have our reception at the Palace Hotel.'

'Indeed not.' He grimaced at the coffee, but persevered. 'Some of us have to make do with the RAFA club.'

'Mike's dad was in the RAF. He was a war hero. Your dad was a banker. And we all know what that rhymes with.'

'Spanker?'

'Ha, bloody ha.'

'Don't be like that. You know we have this "thing" between us.'

'I wish that thing would drop off.'

'Very good. I'll make a note of that.' And then he laughed. I meant to dazzle him with my cutting wit but he bloody laughed at me, a rip-roaring laugh, like I was an idiot. The bastard.

'Enough of this joshing,' he said, serious all of a sudden.

'What is it, David? Get to the point.'

'I thought it my duty to inform you of something that's cropped up. I speak with authority not only because the person in question is a relative of mine, but also as chair of directors at the Academy.'

'Just because you call it an "academy" doesn't change it from being the very same comp we went to.'

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‘There’s great importance in a name, Jennifer. Miss Barton, for instance.’

‘What about Miss Barton?’

‘You know her?’

‘Of course I know her. She’s your niece, poor thing. We used to babysit for her, remember. Plus she’s Lauren’s chemistry teacher, gives her extra tuition because she says she’s got potential. Which we pay for, as your academy won’t.’

‘You should know that Melanie is also being paid in other ways.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘Your husband.’

‘Mike’s paying her too?’

‘Not quite, though there’s an exchange of sorts.’

Talking in flaming riddles as always. ‘What the hell are you going on about?’

‘Temper, Jennifer.’

‘Well?’

‘He’s having an affair with her.’

‘Who’s having an affair with who?’

‘Mike. With Melanie.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous.’

‘I’m not being ridiculous.’

‘She’s far too young.’

‘And?’

‘She’s Lauren’s teacher.’

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'And?'

'Mike's not like that.' I heard all these words falling out of my mouth, I acknowledged them, but even so I felt the need to sit down on my chair for a moment. 'Mike wouldn't do that.'

'Every man would do that. They'd do her anyway. Not me, obviously, she's my niece—'

'Don't be disgusting, you sexist pig. And don't judge every man by your own shoddy standards.'

'Can you honestly tell me you have a good marriage?'

'My marriage has got nothing to do with you. And anyway, what do you know about marriage?'

'Quite a lot. I've had three of them, remember.'

'And three divorces.'

'I'm very happy to advise if that's the path you choose.'

'Get out.'

'I'm going. Got a round of golf booked.'

'Of course you have.'

A year ago. He was right. I was wrong. Bloody harbinger of doom. Whatever he's got stuffed up the sleeve of his designer shirt can't be any worse than that.

Once we've locked up, we head upstairs to the meeting room. It's cramped what with all the staff gathered and Dave manspreading on his chair. I force myself to look at his double chin rather than his crotch. He's put on

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weight. Golf and tennis aren't keeping the pounds off. Nor are the late hours he keeps or the women he chases.

'Councillor Barton. What can we do for you?' Jackie is polite and formal; this is a work meeting and she is the manager and the council pay our wages.

'I'll get straight to the point,' he says. 'We need to close Clatford House.'

The room fills with a collective gasp and a lot of what-the-hells.

'But you can't,' Tish says. It doesn't help that she's still dressed like Captain Pugwash. 'What about the museum?'

'We'll incorporate Dingleton museum with Appleton's. They've got a state-of-the-art building, all mod cons, and it's only three miles away so we're keeping it local.' He gazes around the room, making eye contact with every one of us. We've known each other for years and yet he can look us in the face and be so blasé about our future. 'I'm sorry,' he says. 'But this place is decrepit. It's just not feasible to keep it going.'

'Clatford House is listed.' Thank goodness for Tish. She knows her stuff. 'You have to do the repairs, surely?'

'It is listed, yes. Thank you, Tish, for bringing that up.' He gives her a charming smile that I want to rip off his face. 'But we can't afford to get this place up to speed so we'll have to sell it.'

Sell Clatford House?

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'There has been some interest from a national company,' he goes on, all chirpy as if he's our saviour but I know where there's a Barton, there's a cunning plan to make money. His dad was the same. And his dad before him.

'What about us?' I ask him, throwing daggers. 'Will we be incorporated into Appleton?'

'Well, Jennifer, realistically that's not going to be possible for all of you.' Here it comes. 'You'll be offered early retirement or redundancy.'

And that's when he clicks opens his briefcase and hands over the letters of mass destruction.

So Jackie, Carol, Tish and I end up down the Thirsty Bishop, sitting outside on one of the picnic benches that overlooks the green because it's a balmy evening and because Tish smokes like a 1940s starlet, constantly and glamorously. We share a bottle of Pinot that turns into two, then three, going round and round in circles, trying to get to grips with this news, not only the prospect of unemployment but also the loss of a vital part of our community. And I know David; there'll be something dodgy at the heart of the matter.

'Can I join you?' It's the Silver Fox.

'Course you can,' says Carol, a little too keenly.

'I couldn't help overhearing your conversation.'

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‘Oh, girls, we’ve got ourselves a stalker,’ Carol screeches. I kick her in the shins. She shoots me a frown and shifts her bum away from me, tapping the spot on the bench between us with her scarlet acrylics. He squeezes in, careful not to spill any of his pint or brush against any stray body parts. He has dirty fingers and I find myself wondering if this is because he’s a gardener in his spare time, or just a dirty bugger.

‘Is it true?’ he asks, conspiratorially, checking all around for spies or whatever. ‘About the museum closure?’

We look at Jackie. She’s our manager. It’s up to her to say. She’s been quiet all evening. She’s not the most talkative, but she’s a plodder, a dependable plodder who can step up to the mark when needed. Actually, that’s a little unfair. She can be a warrior. A dependable warrior. She wasn’t camped out on Greenham Common with her mum for nothing, standing up to one of the biggest superpowers in the entire history of the world.

She reaches into her bag and shows him her letter. I’m surprised, she’s normally so discreet, but I can see a fire burning away inside her and I know that she will not let this lie. ‘I hear you used to be a campaigner before you started teaching, Mr Winter,’ she says.

He raises his eyebrow. His silver eyebrow. I think we all raise an eyebrow and prick up our ears.

‘Call me Tom,’ he says.

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'Well, Tom?' I ask him. 'What did you campaign about? Brexit? Page Three? Boaty McBoatface?' I know I'm sounding cynical but I can't bear the thought of another man thinking he's God's gift and feeling the need to mansplain everything.

'Er, well, I've worked for Amnesty. Free Tibet. And Mind. Oh, yeah, and a stint at Battersea Dogs and Cats Home.'

He has me at dogs. I feel so completely stupid and infantile. Boaty McBoatface. My excuse is that I've had bad news. And much wine.

'What you need is a campaign,' he says. He's on the verge of saying something else but then shuts up.

Tish notices this. 'Go on, Tom. What is it?'

He checks from side to side again. 'There've been rumours,' he says quietly. 'About a certain pub chain who like to buy up historical buildings and sell cheap booze.'

We know exactly who he's talking about. They took over the Wesleyan chapel in Newton, the old cinema in Tormouth and the family Grace Brothers-type department store in Appleton where I used to buy the kids' school socks. Are we next on the list?

'They'd never get planning permission,' says Carol. 'Not in Dingleton. We're all about local pubs and indie cafés here. People won't put up with it.'

'People like cheap booze.' Tom shrugs. 'You'll have a fight on your hands.'

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'We can fight, can't we, team?' Jackie is fired up.

We all are. We nod. We even give a little whoop that could be mistaken for a battle cry.

'I'm happy to help in any way I can,' Tom says. 'You don't have to give in to this. You could buy it. Get an investor.'

'What, keep the museum going?' Jackie sounds surprised, optimistic for a moment.

'Maybe. Maybe not. But you could stop it being a chain pub. Keep it independent. Keep your jobs going somehow. You might just have to come up with something unique, though. Something that will make you stand out and bring added value to the town.'

The four of us slump again. We had hope there for a while.

'What's so unique about a bunch of menopausal women?' Yes, I've said it. The M word. Out loud. The ground did not split asunder. The sky did not fall down.

'Nothing a bit of HRT can't sort out,' says Jackie.

'That's the spirit,' says the Silver Fox and the five of us bump fists like we're in an American movie, not a shabby seaside town with its best years behind it.

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