

Chapter 1

Steve Sinclair looked at his watch, 4.30 p.m. and the office was already preparing itself for the early Friday exodus into the wine bars of Glasgow's city centre. The day had been mild and intermittently sunny and, as a consequence, the office was warm, the staff languid and already mentally ordering their first drink of the weekend. Steve didn't mind his staff leaving early on a Friday; he pushed them hard during the week. He appreciated that all of them could be relied upon to put in the extra hours when deadlines loomed; an early exit on a Friday was easy payback and his staff were more than happy to oblige. Despite the recession Steve, through sheer hard work and a great deal of charm, had managed to keep his graphic design business on track and business and morale, for the moment, was good.

At 4.35 p.m., Paula, his efficient and fortunately good-humoured PA, popped her head around the door.

'Anything else you need doing before we head off?' she asked cheerily.

Steve could tell that she wasn't expecting to be given anything else to do on a Friday afternoon as, already fully made-up for a night on the town, her body language signalled that her mind was already on her first vodka.

'No thanks, Paula. Have a good one. I don't think there's anything that we didn't discuss this afternoon. Remember, Donnie is quite capable of dealing with any issues while I'm away and tell him only to contact me if it's life or death. I'm sure you can all manage for a few days without having to call me.'

Paula laughed her mischievous, throaty laugh, her recently whitened teeth clashing with her glossed lips and expensively applied bottled tan. She was attractive, but smoking from the age of fourteen was already taking its toll.

'I'm sure we can, Steve, enjoy yourself and don't do anything I wouldn't do!' And with a wink she was gone.

That leaves me a pretty blank canvas then, Steve thought to himself as he watched her wiggle her way along the corridor in her ridiculously high heels and tight black skirt. Not his type, but as he eyed her buttocks straining at the fabric, he had to admit she had a great arse.

By 4.45 p.m. the office was empty, silent, apart from the intermittent buzz from the water cooler and the background hum from the rush-hour traffic outside. His mobile rang; it was Mike MacDonald, keen for his usual Friday-night pint.

‘Bloody hell, Mike, are you out already?’

‘Stevie Boy,’ Mike shouted down the phone, trying to talk above the din of the already busy wine bar, ‘are you coming down to Dawson’s? Thought we might get revved up before we head off tomorrow, shit, I’m so excited. Callum’s coming, not sure about El Divo.’

Mike MacDonald, , property developer and an all-round great bloke was, as usual, firing on all cylinders. Despite being on the small side, Mike was a magnet for women, his outrageous sense of humour and Tom Cruise smile appealing to all types and all ages. Mike, however, was devoted to his lovely wife Christie.

‘Not sure yet, mate, got a few things to finish up here. I’ll do my best. I’ll text you if I can make it.’ Steve stared at the computer screen trying to assess how long it would take him to tie things up.

‘Come on, Stevie Boy, it can wait till you get back, that’s what your staff are for. Come on, it’s party time!’

Putting down his mobile, Steve scanned the emails, searching for any that might need his attention before he left. Most of them were from the rest of the boys about to embark on the annual Scotland–England golf trip, the usual juvenile banter along with confirmation of hotel bookings, flights, costumes purchased, song lyrics to learn and team sheets. Shit, he hadn’t even looked at the song sheet, which was bad news. Punishment this year for being crap on any part of the tour was likely to be severe, this being the twentieth anniversary and a big one. Myles Cavendish was in charge, and he was

dangerous. He never missed a trick. Forfeits were his speciality. His phone rang again. It was Lucy, his wife.

‘Hi, darling, what’s up?’

‘I was just wondering what time you would be home this evening as the kids would like to see you before you head off tomorrow. Jamie wants you to help him with his talk.’

From the tone of her voice, Steve realised that a pint was probably a bad idea. ‘Tell him I’ve got a few things to finish up here and I will try and get on the six-thirty, if not it will definitely be the seven, I promise.’

‘Please, Steve, it’s really not that much to ask.’

‘I said I would be back as soon as I can, I will definitely be on the seven, I promise. Tell him to have his bath, and I’ll help him when I get back.’

Steve returned to his emails and, draining the last of his coffee, printed off the song sheet. Bloody hell, how many songs were there? Cavendish was a complete bastard. It was alright for him, he didn’t have a wife and kids to deal with every evening, having been divorced or dumped by every woman who had ever been daft enough to get mixed up with him. Steve knew that Lucy couldn’t stand Cavendish, having described him recently as an arrogant shit, and her unhappiness with this trip stemmed from the fact that Cavendish was in charge. Cavendish was also not one of the original founders of the trip, having been drafted in a few years ago when one of the London boys had had to call off at the last minute. If he was honest, Steve didn’t trust him either, considered him a bit of a pompous twat, full of his own importance and, as far as Steve was concerned, he had no right to be organising it. But, as usual, he had muscled his way in, and as no one else had complained, he had had to let it go. For a fleeting moment he began to wonder whether he was getting too old for all this. He forwarded a few more emails to Donnie and Paula and looked at his watch, five-thirty, just time for a pint. Picking up his mobile, he sent a text to Mike.

Lucy slammed down the phone in exasperation. Men are such complete shits, she thought to herself, selfish bloody shits. Taking a tube of tomato purée from the fridge, she squeezed it angrily into the Bolognese sauce. She knew he would go for a pint, he wouldn't be able to help himself, wouldn't want to let the boys down. It was alright to let her down, that was part of the game for them, seeing how much they could get away with, how far they could push without the walls crashing down. Lucy, however, realised that the more barriers the wives put up, the more they tried to circumnavigate them, not being able to resist any form of challenge. She had learned early on that ignoring their games made it a lot less fun for them. Boys' trip was the right word for it, certainly none of them had grown up yet, and how the hell they managed to run successful businesses was anyone's guess. She poured herself a glass of white wine and left the sauce to simmer. In reality she didn't really mind Steve going away, quite enjoyed having one less person to cater for in the house and the bed to herself for a few nights, but there was always something nagging at the back of her mind. It annoyed her that he enjoyed his time away from her so much, that he obviously found a trip away with the boys a lot more fun than a holiday with her, but she could cope with that. If she was honest, she often preferred the company of her friends to him. The difficult thing to cope with though, was her lack of trust. Steve had never in their fourteen years of marriage given her any reason to doubt that he had been anything other than faithful, but the golf trip always made her nervous. A combination of boys, booze and too many egos was, in her mind, a recipe for disaster. She was in no doubt that he would flirt, would enjoy any attention at his age, but would he actually have sex with another woman, had he had sex with another woman or, worse still for her, actually enjoy the company of another woman? She didn't know. If he had, would she want to know? This year, the fact that Cavendish was in charge made her more uneasy for, as far as she was concerned, Cavendish was without any moral substance, having cornered her at a recent party. She had dealt with it; possibly she had been slightly flattered and hadn't told Steve. She didn't know why she hadn't told him, it was probably because she hadn't wanted to rock his world, to shatter his illusion of the solidarity of the brotherhood, the brotherhood of which she was undoubtedly jealous. If it wasn't for the kids, she wondered whether she would still be with him. Pouring herself another glass of wine, she decided that she probably would.

‘Christie, babe, are you still at work?’

‘Are you in the pub already Mike? Where are you?’

‘Dawson’s, I’m just having a quick one with Steve. Do you want to come down here and then grab something to eat before we head home? I’ve spoken to the kids, they’re fine, going out anyway; said they would do their own thing.’

‘Yes, I bet they will.’ Christie said. ‘I think we’ll be finished in about twenty minutes.’ Then, lowering her voice, she added, ‘This shoot’s been a bit of a disaster, bloody woman’s a bitch of a client, I could do with a drink. I’ll text you when I’m leaving, mine’s a gin and tonic.’

Christie leaned against the wall of the corridor. She was exhausted, the shoot had been a nightmare and the prospect of a few days alone with three teenage boys, without the support of Mike, filled her with dread. She had been beginning to wonder whether full-time working really was such a good option. She didn’t need to work and loved her job, but over the last few months she had begun to think that the boys needed taking in hand and, at the very least, needed one of them in the house at the end of the school day to keep things under control. Taking a deep breath, she walked back into the studio, resolving to give it some serious thought over the weekend.

As Mike handed Steve his pint, Steve felt himself start to relax. The last few months had been difficult, and long hours had taken its toll on both his health and his marriage. Lucy had been understanding, but by taking on most of the responsibility for the kids and taking little time for her own needs, it had given their relationship an edge, an edge he understood was born of resentment for what she saw as his freedom. As far as he was concerned, he would be quite happy for her to take a break or get herself a part-time job, anything to get her out of the house, but she always found some excuse and usually it was his fault. The golf trip was not great timing, but he needed some time off, needed a few days without responsibility. He would make it up to her when he got back. Snapping himself out of it he raised his glass to Mike.

‘Here’s to a good one, just hope Cavendish hasn’t overdone it.’ Mike raised his eyebrows. ‘So do I, pretty bloody expensive this time, I haven’t actually told Christie the full price. The hotel sounds top drawer though, it’s got a casino.’

‘Aye, but Cavendish worries me, I’m not sure he knows where to draw the line. It’s one thing going overboard in this country, but getting us arrested abroad is a different matter. Just as well we’re taking a lawyer or two. Talking of lawyers, I thought Callum was coming for a pint.’

‘Nope, Maggie put her foot down and he thought better of it. Thought he might find his passport in two pieces if he didn’t go straight home. She’s so bloody scary, Maggie, I love her but I wouldn’t want to argue with her. One of the kids has got a recital or something.’ Mike drained his glass.

‘Poor little bugger. Do you want another? Christie’s on her way, but she’ll be half an hour.’

Steve looked at his watch; six-thirty. He’d be risking it

‘Yeah, OK then, it’s my turn, what you having?’

At 7.30. Lucy dialled Steve’s mobile, but before it had chance to connect, she hung up. What was the point?

‘Jamie,’ she called up the stairs. ‘Sorry, darling, Daddy’s going to be late again, go and get your talk and we’ll practice.’ Settling herself at the kitchen table, she poured another glass of wine.

Letting himself in at 10.30, Steve found an empty bottle of wine and an empty bed. He knew Lucy would be in the spare room again, and as the door was pointedly shut, he left well alone. At least that gave him chance to pack, and he could avoid any confrontation. Whatever he said or did was wrong these days. He didn’t have the time or the inclination for any melodrama. He could deal with it when he got back.

