



RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Summer Madness

Susan Lewis

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About the Book

After finishing work on their sensationally successful TV series, Louisa, Danny and Sarah take a much-needed holiday on the French Riviera. All they want to do is party, soak up the sun and have a good time.

Danny, the actress, with her sensual beauty and impossible temper, soon has the eligible men of the Riviera chasing her. Louisa, the scriptwriter on the rebound from a broken love affair, finds herself more and more drawn to the mysterious Jake Mallory. While Sarah, the producer, just wants to hang out and have fun.

But they quickly discover that the sparkle of Riviera life conceals a dark presence that pulls them into a game no one can win. And when mayhem and madness begin to stalk them, to their terror they find there is no way out...

About the Author

Susan Lewis is the bestselling author of twenty-seven novels. She is also the author of *Just One More Day* and *One Day at a Time*, the moving memoirs of her childhood in Bristol. Having resided in France for many years she now lives in Gloucestershire. Her website address is www.susanlewis.com

Susan is a supporter of the childhood bereavement charity, Winston's Wish: www.winstonswish.org.uk and of the breast cancer charity, BUST: www.bustbristol.co.uk

Also by Susan Lewis

Fiction

A Class Apart
Dance While You Can
Stolen Beginnings
Darkest Longings
Obsession
Vengeance
Last Resort
Wildfire
Chasing Dreams
Taking Chances
Cruel Venus
Strange Allure
Silent Truths
Wicked Beauty
Intimate Strangers
The Hornbeam Tree
The Mill House
A French Affair
Missing
Out of the Shadows
Lost Innocence
The Choice
Forgotten
Stolen
No Turning Back
Losing You

Memoir

Just One More Day
One Day at a Time

Susan
LEWIS

Summer Madness



arrow books

Acknowledgements

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To all my friends on the Côte d'Azur with whom I have shared so many wonderful summer madneses.

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For Carl and Brenda

They'd followed it all on the television news - the accident, the murder, the arrest and then the release. It was sensational stuff, with enough speculation and scandal to keep the American, Mexican and Argentinian press in headlines for weeks. There was more money in the two families concerned, the Santinis in Buenos Aires and the Mallorys in San Diego, than the two Mexican peasants, Sanchez and Ortega, could ever hope for in ten lifetimes. But there was plenty, plenty, plenty for them in this lifetime if they kept their mouths shut.

The battle between San Diego and Buenos Aires rumbled on long after the press lost interest. Still Sanchez and Ortega said nothing. They collected their dollars, drove their flashy American cars, lived it up in grand Mexican style, while they guarded their secret and waited.

Delacroix, the boss, took care of everything. He alone knew the price they'd eventually be paid for their secret. But for now he played the game, kept Sanchez and Ortega happy while he moved between the underworlds of Buenos Aires and Mexico City letting it be known that his was the gun at the Santini and Mallory families' heads. He had been feared and respected before, now he was becoming a legend. Oscar Delacroix, one of the three people in the world who knew what had really happened that fateful day off the coast of Puerto Vallarta. Oscar Delacroix, the man of many faces, the man of a hundred photofits, the human chameleon whose gun was for hire and whose soul was committed to the highest bidder that day.

Delacroix, Sanchez and Ortega, the guardians of a secret that was rumbling steadily, inexorably, terrifyingly, away from the Mexican shores ... A secret that was seeping

into the ocean and washing itself up on the shores of Europe ... A secret that was soon to explode with horror and devastation in the wrong people's lives ...

1

'I CAN'T BELIEVE it's over, can you?'

'Not really, no.'

'It's the end of an era.'

'The gravy train stops here.'

'Speak for yourself. Some of us have got work to go to.'

'And some of us don't ram it down other's throats.'

'Now, now girls.'

'Any more boxes going? I'm full up over here.'

'Fred's bringing some more.'

'Put some music on someone.'

A few seconds later the chaotic, open plan offices where a slightly bemused and future-wary production team were throwing and catching, shouting and banging around as they packed up their belongings, began to throb with the catchy beat of the series' theme tune. Instantly everyone stopped. They weren't sure whether this was what they wanted to hear right now, but somehow it was appropriate. One of the secretaries began to cry. *Private Essays*, the series they'd all devoted their lives to for the past three years, was at an end.

A door at the far end swung open and Louisa Kramer, the series' creator and Sarah Lovell, the series' producer, teetered into the mayhem.

'Looks like someone's had a good lunch,' one of the PAs remarked.

'Not a drop has passed our lips,' Sarah hiccoughed.

'Not a drop,' Louisa echoed, trying to keep a straight face.

Everyone was grinning.

Sarah looked around at the packing cases, the open filing cabinets, the empty noticeboards, the general debris of three years' hard labour. 'Oh God, I suddenly feel depressed,' she groaned.

Laughing, Louisa took hold of her and danced her through the cane partitions and cluttered desks in the hilarious swing and bob routine some wag had choreographed to go along with the theme tune.

'Champagne's on its way,' Sarah cried, waving out as she disappeared into her office to begin her own packing.

Louisa's secretary came beetling over with a stack of unedited cassettes. 'What shall I do with these?' she asked.

'Sling them!' Louisa cried dramatically, and with a jaunty backward kick of her heel she threw open her own door and shimmied into her office.

It was chiefly due to Louisa and Sarah that the *Private Essays* ship had been such a happy one these past three years, for Sarah's dry and often risqué wit coupled with the infectious ring of Louisa's laughter and remarkable talent for writing scripts that were not only brilliant but shootable had bonded everyone into a formidable team. The series was only ending now because Louisa felt it had run its course, that it was better to go out on a high – in other words around number two or three in the ratings – than drag it on the way so many other producers did with their successes. She was ready to start something fresh and the fact that the TV station which broadcast *Private Essays* had lost its franchise had given her the perfect opportunity to call it a day. As soon as they'd heard that *Private Essays*, the nation's leading one-hour drama series, was about to be pulled other broadcasters had bombarded Louisa with offers to continue with them, but she'd remained firm. Not that the decision had been easy for it was *Private Essays* that had made her, Sarah and Danielle Spencer, the star, household names. Were it not for the fact that Louisa and Sarah were so young the press probably wouldn't have paid

them much attention, but to be heading up a multi-million pound production at the age of twenty-seven in Louisa's case and twenty-nine in Sarah's was obviously, at the time, deemed newsworthy. And that the three of them had become such close friends during the course of the production, partying the nights away in all the trendy night spots of London, mixing with the rich and the famous, causing wonderfully juicy scandals and still managing to churn out a hit show had made them great fodder for the gossip columnists. Danny most of all, for hers was the beautiful, unbelievably sensuous face the public saw on their screens every Friday and her stormy, sensational and riotous love life made spectacular reading.

The break-up of Sarah's marriage just after the series started had brought the press flocking again. Was someone else involved? Was it true she was seeing Phillip Standeven, one of the TV station's more flamboyant controllers? Was he going to leave his wife? So many questions about something that had made Sarah's head spin with the sheer incredibility of it all. I mean, had they *seen* Phillip Standeven!

It had been much the same with Louisa when just over a year ago her relationship with Bill Kovak, a freelance director, had ended. During the time they were together the speculation about wedding bells, the outrageous suggestions of miscarriage and stolen pictures of blissful togetherness just went to show how wrong the press could be.

Still, she reflected, tipping the contents of her top drawer into a shoe-box, at least it was over now, mainly thanks to Danny who had rescued her from the trap of her own misguided attraction to the wrong men. Violence had been a part of her life from such an early age that until Simon, the gentle, crazy and adorable man she lived with now, had come along she'd been terrified that maybe in some appalling, masochistic or unthinkably deranged way,

she was responsible for it. That maybe she was incapable of having a relationship with a man without the constant threat of both physical and mental abuse. However, knowing Simon had put her mind at rest on that score and it was only the packing away of old newspaper cuttings that had made her think of Bill now.

‘Oh shit, what a mess,’ she grumbled aloud as she pulled open a deep bottom drawer and gazed despairingly down at the chaos. She looked hopefully around the room searching for something marginally less daunting to tackle, then started to laugh. Next door Sarah was complaining so loudly about her own slovenly state of affairs that Louisa decided to go and sympathize.

‘It’s so fucking depressing,’ Sarah complained as Louisa strolled into her office to find her sitting in the midst of a pile of old scripts and story outlines staring down at a photograph of the three of them, she, Louisa and Danny, taken for the launch of the series. ‘Talk about a trip down memory lane, I feel like slitting my wrists all of a sudden.’

Louisa’s luminous brown eyes were dancing with laughter. ‘Why don’t you have some more champagne?’ she suggested.

‘Good God no, if I do I’ll start seeing double and it’s bad enough as it is. How are you doing?’

‘Not much better. I knew we should have gone to Spain with Danny.’

‘Don’t remind me.’ Sarah’s round, cheerful face and normally bright, laughing blue eyes were filled with despondency.

‘Oh come on,’ Louisa laughed. ‘Only an hour ago you were telling me how much you were looking forward to making a new start.’

‘That was before I was sitting here facing all this. For some nasty little reason it’s reminding me how long it is since I last had sex and I swear to you I didn’t set out to break any records.’

‘Hey everyone!’ Camilla, the redheaded associate producer called out. ‘Frank’s just rung from wardrobe, they’re selling off the costumes if you’re interested.’

‘Have the sets gone into the crusher yet?’ Sarah asked, tucking her sleek, short blonde bob behind one ear as she looked up at Louisa.

‘I imagine so,’ Louisa grinned, her lovely eyes sparkling with mischief. She was tall, extremely slim and her soft, tawny brown hair framed her elfin face in a sixties, Quant sort of way. Her full, wide mouth had a gentle hypnotic quality and her smile could make people blink with its radiance.

‘Why do I feel that my whole life is going through a shredder?’ Sarah grumbled. ‘It’s all right for you, you know what you’re doing next ...’

‘Sssh,’ Louisa said, putting a finger to her lips as she glanced over her shoulder.

‘It’s OK,’ Sarah grinned, ‘your secret’s safe with me. How are you feeling about it now?’

‘As nervous as hell.’

‘Yeah, I imagine I would be too,’ Sarah commented. ‘And I’d be ecstatic. Aren’t you?’

‘Of course. I’m going to get some coffee. Want some?’

A few minutes later Louisa was back in her office, sipping her coffee as she gazed thoughtfully out the window. What a day this was! Talk about immaculate timing. To have discovered she was pregnant on the very day *Private Essays* was coming to its final conclusion seemed quite stupendously fateful. She’d only told Sarah so far, she would tell Simon tonight when, for once, they had managed to make their busy calendars coincide to give themselves an evening at home in their still relatively new apartment in Bedford Park. They’d really pushed the boat out when they’d bought it, sinking every penny they both had into it and virtually crippling themselves with mortgage repayments. But neither of them had ever had

money before, they'd come from ordinary, working-class backgrounds where to have an extra couple of quid in your pocket at the end of the week was almost unheard of. Well certainly in Louisa's gran's case it was, probably it wasn't quite so drastic for Simon's parents. Nevertheless, the thrill of earning such inordinate sums of money had intoxicated them both and they'd spent and squandered and lived it up this past year as if they were Bonnie and Clyde at the height of their luck. Well, Louisa had, Simon was more sensible when it came to money, only ever buying things that virtually guaranteed a return on his investment. He was the smart thinker, the steady influence and the man who had given Louisa more confidence in herself. She could hardly wait to see his face when she told him about the baby, he'd be over the moon, she just knew it.

Turning back to the onerous task of clearing out her desk Louisa set down her coffee and began sorting through the clutter. It was such a drag doing this sort of thing, especially when she just couldn't make up her mind what to keep and what to junk. Sighing wearily and putting her feet up on the desk she flicked idly through a batch of photographs, wondering if maybe it wasn't an idea to junk it all. She had a video cassette of every episode, Simon had had a copy of each script bound in leather and embossed in gold for her thirtieth birthday and she couldn't think of anything else she really needed. Except the odd bric-a-brac she kept on her desk – the silver paperweight, the leather blotter from Aspreys, the Tiffany pen and pencil set. And of course the framed photograph of her gran with the entire cast of *Private Essays*.

Louisa smiled mistily to herself as she picked the photograph up. She could almost hear her gran's voice, filled with awe and pride the day Louisa had won her first award for writing. She'd been fourteen at the time and her play, her very own play, had been put on at the Royal Court in London! She and her gran had never been to London

before, so when they'd got there everything had been an adventure. The big shops, the thundering Underground, the dazzling theatre lights and the overwhelmingly swish hotel in Chelsea. They'd been too shy to go down to the posh restaurant for dinner with its formal waiters and glittering chandeliers, and not even knowing that such a thing as room service existed they'd popped out to see if they could find some fish and chips.

Louisa laughed to herself. She knew now of course that Chelsea wasn't big on fish and chips, but what fun they'd had during that first trip to the Big City. Her gran had treated herself to a new suit in the C&A and had almost burst with pleasure when an assistant told her she looked pretty snazzy. Louisa had bought a new dress in Top Shop which had cost her nearly twenty pounds, and the play's producers had sent a taxi to take them to the theatre on opening night. There were even pictures of them in the paper the next day, mainly because Louisa was so very young. Whenever Louisa looked at those pictures now she wanted to laugh and cry at how lamentably under-dressed and awkward they had looked among so many glitzy, sophisticated people.

Over the years that followed they'd become more used to the limelight as Louisa's talent for writing had blossomed. When she was eighteen she was offered a job on a script-editing team for BBC radio and it had almost broken her heart to leave her gran and the little council bungalow they'd shared since Louisa was two. Her gran had put on a brave face, telling her she had to get out there and make something of herself and not worry about an old woman who had more friends than she knew what to do with.

When *Private Essays* finally went on air the press who had come to know Florrie Kramer over the years made almost as much fuss of her as they did of Louisa, Sarah and Danny. Florrie had become one of the nation's favourite

grans and to her chuckling delight she even received fan mail. That her success had brought such happiness to her gran was more than Louisa could have hoped for. Life hadn't been easy for Florrie, not that she ever complained, but taking on a two year old at the age of sixty-one had been quite a challenge when all she had was her old age pension and a paltry child allowance to live on. But she'd always managed to keep a pound back to go to the bingo on Saturdays. She'd won fifty pounds once and had put it into a post office account for Louisa. There had been so many gestures like that over the years, like giving Louisa an extra lamb chop because she was a growing girl and going without herself, or making sure that Louisa's shoes were as smart and tidy as the other children's when her own had holes in them, or saving up to take Louisa on the bus to the zoo with enough left over to buy nuts for the monkeys and ice-creams for themselves. The list was endless and too painful to think about now. But at least she had managed to give her gran something back when she'd started to earn herself. Florrie loved hats and Louisa never failed to turn up with a new one each time she visited. And she'd taken her gran on holiday to Butlins because that was where Florrie had wanted to go, and she'd bought her a spanking new colour TV to replace the second-hand black and white one a neighbour had generously given her.

Florrie had been dead for two months now and Louisa still wasn't sure she'd accepted it. There had been such a turn-out at the funeral that it had overwhelmed Louisa to discover just how loved her gran was. Most of the cast of *Private Essays* had been there, all of the journalists who had interviewed her came to pay their last respects and one old man had travelled all the way from Newcastle, saying he'd fallen in love with Florrie from afar. The local bingo hall opened its doors for the mourners and Florrie's pals did all the catering. It was one of the most moving experiences many of them had had. The only person who

hadn't come to the funeral was Florrie's only son, Louisa's father.

Louisa was glad he hadn't come for she knew that Florrie wouldn't have wanted him there any more than she did. Neither of them had seen him since he'd emigrated to Canada when Louisa was twelve, but neither Florrie nor Louisa had ever forgotten his visits throughout Louisa's childhood when he used to beat them, take all Florrie's money, and frighten them half to death. Florrie had never said that it was her son who had driven Louisa's mother to suicide, but Louisa suspected that was the case - she'd never questioned Florrie too closely though, for she had sensed what pain it caused her. He was the only living relative Louisa had now and she hoped never to see him again.

'Hey, what's all this?' Sarah asked, seeing the tears on Louisa's cheeks.

Louisa looked up, then smiling she tilted the photograph of Florrie and the cast for Sarah to see.

'Oh,' Sarah said, her face instantly softening. 'Life just isn't quite the same without the old girl, is it?'

'No,' Louisa said sadly, 'but it has to go on.' Then swinging her legs back to the floor she said, 'How are you getting on in there?'

'I can't tell you how many things I've found that I've accused other people of stealing,' Sarah answered with a grin. Her big floppy shirt and leggings were covered in dust and there was some kind of smudge over one of her dimples. 'Anyway, I thought you might like this,' she said, handing Louisa a skipping rope she'd borrowed and lost during one rash week of exercising about two years ago.

Laughing as she recalled the way Sarah had skipped her way round the production concourse, back and forth to the loo and even down to the studio, Louisa took it, saying, 'I've found some publicity photographs here that you took. If you

haven't got copies yourself you can have them, otherwise I'll hang on to them.'

Sarah gave them a critical look-over. 'Not bad,' she said. 'I can do better now. I'll *have* to do better now if I'm going to make it my new career.'

'Are you really serious about that?' Louisa said.

'Of course I am!' Sarah cried. 'I've had enough of all this telly lark and thanks to the Waltzing Matilda I can take a bit of a breather now with no worries about paying the bills.' Waltzing Matilda was Sarah's great-aunt who, just like Sarah, had been the youngest of four children and who, as Sarah put it, had left all her dosh to a worthy cause – in other words, Sarah.

'So, do you think you'll be coming to the final bash tonight?' Sarah said.

Grinning, Louisa shook her head. 'I wouldn't have thought so,' she answered. 'Tonight is going to be pretty special for Simon and me and I can't imagine him wanting to share it.'

'No, me neither,' Sarah said, pulling a face. 'I don't know, with you not there, Danny not there and me without a brawny body to hang onto I'm not really sure I'm looking forward to it.'

'Sarah, everyone will be devastated if you don't go,' Louisa told her.

'Mmm,' Sarah replied distractedly as she gazed around the steel shelves and bookcases while Louisa answered the phone.

'Don't tell me,' Sarah said when she'd finished, 'it was Daddy.'

'Sssh!' Louisa laughed. 'Yes, it was. Just checking that nothing was going to hold me up tonight. Do you know this will be the first night in together we've had in three weeks?'

'Well, you'd better start getting used to them because there are plenty coming up. Oh God, I'm so envious. All I

want is a husband and children. Is that so much to ask? Oh, but for God's sake not a husband like the last one, I couldn't stand it a second time around. I blame him, you know, for turning me into a raving sex maniac. Frustration does that to a person. You don't get it, you start fantasizing about it and once that old brain gets hold of the libido ... Hey! Wait! Diane, what are you doing with my mummy?' she cried as a set designer sailed by with an Egyptian mummy tucked under her arm.

'Putting it in the prop store,' Diane answered, uncertainly.

'But I've grown so attached to her,' Sarah declared. 'Can't I take her home with me?'

Diane looked from Sarah to Louisa and back again. 'Are you kidding me?' she said.

'Absolutely not! I want her. Leave her in my office ... Can she sit down?'

'Uh, no, I don't think so,' Diane answered.

'What a spectacle we're going to make at rush hour,' Sarah grinned.

'She'll never fit into your Midget,' Louisa laughed.

'She will if I put the roof down.'

'But it's raining.'

'So it is. Well, I'll work something out. That was one of my favourite episodes so I'm not letting her go off to be all lonesome in some spooky old prop store. Anyway, what were we saying? Oh God, we were talking about my ex, weren't we? Well, we'll get straight off that subject.' Then, lowering her voice to a whisper she said, 'I know I've got tons of nieces and nephews but I don't have any godchildren. Just thought you'd like to know.'

Laughing, Louisa threw a note pad at her which missed as Sarah ducked around the door and sailed back to her own office.

At six o'clock, having finally sorted out what she did and didn't want to keep, Louisa followed one of the porters out

to her car which he loaded with her belongings then, along with a few million others, she set off into the dreary London night heading for home. She would never have dreamt it was possible to feel so happy so soon after her gran's death, but she did. She only wished that her gran was still there to share in the joy. But she felt sure that wherever her gran was she knew and she whispered a little prayer for Florrie to look after Simon and make sure he got home safely on this rainy night. It wasn't so unusual for her to do that, she'd done it most nights since her gran had died because Simon and now their baby mattered more to her than anything else in the world.

Louisa was slavishly following a Delia Smith recipe, running a floury finger down the page, weighing out all the ingredients and desperately wishing she understood what she was doing. This was one of Simon's favourite dishes and all too often her valiant efforts in the kitchen ended in misery. But not tonight! she told herself. Tonight she and Delia Smith were going to work culinary magic because she simply couldn't imagine that anyone, least of all Delia Smith who looked such a nice lady, would want anything to spoil this momentous occasion.

'Hi,' she said, licking her fingers as she took the phone from the wall. 'Oh, Elaine, no, he isn't home yet. I'm expecting him any minute ... Is it urgent? Shall I get him to call? OK. The minute he gets ... Oh hang on, that must be him now. I'll tell you what, let him take his coat off will you? I'll pour him a drink then he'll call you back.'

Whether Simon's secretary was agreeable to that Louisa didn't wait to find out. He was always getting called back to the office for something or other, because advertising campaigns were much like TV programmes in their erratic hours. But not tonight, she told herself as she called out, 'Hi, sweetheart. I'm in the kitchen.'

‘Mmm, something smells good,’ he remarked coming to stand in the doorway. ‘And you’ve lit the fire I see.’

With flour on the tip of her nose and pastry all over her hands Louisa turned to greet him. ‘Oh Simon,’ she cried, ‘you’re soaked. Didn’t you take the car today?’

‘No. I was late this morning so it was quicker to jump on the tube,’ he answered, running a hand through his dishevelled blond hair. His pale blue eyes were watching her curiously and when she tilted her mouth up to his for a kiss he laughed. ‘I was half afraid I’d find you in tears,’ he said, kissing her briefly. ‘How did it go today?’

‘OK. I’ll probably miss it like crazy over the next few weeks, but to be honest I could hardly wait to get out of there tonight. By the way,’ she added as he turned towards the bedroom, ‘Elaine just called and wants you to ring her back.’

‘OK, I’ll do it before I take a shower just in case I have to go back in.’

As he disappeared into the study Louisa crossed her fingers and prayed furiously that he wouldn’t have to. Fortunately he didn’t and half an hour later they were sitting down at one end of the big oval table in their spacious, yet cosy, sitting room with a fire crackling lazily in the hearth and the sleepy sound of a jazz piano drifting soothingly from the CD player. Outside a feisty March wind was tearing through the trees and the rain thrummed a steady beat on the windows, making the room seem even more secluded and restful. In fact everything was just perfect, even the meal now she’d pretended there was no starter. Most of that was still on the bottom of a saucepan, actually it *was* the bottom of the saucepan, but Simon didn’t need to know that.

‘So, how was your day?’ she said, gazing at him in the candlelight and trying not to wince as she burnt her lip on the steaming hot food.

‘Not bad,’ he said. ‘Things are moving a bit now they say the recession’s over. We clinched the cat food, by the way. That’s what Elaine was ringing about.’

‘Congratulations!’ Louisa cried, raising her glass. ‘Here’s to Whiskas!’

He smiled. ‘Actually, it’s called Purrfect Puss and before you come out with any smart ass remarks I’ve heard them all already.’

‘I’ll bet you have,’ Louisa laughed. ‘But you and I both know Sarah will be able to top them all.’

‘I don’t know whether I’d dare put her to the test,’ he laughed. ‘And this,’ he added, pointing with his fork to his meal, ‘is pretty damned perfect too.’

There were several Sarah-type comments Louisa could have made to that, but she refrained and listened as he talked some more about what was going on at the agency he part-owned.

It had nothing to do with the fact that she wasn’t interested that her mind started to wander, it was simply that she was so excited about her news that she wasn’t able to concentrate on anything very well. And for some reason Danny was in her mind right now, over there in Spain doing heaven only knows what because Danny had a flair for the reckless. Louisa wondered how Danny would take the news that she was pregnant. Actually, she was quite glad Danny didn’t know yet because Danny had a way of taking over Louisa’s life that Louisa wasn’t always totally comfortable with. Not that Louisa couldn’t stand up to Danny, it was usually just easier to let Danny have her way than to get into unnecessary arguments. In fact Louisa only had to take the situation with Bill, the director who had given her such a terrible time with all his ridicule and jealousy and violent tempers, to know that had it not been for Danny she might actually still be there suffering it all. It was when Bill had put her in hospital with two cracked ribs and severe bruising to her face and neck that Danny had finally acted.

She hadn't allowed Bill into the hospital to see Louisa, threatening to expose what he'd done to the press if he tried, and when Louisa was ready to leave Danny had taken her to her own large, terraced house in Fulham where to Louisa's surprise she had discovered all her possessions already installed. She had a lot to thank Danny for ...

'Louisa? Louisa, are you listening to me?'

'Sorry,' she smiled, 'I was miles away. What were you saying?' Simon looked at her steadily and for once, surprisingly, she couldn't tell what he was thinking. He'd finished eating, she noticed, had pushed his plate aside and was holding his glass between both hands.

'What were you saying?' she repeated.

'It doesn't matter.'

'No. It does. Come on.'

He shook his head. 'It wasn't important.'

They sat quietly, a little awkwardly, for a moment then both spoke at once.

'You first,' he said.

'No. You first.'

He sighed, pushed his fingers through his hair and rested his head on the heel of his hand.

'Simon? What is it?' she said, her brown eyes clouding with concern. He had been saying something important, she realized, and was hurt that she hadn't been paying attention. Did that happen often, she wondered. But no, she was sure it didn't.

He lifted his head and looked long into her eyes. She looked back, waiting for him to speak, but all he did was force a smile and look away.

'Come on,' she encouraged. 'What is it?'

Again he sighed, dabbed his mouth with his napkin, then pressed it onto the table. 'We have to talk,' he said. 'There's something I have to tell you ...'

She smiled. 'I have something to tell you too,' she said. 'So why don't we take our wine over to the fire.'

He turned to look at the cosy depths of the sofa. 'No,' he said, shaking his head. 'Let's talk here.'

'OK,' she said frowning. 'Would you like some dessert or ...'

'No. I've had enough.' He picked up the wine and refilled his glass. When he held the bottle out to Louisa she shook her head and watched him put it down with the same odd deliberation with which he had put down his napkin.

Turning his gaze back to the fire he stared so long and so hard at it that Louisa turned to look at it too. She was aware of the unease stealing over her, of the inexplicable alienness she was suddenly feeling towards her surroundings and as a quick panic tightened her heart she turned back to Simon, half-expecting, half-hoping he'd be watching her and smiling reassuringly. But he was still staring at the fire, seemingly intent on the sluggish yellow flames.

And then it hit her. The offer of a job in New York must have come up again and he was trying to find a way of breaking it to her. But it wasn't a problem any more. There was nothing to keep her here in England now, she wanted to go.

At last he looked at her and her heart lifted as the smile of reassurance came and reaching across the table he covered her hand with his own.

'I love you,' she whispered.

Lifting his hand he curled her hair behind her ear, gazing searchingly into the heartbreaking loveliness of her face. Then his eyes dropped from hers, following his hand back to the table.

'Louisa, there's no easy way of saying this,' he began softly.

'Of saying what?' she asked, hardly able to hear her own voice above the strange buzzing that had started in her ears. 'If it's about New ...'

'Of saying I'm going to leave you,' he interrupted.

Louisa stared at him, unmoving, but feeling everything inside her starting slowly to withdraw. 'But ... But you can't,' she said.

He looked up to find her eyes wide with shock, her full lips parted as though to say more, but nothing came.

'I'm sorry,' he whispered. 'Truly, I'm sorry, but I just can't go on living this lie.'

'Lie?' she echoed huskily.

'The lie of pretending to love you when ...' his voice trailed off as he realized how painful his next words were going to be.

'When you don't any more?' she finished for him, looking stupefied and confused as she wondered how through this debilitating numbness she was able to say anything at all.

His lips narrowed in an uneasy smile of admission.

She looked away. Her eyes were big and haunted, seeming to search the room for something to hold on to.

'Oh God, Louisa,' he groaned, squeezing her hands. 'I don't want to hurt you. You're the last person in the world I want to hurt ...'

'But?'

He was silent for a while, then taking a deep breath he said, 'I might as well come clean about the whole thing. There's someone else and has been for some time. She's someone I want to be with, someone I love ...' Again he stopped, knowing he was making a real mess of this.

'More than you love me?' she said.

'In a different way from the way I love you,' he said lamely.

Without really knowing what she was doing Louisa reached out for the wine and refilled her glass. Beneath this strange, almost eerie calmness she was feeling there was something else, something she didn't want to escape, and it was growing, expanding within her and frightening her.

‘Why are you telling me now?’ she heard herself say.
‘What made you choose tonight?’

He shrugged. ‘I don’t know.’

She was still holding the pain at a distance, but knew that it was there, reaching for her, waiting to claim her.
‘How long have you been seeing her?’ she said.

‘I don’t know. Six months.’

She looked down at her wine. So everything had been a sham. His concern when her gran had died, his proposal of marriage, even his lovemaking, had all been done out of pity. ‘Who is she?’ she said flatly. ‘Do I know her?’

He nodded. ‘It’s Elaine.’

‘Elaine your secretary? Elaine who rang earlier?’

Again he nodded.

‘I see.’ She knew he was waiting for her to say more, but what more was there to say except that she loved him and wanted to be his wife and that she was carrying his baby? She looked at him, almost told him, then looked away. What good would it do, he loved someone else.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said, and the tears in his voice made her flinch and pull her hands away.

‘I’ve tried to tell you so many times,’ he said, ‘I hated cheating on you, you deserve better, you deserve someone ...’

‘Simon stop it,’ she said, a sudden edge to her voice. ‘Patronizing me by denigrating yourself isn’t going to make this any easier.’

‘No, you’re right,’ he whispered. ‘It’s just that I feel such a bastard. I mean I know the timing is lousy, what with you losing your job and your gran being dead only a couple of months, but I just can’t go on like this.’

The mention of her gran was almost her undoing.

‘... and I thought,’ he went on, ‘I was thinking that ... Well, Elaine and I talked it over and we thought that perhaps it was better for you to deal with this now, I mean, rather than me being there to help you get your life back

together then pull the rug from under you when it was, by going. This way, we thought, you could make a whole fresh start.'

Each use of the word 'we' was like a knife jabbing into her heart. She was staring absently at the bangles on her slender wrists, feeling oddly repelled by the dress she was wearing, the dress she had chosen for seduction and celebration. 'And when exactly have you and Elaine decided that I should make my fresh start?' she asked, her dark eyes flashing in the candlelight.

'What do you mean?'

'I mean, when are you going? Or do I have to move out to make room for Elaine?'

'Don't be ridiculous. I'd never ask you to do that. This is your home.'

'And yours,' she reminded him.

'I'll go to Elaine's,' he said dully.

'When?'

'I'm not sure. I hadn't really ...'

'Tonight?' she cut in. 'Maybe you should go tonight.'

'Louisa, for heaven's sake!'

'For heaven's sake what?'

He shook his head. 'I don't want to leave you like this.'

'Like what?'

'I don't know, just like this. We've meant a lot to each other, we still do and I suppose, well, I suppose I know how hard this is for you.'

'No you don't. You have no idea what this means to me.'

'Then tell me. Let's talk about it.'

'What for? You've made up your mind so I think you should go. Now.'

'I can't. Not yet.'

'Why? Isn't Elaine ready for you?'

'Yes, she's ready, but you're not.'

'I've already asked you not to patronize me,' she snapped.