

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



The Ex-Files

Jane Moore

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About the Book

Fay Parker is beautiful, successful - and worried she'll never find her perfect match. So when she meets a caring, good-looking man who adores her, she casts aside any niggling doubts and accepts his proposal. In a bid to be modern and grown-up, the bride and groom invite a potentially explosive mix of ex-boyfriends and girlfriends and Fay is determined to enjoy her special day. But there's one person present who has other ideas...

About the Author

Jane Moore is a columnist for the *Sun* and writes articles for the *Sunday Times*. She regularly presents documentaries, including the hugely successful Supermarket Secrets for Channel 4's *Dispatches*, *The Beckhams* for Sky One, and *Spoilt Kids*, also for Channel 4. She is also the author of the internationally bestselling novels *Fourplay*, *The Ex-Files*, *Dot.Homme* and *Love @ First Site*. She lives in London.

Also by Jane Moore

Fourplay
Dot.Homme
The Second Wives Club
Love @ First Site

the ex-files
Jane Moore



arrow books

For my husband Gary

Saturday, 22 June, 2002, 11.55 p.m.

HE BOOTED OPEN the bedroom door with his bare foot, then removed her slip-dress in one swift motion as she raised her arms. Now wearing nothing more than a G-string, Fay yielded as he pushed her against the wall and continued the kissing session that had started on the living-room sofa just five minutes earlier.

While she fumbled with his shirt buttons, he saved time by undoing his belt and flies, then kicked off his trousers, which fell in a crumpled heap on the floor. Manoeuvring her towards the bed, he pushed her backwards so that she plunged into the duck-down duvet. The movement jolted the bedside table, and a framed photograph of a middle-aged woman crashed to the floor. Standing over her, he stared into her eyes, a crooked smile on his lips, then slowly pulled off the G-string. He dangled it on the end of his finger, then tossed it aside.

Christ, he's sexy, she thought, as he lowered himself towards her, never taking his gaze from hers. She fully expected him to be a 'Monopoly' lover, a term she and her friends had coined for men who selfishly moved straight to 'Go', so her breath caught as he started to slow-kiss his way down her body from just beneath her breasts.

Unlike the inept performances of the stamp-lickers she and her friends also complained about, this one knew *exactly* what he was doing.

She closed her eyes to savour the sensation, then snapped them open again. Initially, she'd wanted nothing more than to have sex with this man, but the reality of

knowing that it was about to happen suddenly brought her to her senses. What on earth was she *doing*?

It had been a doddle, as flirtation always was. A couple of meaningful stares across a crowded cattle-market - or do they call them wine-bars? - followed by a couple of slow lip-lickings. Within minutes of her friend Susie's departure to catch the last train, he was at Fay's side.

'May I buy you a drink?' He smiled.

'I already have one thanks.' She held up the remnants of a glass of white wine.

'In that case, as we're being pedantic, may I buy you *another*?'

Normally, having established a man's interest, Fay would have brushed him off and headed home, but tonight she had found herself nodding. 'OK.'

She encountered gorgeous men all the time in her job as a model, but there was something mesmerizing about this one. He had dark hair, blue eyes and a well-toned body, but he also had an X factor that intrigued her. Probably nudging forty, flecks of grey were starting to appear just above his ears, but it suited him. He was confident and, judging by his Gucci shirt and Ralph Lauren loafers, not short of a bob or two.

'Are you drinking alone?' she said, craning to see if anyone was behind him.

'Yep. Just fancied a quick one.' He waved his bottled beer in front of her. 'But it turned into several.'

'Are you from around here?' She couldn't believe she was asking such humdrum questions, but his confidence and maturity unnerved her.

'No.' He didn't elaborate. 'You?'

'Just round the corner.' She felt her neck flush as she said it.

For the next half-hour, they were engrossed in conversation, never taking their eyes off each other until Fay felt a hand on her shoulder. It was the bar manager,

gesturing behind him where chairs were being stacked on the tables.

'I'll walk you home,' he said, in a tone that suggested he wasn't going to take no for an answer.

'Thanks.' Curiously, she felt protected rather than threatened.

During the short walk, she had vowed she would say goodbye on the doorstep, but when they arrived at her front door she felt compelled to spend longer with him.

'Coffee?' she had asked. 'And, no, that's not a euphemism.'

'Damn.' He clicked his fingers in mock frustration. 'But can I have wine instead?'

The bottle of Chablis they shared had been her undoing.

Now she was studying him as, hair flopping into his face, he concentrated on the task in hand. She still felt attracted to him, but her desire for him had been outweighed by pangs of guilt about her uncharacteristic sluttishness. Yes, he was gorgeous, sexy, funny and interesting, but he was also a complete stranger and she just didn't *do* that sort of thing.

'Look, if you don't mind, I'd rather we didn't go all the way,' she said. She put her hands on his shoulders and eased him away.

A fleeting look of surprise crossed his face before he fell beside her, wiping a bead of sweat from his forehead. She grabbed a corner of the duvet and draped it over her naked body. Then she reached into her handbag and pulled out a packet of Marlboro Lights. The small chrome clock on the bedside table read 12.10 a.m.

Propping herself up on one elbow, she glanced at him lying next to her, then he suddenly caught her eye. Embarrassed, she blew smoke towards his face, then giggled to show it was a joke.

'Your bedroom habits could do with a little work.' He frowned.

'Look, I don't mean to be rude, and I'm really sorry, but this doesn't seem like such a good idea after all, and I have to be up horribly early. So if you don't mind, I'll call you a cab,' she said.

He raised his eyebrows. A small twitch started in his cheek, and his blue eyes turned darker as his pupils expanded. After a few moments, his expression softened and he stroked the side of her face gently. 'Why don't I stay a little longer?' he murmured.

Fay was tempted to let him, but she felt deflated and angry with herself for allowing a wine-bar flirtation to develop so far. Now that the effect of the wine had worn off, she realized she knew nothing about this man. He could be a psychotic killer, yet she'd brought him back to her flat without anyone else knowing. How reckless, she thought. How desperate. How bloody stupid.

Her mind went into overdrive. She had no plans for Sunday, so her mutilated body might not be found until late next week when maybe her best friend Adam or her mother would have made several calls and be wondering where she was. Or perhaps the woman downstairs would eventually notice the smell.

She took another drag of her cigarette and tried to calm herself. Psychotic killers didn't go to busy wine bars for a casual drink ... did they?

She gave a cavernous yawn, fatigue creeping up on her, and ground out the cigarette, 'As I said, I'd really rather you left.' She looked apologetic.

Flopping on to his back, he lay there motionless. For a moment, she thought he was going to be difficult. She couldn't believe it: so many of her female friends had whinged that men couldn't wait to leave straight after a sexual encounter, yet this one wanted to stay. It testified to the 'treat 'em mean, keep 'em keen' philosophy, but Fay didn't want him keen. She just wanted him out.

He sat up suddenly and swung his tanned, muscular legs out of bed. 'Well, at least make me some coffee first. I'll get dressed and follow you down.' He picked up his white cotton boxer shorts that were partially tucked inside a leg of his trousers.

Fay was relieved that an end was in sight to this cheap little episode. 'OK.' She smiled. 'I'll get the cab to come in about ten minutes.' She grabbed her white cotton robe from the end of the bed and headed out of the door.

Downstairs, she crashed about opening cupboards and throwing coffee into a mug bearing the words 'caffeine queen'. Then she rang her local cab firm and asked them to send a car immediately.

'Where to?' asked the controller.

'Um, no idea,' said Fay. 'The passenger will tell you.' She hung up and poured boiling water into the mug.

'Hi.' He appeared fully dressed in the kitchen doorway, his suit jacket slung over his arm. He looked dishevelled but still gorgeous. 'What was your name again?'

She held up a teaspoon. 'Milk and sugar?'

'That's an unusual name.' He grinned.

Through the beginnings of a headache, she vaguely remembered that *his* name was something estate-agency like Toby. She was pleased he'd forgotten hers. 'Let's just keep it as a mysterious encounter,' she said.

He looked at her quizzically, then shook his head. 'No sugar, just a splash of milk, thanks.' He made a small sighing noise. 'So, are you in the habit of picking up strange men in bars and bringing them home?'

'No, absolutely not,' she said firmly, walking across to the doorway and handing him the mug. As he took it, his hand touched hers and she felt the flutter of butterflies. 'It was completely out of character and I won't be doing it again.'

'I see. That disappointing, was I?' He took a sip of coffee and peered at her over the rim of the mug.

She wrinkled her nose. 'That's really not the issue here.'

'So what is?'

'Sorry?'

'The issue,' he said. 'What is it?'

'There isn't one. We saw, we conquered, we almost came ... then I changed my mind. Simple as that. I'm sorry.' She looked at her watch and folded her arms, attempting to indicate that the subject was closed.

'Oh, please don't apologize, the pleasure was all mine.' He looked at her curiously. 'You're unusual, do you know that?'

'You mean I behave like a man?' she replied. 'You're probably right, but it doesn't make me a bad person.' She just wanted to go upstairs and crawl back into bed ... alone.

'I didn't say it did. In fact, it's quite refreshing. It's better than being asked to go and choose curtains together.'

She laughed a little and looked at him. He was smiling broadly, and she noticed he had a small gap between his front teeth.

In clothes, his broad shoulders and height were accentuated and she wondered whether he'd done any modelling. In the wine bar, he'd brushed aside her question about his job, describing himself as 'a glorified salesman'. Now, she was dying to ask him to elaborate, but refrained in case it was construed as interest in seeing him again.

There was the faint sound of a cab pulling up outside, followed by the honk of its horn - always a joy for the neighbours at that time in the morning.

'That'll be your cab.' She hoped the relief on her face wasn't too obvious.

'Thanks, Sherlock.' He grabbed his briefcase, drained his mug and put it on the kitchen table. 'I have a strong feeling the answer is going to be no, but I'll ask anyway. Any chance of seeing you again?'

Fay looked up at him and shook her head. 'I doubt it,' she said. 'I'm getting married next weekend.'

Friday, 28 June, 2002, 2 p.m.

'THAT MICHAEL CAINE film with the Minis keeps popping into my head,' said Brian, his eyes squeezed shut.

'I think you'll find it was set in Italy, and it was actually a *coach* that ended up hanging over the cliff. We're in France and this is a Fiat Cinquecento.' Mark was grimaced as he negotiated the twists and turns up the side of the mountain overlooking the town of Cerets. They were on their way to the tiny village of Montferrer, a quaint but unremarkable place.

'Couldn't you just have got married in the local register office like normal people?' Brian was looking distinctly green, his cheek pressed against the half-open window. 'A quick ceremony, a couple of sausage rolls, then off to the pub. Much more civilized.'

'And I was wondering why some girl hasn't snapped you up,' said Mark sarcastically, his eyes never leaving the road. 'I'm afraid I didn't have much say in it, mate. Fay has pretty much organized the whole thing. All I have to do is turn up.'

'If we don't plummet to our deaths first.'

'What?' Mark grimaced as the road became even steeper and narrower.

'Nothing.'

They lapsed into silence, Mark concentrating on the road, his friend on keeping his breakfast down. He wasn't great at travelling in cars at the best of times, but Mark had assured him it was mostly autoroute from the airport to the village. He'd neglected to mention the road up to the

hotel, which looked dangerously as if they'd soon need a sherpa.

'There it is!' Mark pointed, then thought better of it and clamped his hand back on the wheel. The château was clearly visible through the trees, its roof highlighted by the afternoon sunshine. 'Another ten minutes and we'll be there.'

Brian opened his eyes, but was still clutching the sides of his seat. 'Can you make it sooner?'

'God, now I've seen it, I'm *so* nervous.' Mark's eyes were shining. 'It suddenly seems so real ...' He turned to look at his friend. 'I'm getting *married*. Isn't that exciting?'

'I'm at fever pitch, mate.' Brian's voice was flat with nausea.

As Mark negotiated a tricky bend, a donkey pulling a cart came into view. It was being led by a man who looked in no hurry to be anywhere. 'Oops, could take a little longer than I thought.' He ran a hand through his floppy brown hair and sighed. There was no way he could get past the cart: he would just have to fall in behind and crawl along.

Brian evidently preferred this sedate pace. He fumbled in the pocket of his gaudy Hawaiian shirt, pulled out a packet of cigarettes and lit one. He exhaled smoke out of the window, then screwed up his eyes as some floated back into his face. 'I still can't believe you're having separate rooms tonight, particularly as you'll be seeing each other at dinner.'

Mark shrugged. 'Fay wanted to keep a bit of the traditional stuff. She didn't want me to see her dress before the ceremony tomorrow either.'

Brian looked surprised. 'She doesn't strike me as the traditional type.'

'I know what you mean.' Mark fiddled with the car radio to see if he could pick up any local stations. 'I guess most

women like to be a little old-fashioned on their wedding day.'

Euro-pop filled the car and Brian let out a low wail. 'Turn that shite off. This whole country has Van Gogh's ear for music.'

Mark laughed. He'd asked Brian to be best man partly because he was a never-ending source of gags and one-liners, but he'd made him swear to keep his speech clean for the benefit of the parents and aged aunts. 'How's the speech going?' he asked.

'Not bad.' Brian stubbed out the cigarette. 'I've had a few thoughts, and I'll add to them when I've met more of your guests at dinner tonight.'

'There's enough material there to fill an entire comedy festival, particularly my aunt Ethel. She's the only pensioner I know with Tourette's.' He grinned as a memory popped into his head. 'She once told our local vicar he was a twat, although she claimed later she meant to say twit.'

'Fantastic!' Brian slapped his palm against the dashboard. 'I *insist* on sitting next to her.'

As they edged round another corner, the donkey-cart veered through a small gateway at the side of the road.

'Thank God for that,' muttered Mark, and rammed the gearstick into second. He grinned. 'I can't wait to see Fay.'

'That's nice to hear. I hope I'll feel like that about someone one day.'

'You will,' said Mark, firmly. 'If I can meet and marry someone like Fay, so can you. You've just got to keep looking.'

Brian seemed doubtful. 'She's too high maintenance for me. I need someone normal.'

'You make her sound like an alien with two heads. Anyway, your version of high maintenance is a woman who complains if you forget her birthday or spend all day in the pub.'

Brian slapped his chest in mock hurt. 'How little you know me.'

'I know you better than anyone, and you just don't make enough effort with women.'

'Yes, but there's effort, and there's *effort*.' He stretched his arms behind his head. 'You like the drama of life with Fay, but I'd prefer someone more low-key. Like Jenna, for example.'

The corners of Mark's mouth turned down. 'Jenna's lovely, and I'm really looking forward to seeing her tonight. But only as a friend.' He looked at Brian, who was putting on his trainers. 'What I love about Fay,' he continued, 'is that every day is different.'

'You mean every day is a pain in the arse,' said Brian. He went back to staring out of the window.

Brian lifted up the lid of his school desk for protection, and lowered his head behind it. 'Psssst!'

Mark snapped out of his daydream and turned to look at him. 'What?' he whispered, so that the geography teacher wouldn't hear.

'Did you ... you know?' Brian formed a circle with the thumb and forefinger of one hand and used his other forefinger to make a thrusting motion through it.

'No,' Mark replied glumly. 'Not even close.' He thought about sex a lot. On a good day, it distracted him maybe twenty times; on a bad one, it could be up to sixty. His main problem was that he wasn't getting it. Worse, he'd never had it. Catastrophically, Brian had.

He didn't reckon that Brian was better-looking than he was, or that he was brighter or wittier - no, they were pretty well matched in those areas. The inequality in their sexual experience was down to the fact that Brian had bought - to put it kindly - the *free-spirited* Hannah Foley a Snowball at the local off-licence and been rewarded with perfunctory sex in a disused shed at the local park.

But Mark was dating Jenna Davis. She was 'a nice girl', and didn't do that sort of thing. Her father was a bank manager who had recently been transferred to Southampton from Norwich, so she had only joined Mark's secondary school at the start of the fifth year. As a new girl, her arrival had prompted a fleeting interest from several of the boys, who always got short shrift from their wised-up female schoolmates. But she had got on with her work, giving them no encouragement. Finally they had got the message.

About a month after she had started, Mark had sat opposite her in the library one day and struck up a conversation about the Second World War, a GCSE history topic. It was swiftly followed by a track-by-track analysis of the latest Nirvana album.

He hadn't really noticed Jenna before that but, to his surprise, he found himself suggesting they make a Saturday trip together to Woolworth's to check out the charts and new releases, and she agreed. The outing marked the start of their relationship.

Then, Mark's sexual urges had been distant rumblings. Now, six months later and with his sixteenth birthday behind him, daily earthquakes erupted in his Marks & Spencer Y-fronts.

Brian's gauche mime was referring to the previous night, when Mark and Jenna had stayed in alone at her parents' house. Half-way down a bottle of cheap but effective Thunderbird wine, he had made his move and, tantalizingly, he hoped, kissed her neck.

'Hmmm, that's nice,' she murmured, moving closer, her hand rubbing his knee. She was wearing a loose blouse and he had caught a glimpse of her bra. Slowly, he tugged her blouse out of her waistband, his hand creeping up the hitherto forbidden flesh. 'I do love you, Mark,' she whispered, planting small kisses on his upper and lower lips.

Reaching her left breast, his hand rested on the erect nipple.

She shot backwards as if she had been stung and pulled her blouse back into place. 'What are you doing?'

'Sorry,' he said hurriedly. 'I thought you wouldn't mind.'

'Whatever gave you that idea?' She frowned, as if disappointed in him.

Mark had masked his frustration well, even telling Jenna that he respected her for turning him down, but inwardly he was desperate.

Jenna was pretty, in a natural way, and undeniably a lovely girl. Mark preferred her to some of the brassier, more boisterous girls at school, and enjoyed her company. But she wouldn't have 'rumpy-pumpy', as he and Brian called it, which threw him into a daily dilemma.

'Just dump her and date someone who will,' said Brian, with his trademark sensitivity. 'What's she waiting for? Bloody marriage?'

'What are you waiting for? Bloody marriage?' Mark parroted to Jenna a few days later, after she'd yet again slapped his hot little hand away from her breast.

She looked hurt. 'We don't have to have sex just because it's legal now,' she said quietly. 'I want to wait until I'm ready.'

'And when will that be?' he snapped, and conjured up an image of his beloved Southampton FC in an attempt to make his erection subside.

'Your voice sounds funny,' she replied, looking hurt. 'Why are you so angry with me for wanting the time to be right? I thought you respected me for that.'

As ever when she was upset, Mark apologized, enveloped her in a cuddle, and assured her that, yes, she was right to take her time and that everything would work out just fine. It pained him to think he'd hurt her, but he was increasingly frustrated in this sexless relationship and finding it harder than ever to disguise it.

Several months later, and now past his seventeenth birthday, Mark's hands had progressed across Jenna's body with the stealth of Hitler across Europe. But, much to Brian's amusement, he was still technically a virgin. 'You've only done it once yourself,' he retaliated, after yet another of his friend's unsubtle jibes.

'Ah, but the one-eyed man rules in the kingdom of the blind,' said Brian, amiably. 'Or, in this case, the kingdom of the one-eyed trouser snake.'

It was true. In Mark's mind, Brian's experience gave him *carte blanche* to lord it over his friend at every available opportunity - and it grated.

Jenna now allowed him to fondle her breasts and, on a couple of occasions after one white wine spritzer too many, she had allowed his hands to roam down her waistband. But she had still refused his pleas to go all the way, and had recoiled in horror when he had produced a condom from his jeans pocket one night when her parents were at the cinema.

'Oh, I see. You thought I was dead cert for tonight, did you?' Her bottom lip was trembling. 'You had it all planned on a grubby little checklist. Parents at the cinema, empty house, take a condom.'

Mark sighed. 'No, Jenna, it wasn't. If you want the truth, I've been carrying this condom for weeks, probably months, in the vain hope you might make love with me. In fact, it's probably rotted by now ... much like this relationship.'

His remark hung in the air between them, an admission he had been holding back for some time.

'Do you really mean that?' Her voice was small.

Mark cleared his throat. 'No, it hasn't rotted ... wrong words.' He took her hand. 'But I *do* think we need a break from each other, time to think about what we want.'

It was standard waffle taken straight from some soap opera he'd watched the previous week. Mark already knew what he wanted: sex. And he wasn't getting it.

'How long?' Jenna's face was crumpled with distress.

'Let's just see,' he said softly. The ball was firmly in his court and he didn't want to throw it back too soon. 'Time will tell.'

A man with a mission, he had approached Hannah Foley one break-time, even before Jenna's tear-stained pillow had dried out. 'Fancy a night out?' he asked nonchalantly.

Hannah, chewing gum, looked him up and down. 'Where?'

'I thought we could have dinner at the Harvester.'

'Oooh, get you,' she said. 'All right, then.'

Over steak and chips, she had bored him rigid with her encyclopedic knowledge of the life and death of the Doors' Jim Morrison, while he stared down her ample cleavage and imagined the delights cupped within. At one point, she removed a clumpy black shoe and placed her bare foot between his legs, massaging his groin under the table. Mark thought he might pass out with sheer ecstasy.

Later, tense with anticipation, he placed an arm round her shoulders and walked her home via the school playing-fields. Pulling her towards the shadowy safety of some nearby bushes, he started a snog of some ferocity. Within seconds his hand was inside her blouse, the other lifting her skirt, and when he felt no slap to his face, there was no stopping him.

There, on the playing-field where he'd scored a good few rugby tries, he dropped his trousers, wrestled on a condom, and kicked his virginity into touch.

'Bloody hell, it only cost me a Snowball to get my leg over,' said Brian, when a glowing Mark had told him the next day. 'Trust you to fork out for a three-course meal with wine. I hope the steak wasn't fillet.'

Actually it had been, but Mark didn't care. He was walking tall, his chest puffed out with pride that he had become - in his own eyes, at least - a man. The relief was overwhelming.

He had been brought up to respect women and treat them well, so he had asked Hannah for another date, anxious that she shouldn't feel cheapened by what might have been a one-night stand. This time there was no fillet steak, just a stroll down to the local recreation ground and a shared bottle of lukewarm cider stolen from his parents' cellar.

'D'ya wan' another shag, then?' said Hannah, as they passed the cider bottle between them, and Mark realized she probably didn't trouble herself with feeling cheap. Now that he'd lost his virginity, his interest in Hannah had waned. But he didn't want to upset her by rejecting her offer, so to make himself feel better about it, he fumbled around with her one more time, *then* never called her again.

Since their decision to take time out and think about their relationship, he and Jenna had seen each other several times for a drink and a chat but little had been resolved. Occasionally Jenna looked wistful, but Mark pretended not to notice. The last thing he wanted was endless hand-wringing heart-to-hearts that ended with her saying, 'I'm not ready for sex.' He assumed that when she was ready she would tell him so. Until then, it was best to keep it platonic and fun.

All three passed enough GCSEs to stay on in the sixth form for A levels, and they spent a pleasant summer together.

When September arrived, they had enjoyed a surfeit of good times and were ready to throw themselves into schoolwork.

Since he was a small child, Mark had wanted to become a chef with his own restaurant. His parents, Jean and Derek, were wealthy: his father had invented a compact, cost-effective air-conditioning system aimed at small businesses. The idea had been taken up by a major company, who paid him a small percentage of the value of

each system they sold, so when it took off in America, his parents had been rolling in cash.

Mark had told them of his restaurant dream, but they had never offered to help him out and he'd never dared to ask them outright for backing. They were traditional parents, and Mark knew they wanted him to get a university degree, like his brother Tony, who was ten years older and worked for a major stockbroker's in the City of London.

So he'd toed the family line, spent the next two years studying hard for his A levels, and applied to several universities to study English. But all three of them had named Birmingham as their first choice.

Although Mark and Jenna were still apart on the day the results were to be pinned on the school noticeboard, they agreed to meet up with Brian to face the music together.

'Yes! Fucking yes!' Brian punched the air and danced around the corridor.

Mark's eyes scanned the list until he found 'Hawkins, M: English, A, geography, B, general science, B.' 'Oh, my God!' he spluttered. 'I've done it. I'm going to Birmingham!' He joined Brian in a victory dance.

Several seconds passed before they realized that Jenna was motionless.

'Jen?' Mark put his hand on her shoulder and turned her to face him.

A tear was rolling down her cheek. 'I've only passed one,' she whispered. 'I'm not coming with you.'

'I won't go, if you like,' said Mark, as he and Jenna sat nursing their coffee in the local Burger King later that night. 'Maybe it's the perfect excuse I need to get a job in a restaurant and work my way up.' He knew she'd never try to stop him going to Birmingham, but he had to offer.

'Don't be silly,' she replied. 'I'm not sure I'm the university type so I'm not that bothered.'

Mark wrinkled his nose. 'What went wrong? It's unlike you to fail.'

'No idea. I thought I'd prepared well, but I guess my mind was on other things.'

Mark knew she was probably alluding to their fragmented relationship, but guilt stopped him saying so. He changed the subject. 'How did your mum and dad react?' he asked. He didn't mention that Jean and Derek had cracked open some vintage champagne to celebrate his results.

'They were fine about it - they knew I'd tried my best. That's all they've ever asked me to do.'

'So, what now?'

Jenna brightened. 'You know I've always loved doing people's hair? Well, I'm going to see if I can get an apprenticeship in a salon round here.' She gestured out of the window. 'Who knows? One day I might even open my own place.'

'I could open my restaurant next door.' He smiled.

Whether from genuine love or the thought of Mark leaving for university in a couple of months' time, they shared a long, tender kiss across the Formica table and picked up where they had left off.

As he walked her home, his arm protectively round her shoulders, Jenna mentioned that her parents were away next weekend, and she would be alone. 'I'm ready to make love.' She nuzzled the back of his neck. 'If you still want to ...'

Unsure of what their future now held, Mark thought it would probably be wiser to leave things as they were. But he knew what it had taken for her to suggest it, so rejecting her was not an option. That Saturday night, clutching a bottle of wine for Dutch courage, Mark rang the doorbell.

'Hello.' She put her arms round him and kissed his cheek. She was wearing a light touch of mascara and lipstick, and her long brown hair was loosely curled, softly

framing her face. He thought he had never seen her look so lovely. 'Come through.' She led him into the living room, scene of his former frustration, with its lace curtains, floral sofa and the picture of the crying boy over the fireplace.

The wine, abandoned on a side table, wasn't needed. Propelled by a mixture of nerves and excitement, they began to kiss immediately in the middle of the room.

'Lie down on the floor,' Mark murmured, taking a cushion from the sofa and placing it under her head. He kissed her tenderly until he felt her relax.

Looking apprehensive, she smiled. 'I'm glad to see you've brought that condom with you.'

Afterwards, they lay quietly for several minutes while he stroked her hair, occasionally burying his face in it and inhaling the heady scent of Jenna mixed with apple shampoo. 'How do you feel?' he said eventually. Of course, what he meant was 'How good was I?'

'It was well worth waiting for,' she murmured.

His backside was starting to go numb on the hard floor, so he shifted. 'Come on, let's go to bed.' He stood up, took her hand and led her towards the stairs.

In her bed, he held Jenna in his arms until her breathing steadied and he knew she'd fallen asleep. Mark stared at the ceiling. He had released the years of frustration, but he couldn't relax. His mind was racing with thoughts of university and what his future might hold.

The big dilemma was whether his plans included Jenna.

Friday, 28 June, 2002, 2.05 p.m.

ADAM REMOVED HIS pink Chanel sunglasses with all the high drama of a spaghetti-western star and eyeballed her. 'But *why?*' he asked again.

'Why not?' Fay took a defiant glug of the house champagne she'd ordered from Room Service. 'Men can have a last fling before they get married and no one questions it.'

'Not strictly true, darling, but I'll let that sweeping generalization pass for now. Supposing that *was* the case, it still doesn't explain why *you* would want to behave in that way. The last time I looked you didn't have a dangly bit between your legs.'

During an arduous journey of flight delays and a French cab driver who had been even more irritable than the norm, Fay had told Adam about the previous weekend's 'night of shame' - as he was now calling it. Now they were reclining on the vast mahogany four-poster bed in the chateau's honeymoon suite and indulging in what they loved best: a good, analytical gossip - although Fay had to admit that she preferred it to be about other people than herself.

Adam, her best friend - who described himself as '*Homo sapiens*, homeopathic, and homosexual' - had clearly been torn between revelling in this outrageous piece of news and admonishing her. He had chosen the latter and had now been lecturing her for fifteen minutes.

'Don't get all sanctimonious on me.' She stretched her left leg across the lavishly embroidered bedcover. 'You lot are terrible at staying faithful.'

Adam put a hand on his heart and assumed a wounded expression. 'If by "you lot" you mean the gay community then you're wrong,' he said. 'We are perfectly capable of staying faithful in long, rewarding relationships. It's only when we're unhappy that we seek love elsewhere.'

Fay pulled a face. "'Seek love elsewhere,'" she mimicked, in a Joyce Grenfell voice, and they both fell about laughing.

'Oh, all right, then, I meant shag around. But the sentiment's the same.' He removed the olive from his martini and bit into it. 'I just don't understand why you'd want to do something like that when you're about to get married. I mean, what's the point?'

'I told you.' She pouted. 'I'd had a bit to drink, he was handsome and, if we absolutely *must* analyse it, I suppose I was panicking about getting married. But I didn't go all the way.'

Adam shook his head. 'I meant, what's the point in getting married?'

It was an uncomfortable question, which Fay felt too weary to answer. She wasn't sure she even had an answer, so she used the age-old tactic favoured by politicians: she swerved it. 'Anyway, what Mark doesn't know won't hurt him.'

'But it hurts the *relationship*,' said Adam emphatically. 'It's the same thing.'

Fay looked at him incredulously. 'You sound like a bloody therapist.'

'My sweet, that's what you need. There's - something - missing - in - there.' He tapped the side of her head as he said each word.

'Maybe.' She turned down the corners of her mouth. 'But it's true that if a *man* has one last fling, it's seen as a rite of passage before he becomes manacled to his wife and supposedly loses his freedom ... I hate that imagery, by the way. But you're saying that *women* aren't allowed to do it.'

Adam lobbed his olive stone into the bin. 'I don't think either gender screw around if they're serious about something, but it's a scientific fact that some men can have a one-night stand without it affecting a serious relationship while women can't. They're different.' When in doubt, he always used the 'scientific fact' argument, fictional or otherwise.

'But are we naturally different?' she asked. 'Or are we just brought up to think and behave in a way that suits men?'

He pulled a face. 'Bloody hell, this is all getting very deep. All I'm basically saying is, I hope you're doing the right thing.'

Fay stood up to pour herself more champagne. 'Of course I am. Once I'm married to Mark, I'll be faithful, I promise.' She placed her fingers against her temple in the Brownie salute. 'Besides, if it makes you feel any better to hear it, I hate myself for my little indiscretion. It was a cheap thing to do and I wouldn't want to repeat it.'

Adam stretched, pulled down his T-shirt, which bore a sequined heart on the front, and leaped up from the bed. He went to gaze out of the mullioned window that led on to an ancient stone balcony. 'God, this place is beautiful.'

She walked across to stand next to him, and they were silent for a few minutes, absorbing the stunning Provençal scenery, lush after an unusually rain-soaked winter and early spring.

Fay had stayed at Château Montferrer for a magazine fashion shoot a couple of years previously and fallen in love with the place. A few kilometres outside Grasse, it was perched on the side of a hill and had once belonged to an aristocratic family who, through lack of funds, had allowed it to fall into disrepair. Just before the new millennium had dawned, they had moved to a smaller estate, and sold it to an exclusive hotel chain. A few million had restored it to much more than its former glory.