

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

---



# The Cinderella Effect

Miriam Morrison

## **Contents**

About the Book

About the Author

Also by Miriam Morrison

Title Page

Dedication

Prologue: Lila

Chapter One: Lila

Chapter Two: Johnny

Chapter Three: Lila

Chapter Four: Johnny

Chapter Five: Lila

Chapter Six: Johnny

Chapter Seven: Lila

Chapter Eight: Johnny

Chapter Nine: Lila

Chapter Ten: Johnny

Chapter Eleven: Lila

Chapter Twelve: Johnny

Chapter Thirteen: Lila

Chapter Fourteen: Johnny

Chapter Fifteen: Lila

Chapter Sixteen: Johnny

Chapter Seventeen: Lila

Chapter Eighteen: Johnny

Chapter Nineteen: Lila

Chapter Twenty: Johnny

Chapter Twenty-one: Lila  
Chapter Twenty-two: Johnny  
Chapter Twenty-three: Lila  
Chapter Twenty-four: Johnny  
Chapter Twenty-five: Lila  
Chapter Twenty-six: Johnny  
Chapter Twenty-seven: Lila  
Chapter Twenty-eight  
Chapter Twenty-nine: Lila

Acknowledgements

Copyright

## About the Book

Serial fiancée and struggling artist Lila Barton lives with her family in a dilapidated mansion. Penniless, directionless and having sworn off men, Lila is delighted to land a job working for her famous godfather who is directing a star-studded charity production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. She is even more thrilled to learn that Hollywood heart-throb Mitch Clayton will be one of the stars, although she's promised her sister she won't get engaged again ... this year at least!

But avoiding Mitch's advances is proving tricky. And then there's Mitch's stepbrother, Johnny, the Cinderella of the Clayton clan. It turns out he's a man of many secrets and Lila can't help but be intrigued ...

## About the Author

Miriam Morrison used to live in Cumbria, where she was a journalist, teacher and hotelier, though not all at the same time. She now lives in Kent with her daughter, Emily (a genius in the kitchen) and a cat, Poppy (a genius at getting her own way). Miriam Morrison is also the author of *Recipe for Disaster*, which was published by Arrow in April 2008.

*Also available by Miriam Morrison*

RECIPE FOR DISASTER

# The Cinderella Effect

Miriam Morrison



arrow books

For Mike and Beccy

# Prologue

## Lila

SILENTLY, I BEGGED Tony to drop the gravy in my lap, but of course he didn't. He poured it neatly onto the roast lamb, just the way I liked it, and then stood up.

'Oh, and I got you that CD you've been wanting - I'll just put it on.'

I stared down at my plate and inhaled the intoxicating scent of garlic and rosemary. This was my favourite meal. Feverishly I cast around for something, anything, that we could have an argument about. Politics always seemed to work for people on television. I tried to drum up a controversial opinion about Parliament and failed. My hands twitched.

'Dig in, darling. There's heaps more where that came from!' said Tony tenderly, dropping a kiss on the top of my head before sitting down. He smiled at me lovingly, and he had every right to - he was my fiancé.

I smiled weakly and pushed my fork around on the plate. But my throat had dried up completely and the ring on my finger was winking out a coded message. It was telling me what an idiot I had been, again.

'Mmm, the scent from those roses is just wonderful, isn't it?' he said, sounding pleased with himself.

He had cooked my favourite meal, put on my favourite music, and even remembered how much I loved yellow roses. I stared at them, bobbing slightly in the breeze from

the open window, and shuddered. Everything was perfect. And suddenly I was so miserable I couldn't bear it any longer.

'I can't do it! Tony, I am so sorry but I can't marry you!'

He stared at me aghast, his kind brown eyes full of shock. 'What?' he managed to whisper eventually.

I gulped, but knew I couldn't back away from this. 'I don't deserve you. You are a wonderful man, but I am not the right woman for you.'

'But I haven't done anything wrong.'

I nodded and a tear of pity for him plopped into the now congealing gravy. Poor Tony. He was right. But then he probably hadn't put a foot wrong in his life. Vicar's son, head boy at school, Duke of Edinburgh Gold Award winner and now a conservation worker - Tony could fix just about anything. He frowned and I could tell he was thinking about ways to fix this.

'I've gone overboard with the flowers and all this food, haven't I? I know you don't like fuss. I will back off and give you some space.'

'No, it's not that at all . . .'

'Maybe I haven't been giving you enough attention. Do you want to go out more? Is this all too staid and middle-aged, just sitting at home and having dinner?'

'I'm not yearning for wild parties and bags of cocaine and the likes of Pete Doherty, if that's what you mean,' I said wildly. 'It's just that . . . well, I . . . you see . . . oh, Tony, I am so sorry but I just need to be on my own!' I blurted out. I knew with an unshakeable conviction that we had to break up - I just couldn't explain why. I felt like I had led him up the garden path to our 'roses round the door' future and then slammed it shut, leaving him out in the mud and the pouring rain. At least he had found out the truth about me before I led him up the aisle.

He slumped. I couldn't bear to look at him. But then I didn't have to; I knew every inch of him off by heart. Tony

was tall and very fit. He ran every morning and he didn't just belong to a gym - he actually used it, three times a week. He had a square dependable-looking face, the sort of face that said, I won't let you down. Oh, how I wished mine could say the same thing.

Then his eyes sharpened. 'Is there someone else?' he asked hoarsely.

At least I could meet his gaze unflinchingly. 'I would never do that to you,' I said.

'Look, I know things haven't been going right for you recently: your home, your family . . .' He paused and then realised that was too big a subject to tackle now. 'I know your career isn't really taking off either,' he began.

'That's because I haven't got a career. Or even a job,' I finished for him bluntly, determined to call a spade a spade, even if he couldn't. My hands twitched again.

'But honestly, darling, things won't stay like that. And even if they do, I don't care. I love you as you are. I don't want to change you one bit. I will support you whatever happens. That's why we're getting married - that's my vow to you!'

I felt like a surgeon starting the operation without the anaesthetist. 'Tony, I am very, very sorry, but there will be no wedding. I don't think I can really explain it properly, but I am absolutely certain that I cannot marry you.'

He stared at me. 'I don't believe you are doing this!'

'I know. It must seem like I don't know my own mind, but I assure you I do. You see, it's -' I began.

'I don't mean that. I mean that we are in the middle of the most momentous and life-changing discussion of our relationship. I expected - I hoped - you would at least concentrate. But you -' he pointed a shaking finger at me - 'you're doodling on the napkin.'

I looked down, horrified. I wasn't, was I? Yes, I was. Any other woman breaking off an engagement would have taken off the ring and put it quietly on the table, a mute gesture to

signify it was over. But not me. My hands had other ideas. They were busy scribbling a sketch of me taking the ring off.

I stood up and clasped my hands firmly behind my back so they wouldn't get me into any more trouble. 'You are quite right. At least this will show you that you deserve someone far better than me.' I turned, tears welling, and blundered towards the door. 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, but I think it would be better if I just went home . . .' I babbled, and ran out.

As I unchained my bike from the railings outside Tony's flat, keeping my head bent because I knew he was at the window staring down at me, I realised I was still wearing his ring. But I knew I couldn't go up there again now. I would have to send it back. I shoved my hand in my pocket in case he saw it glittering in the lamplight - it was rather a big diamond - and cycled - or rather, wobbled - off, because balancing was difficult with only one hand. I was still sniffing and sobbing, so as soon as I was round the corner, I stopped to blow my nose and mop up. I took the ring off and put it in my pocket. Instantly I felt better.

As I cycled home soberly, I reflected that out of all my admittedly numerous engagements, this had probably been the most unsuitable. I'd known Tony all my life - we'd gone to the same school, but then hadn't seen much of each other until the day he turned up at our house. In his capacity as council heritage officer, he was talking to Ma and Pa about a grant to shore up what he called 'the east wing', but what we called 'those mouldy old bedrooms round the back that never get any sunlight'. He stayed on to fix a floorboard - he has a passion for mending things - and it all started from there. There were many lovable things about Tony, and I did still love him, actually, but there was no spark between us, never had been really. Oh, I was such a fool for agreeing to marry him in the first place.

My route home took me past my first fiancé's flat. There were plenty of sparks between Greg and me then, and even

more during the break-up. Greg was passionate, with flaring nostrils, and I thought the break-up would go more smoothly if we did it in a public place – a restaurant, to be exact. This certainly meant that we kept our voices down, but Greg flung his arms about quite a lot and knocked over the candle, setting fire to the tablecloth. Greg was an English teacher and I can still remember him declaiming a Shakespearean sonnet about lost love and broken hearts in his deep, melodic voice, over the crackling of the flames. One table thought it was a floor show and applauded.

Greg wrote to me six months later to say that our relationship, though painful, had inspired his lessons on *Wuthering Heights* with his Year Ten students, who had then gone on to pass their English Literature GCSE with flying colours, so at least the engagement hadn't been a total washout.

My bike skidded to a halt beside the park railings and a wave of horror washed over me. How many engagements did a girl have to break off before she became, well, a serial fiancée? Was that what I had turned into?

I glanced over the railings and shuddered. Everywhere I looked, my shameful past rose up to haunt me. Just over there, by that exact park bench, was where I had fallen over fiancé number two's legs. Richard was an architect and he was sitting in the park while going over the agenda for an important meeting. I was in my all too brief jogging phase, but had stopped looking where I was going because I had suddenly noticed how the sun was shining on the leaves of a tree. It would be quite a challenge mixing the right shade of green, I thought, as I fell over him.

Richard was such a gentleman, even though my nose bled all over his very important papers and he ended up being twenty minutes late for his meeting. He mopped me up with his handkerchief, sat me down on the bench and arranged to meet me for coffee later. He was very kind, but terribly bossy, I later learned. He was always telling me what to do –

which dress I should wear to the restaurant, what to order when we got there, whether we should have sex before or after dinner.

For his birthday, I drew a sketch of him sitting at his desk. He said he loved it, but I could see him looking at it doubtfully.

‘Darling, I think you’ve made my nose a little too big,’ he said.

‘I haven’t,’ I said firmly.

‘Darling, I do know about proportion and accuracy, and this nose is . . . it’s . . . positively gigantic.’

I laughed and kissed him on the offending honker. ‘You know what they say about big noses,’ I giggled.

‘You will have to draw it again,’ said Richard, stubbornly. There wasn’t even a glimmer of a smile on his face.

‘I won’t,’ I said, louder. Suddenly, defending that nose became the most important thing in the world. We stared at each other and I had an awful vision of our future together, with Richard always insisting he was right.

Later, and obviously I didn’t explain it very well because I was still very upset, I said that the engagement was over because Richard and I couldn’t agree as to the size of his nose. My family clearly thought I was bonkers. Sometimes I agree with them.

# Chapter One

## Lila

'EVERYONE'S TALKING ABOUT us again,' said Ma gloomily, two days later. 'I was in the post office this morning and I heard someone say it should be a regular item in the parish magazine. Or a competition. Something along the lines of: "Guess how many engagement rings Lila Barton has given back this year!"'

I winced.

'Someone else said you were better entertainment than the television,' she continued, drying the dishes with such gusto a handle fell off a teacup. 'Well, that's the last of the Minton tea set.'

'That cup was chipped anyway,' I offered consolingly, but my mother was looking at Will. Maybe she was hoping he would instantly produce a twenty-five-page analysis of my condition, along with a list of treatments, all of them cheap.

But Will was doing the crossword. 'There must be another word for arboretum, because this one just doesn't fit,' he complained. He saw us staring at him and tapped his pencil impatiently, eager to get back to the puzzle. 'She's just a romantic dreamer and I am sure at some point, probably when she has run out of steam, or men, she'll grow out of it,' he opined. 'Ah ha! That's it! Arboretum is right and gravy is wrong,' he said triumphantly, and bent his head again. This was one of those times when it was hopeless trying to get any sense out of him.

Will is much older than I and already starting to go bald, which annoys him, as Pa still has a full head, though penury and deprivation have turned him completely grey. Will has earned so many psychotherapeutical qualifications that anyone writing to him needs an extra large envelope to fit in all the letters after his name. He is as familiar with the thoughts of Freud and Jung as you and I are with the contents of *heat* magazine.

He once said it was unprofessional to analyse members of his own family, to which Pa replied he wished he had known that before forking out all that cash to send him to university, and anyway, no one needed analysing except me.

Brothers can be really quite silly sometimes, even psychotherapists like Will. He'd got it all wrong, anyhow, because I considered myself to be the least romantic member of my family. But even so, there was no escaping the fact that I had made rather a habit recently of collecting and disposing of fiancés.

'I am no psychologist, but isn't it the current trend to blame the parents for everything?' Ma asked hesitantly.

'You and Pa had three children. Statistically one of them is bound to turn out a bit off,' chortled Will, and ducked when I threw the dishcloth at him.

A sudden gust of wind hurtled a sheet of rain at the kitchen window.

'Which one of us is on bucket duty?' asked Ma.

'I'll go,' I offered, even though it wasn't my turn. It was the perfect excuse to escape the firing line of family criticism, so I set off upstairs to my attic bedroom.

Being on bucket duty was an activity peculiar to those of us who call Barton Willow home. Usually houses are described as, oh, a four-bedroom bungalow or a two-bed flat, for instance. Barton Willow has lots of bedrooms, actually, but I preferred to describe it as an eleven-bucket house. This was the number currently required to catch the

rain that dripped through the holes in the roof, a figure that had been growing steadily for the last few years. If the family fortunes didn't change for the better soon, we would be all buckets and no roof. But how could things get better? There didn't seem any way to reverse the downward spiral of our fortunes. And if they didn't . . . No, I definitely wasn't going to think about that right now.

I love my attic bedroom even though the ceiling is so low at one end I can't stand up. But the other end is practically all window, and when I look out, it feels like I am looking halfway across Kent. I stood for a few minutes admiring the view and daydreaming, and then remembered I was here to empty those bloody buckets before the water overflowed down through the floorboards and into Ma and Pa's bedroom.

It also made one less job for Jeeves, our faithful and desperately over-burdened retainer. Poor Jeeves, he could barely lift the silver teapot, his hands were so gnarled and twisted with arthritis . . .

I'm sorry, I made that last bit up. That whole last bit, actually.

We didn't have an old retainer. We didn't have any servants at all, not even a cleaner, and, boy, could we have done with one in this mouldering mansion, with all its bedrooms, reception rooms, anterooms, stables out the back and a drive so long you'd need a cup of tea and a sit-down long before you reached the front door. Yes, we had all that. We just didn't have any money, or the possibility of getting any.

Barton Willow was sometimes more like a monster than a house. It sucked up every bit of money you threw at it like an enormous vacuum cleaner that you couldn't switch off. My sister, Anna, who is good with figures, did a rough calculation of how much it would cost to put Barton Willow right.

'I sort of knew it was going to be seven figures, but even I didn't know it was going to be those particular seven,' she said, and gulped.

Our mood was damper than the clothes drying above the Blessed Aga. To make us laugh, I demanded to look into Pa's wallet. I shook it and out fluttered an ancient one-pound note.

'Oh, Pa, how long has that been there?'

'Since I was eight,' he admitted. 'I got it for my birthday. It was the first time anyone had given me any money and I was so excited. There were so many things I wanted, I decided not to spend it until I was absolutely certain. In the end it became a sort of talisman and I couldn't bear to part with it . . .' He trailed off into silence.

'And now it's not even legal tender,' said Will mournfully.

Really, I thought poverty and perpetual damp had sent us all slightly mad. No wonder I was tempted every now and then to make up stories about servants. It also took my mind off the fact that I was in a tiny bit of boyfriend bother at that moment. Again. I was just fed up with getting it wrong all the time. If falling in love was an exam, I would have been on my third resit by then. Maybe I should just have awarded myself a double F for my failure to be a proper fiancée.

I started emptying the buckets. It was all going well until bucket number ten, which was so ancient that the bottom fell out when I picked it up, and instantly my socks and trainers were drenched in icy cold water. I tore into the bathroom to find a towel for mopping up, but by the time I found a dry one it was too late, the water had seeped away through the floorboards. I upended the waste bin, which was plastic and would serve nicely to catch the drips, but which left rubbish all over the floor. Really, that should have been an incentive to tidy up!

But then I caught sight of my reflection in the bottom of the broken bucket and groaned. I really wasn't up to a

critical analysis of my features just then.

'You have a lovely smile,' Ma says, but this is the sort of thing a mother has to say. I tried a quick smile but I have such a large mouth, I just looked manically cheerful and certainly not sexy, like Angelina Jolie when she smiles. No, my smile was just big. When I was ten, for a dare, I got a whole pork pie in my mouth without losing a crumb, which I suppose is an achievement. Angelina looks like she wouldn't know what a pork pie was.

By the way, I only did the pie thing once, though cash was offered for an encore. I discovered there are some things even I wouldn't do for money.

I had been wearing a blanket draped over my shoulders like a cloak while I did the bucket thing and even though I had changed out of my soaking wet socks and trainers, and into slippers, I was still shivering. Now, because I had once timed it, I knew that it took exactly three and a half minutes of icy cold corridors to get from my attic to the kitchen and the Blessed Aga, but if I took the blanket with me to keep warm in those three and a half minutes, someone was bound to swipe it, and then I would never see it again and I would die of hypothermia, which might be one way out of my current troubles, but rather a drastic one. What better sign that the family fortunes had hit an all-time low than the fact that we were reduced to scrapping over a mouldy old blanket with a red jelly stain in one corner, I mused, as I made my way quickly down the rickety staircase from the top floor and along a wood-panelled corridor. Was that woodworm I could hear or a deathwatch beetle? No, the heel of my slipper had come loose and was clicking on the bare boards. This part of the house wasn't important enough to merit a carpet. I turned right into another corridor, lined with bold squares where pictures had once hung and where now only rusty nails remained. At the top of the stairs leading to the ground floor I paused, even though I was so cold my teeth were chattering. These stairs

demanded style and elegance. I should really be wearing something long and floaty, and as I wafted down, there would be a man waiting at the bottom, hand held out chivalrously to take mine, which in my fantasy was manicured and dainty, not spattered with old ink stains. But then my imagination refused to work another minute in this frigid cold, and I ran down the rest of the stairs quickly.

I opened the kitchen door and got an unexpected view of Ma's bottom, which, despite her advancing years and the hideous brown corduroy trousers she was wearing, was still in very good shape - better than my own, I suspected.

'Why are you trying to climb in the oven? Has Pa been beating you up again?'

'Don't be silly - you know your father wouldn't do that.' Ma's face emerged, rather flushed. 'Actually I was looking for the knives. I simply cannot remember where I hid them last night.'

'Why did you hide them in the first place?' I said, bewildered.

'Tony. I saw his face reflected in the hall mirror when you were giving the ring back. And then, when he asked to use one of the knives, I didn't want him doing anything silly.'

'Oh.' I was engulfed in depression. Tony had insisted on coming to the house the next day to see if we could talk things over. We had then endured an excruciating hour while I'd tried to explain the unexplainable, which was that I was totally convinced we weren't right for each other, I just couldn't explain why. 'He wanted a knife to cut away that bit of loose carpet before someone tripped over it. He wasn't going to do anything else with it,' I explained.

'Well, I wasn't going to take any chances. You have such a volatile love life, dear.'

Tony deserved someone far better than me, someone who didn't heap even more worries on her already overburdened mother, for instance. 'Ma, I really am sorry.'

‘I don’t know how I can make dinner without a knife – not that I have much appetite, because afterwards I must phone Graham and Sylvia for a very uncomfortable conversation.’

I winced. Tony’s dad, Graham, is our vicar and our families have been friends for ever. Who could blame Sylvia if she wanted to heap insults on my head?

I started opening and shutting cupboards, hoping to locate the knives. They were nowhere to be seen, but I did come across Anna’s latest donation, a packet of custard creams. As I fumbled with the pack (why are they always so bloody difficult to get into – do they not want you to eat them?), I scrabbled around in my head for something, anything, to mitigate my poor behaviour. But there was nothing. Tony was a perfectly nice guy. He had no annoying habits, strange fetishes or psychological defects, which was probably why I had fallen for him in the first place.

I sat down miserably next to Will. Could I tell Ma the truth? I wondered. No. It sounded ridiculous even to my own ears. The truth was I had leaped into this relationship as I had into all of them, madly impulsive, sure that this was what I had been searching for, and then, well, it was like becoming instantly sober after a prolonged period of drunkenness. I would look around, my eyes focused now, and discover I didn’t want to be with him at all.

‘If you keep saying you want to be on your own, why do you persist in getting engaged?’ asked Will. ‘You’re practically salivating for an engagement ring, and then when you get one, you run off like a frightened rabbit. Your auntie’s an idiot, isn’t she, darling?’ This bit was addressed to my niece, Emma, who was lying on the kitchen table having her nappy changed.

I blew out my cheeks in a gusty sigh. Will was absolutely right – I was an idiot.

But then he turned round and gave me a quick grin. ‘Cheer up, sis. I have every confidence you’ll get your life sorted . . . eventually.’

'Then you are probably the only one around here who does,' I said gloomily.

'Console yourself with the fact that you are providing the village with gossip fodder,' said Will.

'Why would that be a consolation?'

'Well, it's one of the things a Barton has to do - it's a sort of family tradition - and you are doing it almost as well as Pa's great-great-great-grandfather Quentin. You know the one.'

'Er, no . . .'

Will sighed. 'You really should mug up your family history a bit more,' he grumbled. 'Quentin Barton was one of the first people to experiment with talking to plants to see if they would grow better. The villagers were perfectly happy to let him loose in their gardens, but unfortunately he insisted on conducting these botanical chats in the nude. Even then the village didn't mind too much - it gave people something to talk about on those long winter nights - until he tried to persuade the blacksmith's wife to join him - lying down.'

'I've never heard of Quentin,' I said suspiciously.

'Yes, you have, and you've seen him. It was his ghost you saw running through the kitchen garden last year.'

'I told you I had seen something suspicious but you all blamed it on Ma's sloe gin,' I said triumphantly, and then saw the look on his face. 'Liar! You just made all that up!'

'You are so easy to wind up, post engagement break-up,' he grinned.

If I stuck my tongue out at Emma, she stuck hers out right back and sometimes she even blew bubbles. She was obviously a most advanced baby and destined to be the genius that would turn our family's fortunes round, though by then it would probably be too late. Genius had clearly skipped my generation, or at least me, I thought. The drawings I had done of her the previous week didn't do her justice at all. They didn't capture the uniqueness that was

Emma; they were just a bunch of rather dull drawings of possibly any baby in the world.

‘Well, you do seem to start things and then not finish them – boyfriends, pictures . . .’ Will continued, pointing to a drawing I had done of Anna, which still lacked ears. Actually, I think I could have passed it off as meaningful art, you know, made the earlessness a statement about modern life. Or maybe it could have been an homage to Van Gogh. But the truth was it lacked ears because I couldn’t get them right and had tried so many times with this particular set that there were now two small holes in the paper.

Ma gave a shout of triumph, which made us all jump, when she finally found the knives in the washing machine.

‘It was a kind thought, Ma, but I am certain you needn’t have bothered. Tony wasn’t remotely suicidal. He is far too considerate to put people out like that, and anyway, I am sure he will get over me very quickly.’

I ruminated on the fact that he always seemed to laugh more at Anna’s jokes than at mine and that they had been friends for ages, while Ma set to work on the rabbit that was to become tonight’s supper. It was lying in a depressed way in the sink, well out of Emma’s view in case it frightened her. On top of the rabbit, so he looked like he was wearing camouflage, was a pile of potatoes and a bunch of herbs, all fresh from the soil. In other words, they were covered in muck and needed vast amounts of effort before anyone could eat them. Oh, how I yearned sometimes for those little meals you shove straight in a microwave. When they come out, you don’t even have to transfer the contents to a plate. Being poor is such hard work.

I picked up a potato and examined it. I was sure it had the same shape as Tony’s father’s head, but this obviously wouldn’t be a good time to go round with it and check.

‘Peel it and don’t even think about drawing it!’ Ma waved her knife at me threateningly. It was a good thing none of Will’s colleagues were round – they would have had a field

day. 'Are you sure she hasn't got that attention deficit thingy?' Ma looked at Will hopefully.

'Um, I'm right here, Ma. You can't talk about me behind my back when I'm right in front of you,' I complained.

'Tell your sister I have decided not to talk to her until she sorts herself out.'

'Sort myself out? What do you mean? You make me sound like a pile of dirty laundry!'

'For the love of God, what she means is, just start something - anything, really - and see it through to the finish, the bitter end, if necessary,' translated Will, inserting Emma into my old high chair.

'I did. I finished with Tony, didn't I?' I pointed out. I put down the half-peeled potato, sat, and began giving Emma her tea. 'I just haven't found my *métier* yet.'

'Yes, we know that. It is quite obvious from your bank statement,' said Pa, poking his head round the door from the garden and pulling a silly face so Emma would smile.

'Hey! Why were you going through my mail?' I demanded.

'Well, I have this recurring fantasy that you have actually left home, Lila, so any mail that comes through the letterbox is either for me or your mother. I'm sorry, I just opened it. I certainly wish I hadn't. It was not heartening to discover that you have an overdraft the size of the national debt.'

'Are you going to come in or are you deliberately leaving the door open to let that Siberian draught in?' demanded Ma. She feels the cold terribly, though judging by her size I reckoned that today was a three-jumper day.

'I am checking that I can walk into my own kitchen without coming face to face with blubbing or naked bodies,' said Pa.

'Oh, don't be so silly,' I said, but I squirmed uncomfortably. I had put Pa through the mill a bit, though some time had passed since the awful occasion Pa had barged in, right in the middle of me dumping Peter, who was almost my first fiancé, but I broke up with him just before he

proposed. But he has had the last laugh, because look at him now: he is the most sought-after plumber in the whole of Kent, it seems. He has his own house, which never leaks, anywhere, is married to a gorgeous girl and the father of twins. And then look at me: jobless, penniless, single. Again.

Pa sat down rather heavily at the big kitchen table. I knew he wasn't going to make any more comments about my overdraft, because we all know his is much, much worse and Pa is nothing if not fair, though he does bellow a bit every now and again, just to let off steam.

I went over to the Blessed Aga to make him a nice comforting cup of tea and also to lean against its lovely warmth. I wished I had one of those all-in-one things that Emma wore. I could line it with rabbit fur, I thought idly, watching Ma skinning ours with a speed born of much practice. Her hands were red with cold. Poor Ma, I reckon the Blessed Aga is the only reason she has stayed in this decrepit house for so many years.

That's not true, of course. My parents would never criticise anyone for being impetuous, seeing as theirs was a whirlwind romance. They met in Norfolk, where Pa was learning about estate management, and they were married within the month at the local registry office because they were in such a hurry.

After the service they came straight here, travelling through the murk of a wet and foggy November evening.

It was a very good thing Ma met Pa before she saw Barton Willow. If she hadn't, she may well have run screaming for the nearest two-bedroom maisonette. From the outside it looked, well, fabulous – like something out of a fairytale. But once inside, with the crumbling walls, mouldy carpets, draughts and the family of mice that had set up home in one of the sofas, it turned into a nightmare.

When Ma and Pa arrived home after their wedding, there wasn't a single fire lit in the entire house because Pa was so excited he forgot to lay any. Ma always claimed that the

fires of passion kept her feet warm that night, but the reality was that, at six the following morning, frozen beyond belief, she staggered downstairs, past all the huge, empty fireplaces, which seemed to be giving out hollow, mocking sounds, the chimneys unswept for years, until, like a pilgrim reaching Mecca, she stumbled into the kitchen and heat.

'Oh, bless this Aga,' she is reputed to have said.

When the milkman arrived later that morning he saw Ma curled up, fast asleep, on the warming plate, while Pa made tea and gazed at her adoringly. There is a rumour that Will was actually conceived on this Aga, which is always worth bringing into the conversation when he is being particularly annoying.

Actually, although we all laughed about it, we had all had occasion to bless the presence of the Aga. It hardly ever went out, and was the only part of this crumbling house you could absolutely guarantee to find warm.

'Here, a lovely cup of tea and, look, some delicious biscuits Anna must have bought specially for you!' I said.

Pa looked at me over the top of his glasses and we grinned at each other in a complicit way.

'Stop that!' warned eagle-eyed Ma, even though we hadn't said anything. But then, Pa and I didn't have to. I take after him in temperament as well as looks. We are both tall and skinny and find things funny that other people don't, usually.

Anna is curvy and beautiful, like Ma. She has a brilliant way with clothes so she always looks fabulous, confident and bang on trend. But underneath that, she is an emotional volcano. Anna sees disaster looming round every corner. She can spot catastrophe so early on, it is still in bed, scratching its head and wondering what catastrophic plans to make for the day. She can take any situation and, within seconds, run it to a hideous tragic conclusion. You only have to tread on a drawing pin and you can see the word 'amputation' hover on her lips. I blame poverty myself. She

used to work herself up into a frenzy watching Ma scabble round the back of the sofa for spare coins to make up our lunch money. 'What if she can't find enough money?' she would whisper, her eyes huge. She was already envisaging the humiliation that would follow at school.

To her surprise, having somehow managed to survive all the way through childhood and past her A levels, she made it her life's mission to find a job that was well paid and secure. Anna can be focused when she wants to be, which comes as a shock when all people see is that docile face, and now she is a partner in a firm of accountants, having come to the conclusion that the world will always need an accountant, so she'll always have a steady income. She is simply raking it in.

I couldn't work out why, with a Waitrose income, she still had a Kwik Save mentality.

'I'm saving up to buy Ma and Pa a mortgage-free flat,' she explained.

'But they don't want to move,' I said.

We were in my bedroom at the time and she looked meaningfully at the buckets. 'One day they might have to.'

I was a bit worried about Anna just then. She seemed to have got even more accident-prone than usual and I thought she'd got something on her mind. She'd recently got her hair stuck in the photocopier at work. Then she was reaching for a tin of beans in the supermarket and it fell on her head. And she was distracted. The other night, she was clearing up after dinner and she put the salt and pepper in the fridge and the butter in the cupboard with the ketchup. But why wasn't she talking to me about it? We told each other everything.

Pa took a biscuit and dunked it in his tea, where it instantly crumbled and sank to the bottom.

'Oh, blast to buggery all stupid biscuits! Get me a spoon, there's a love.'

‘Pa, don’t you remember the conversation we had recently about the sort of language we should use in front of Emma?’ Will said.

‘There was never a conversation. I do, however, dimly recall a lecture of excruciating dullness along the lines of damaging influences on pre-verbal infants, to which I think I remarked, “Stop talking nonsense,” and walked off. Anything similar you have to say on the subject will elicit an identical response.’

‘Don’t fret, Will. If Emma does grow up to be mentally or morally unhinged, at least she won’t have to go far for her therapy,’ I said consolingly, putting a fresh cup of tea in front of Pa. I emptied the biscuits into a tin and drew a quick sketch of Emma in her pushchair looking thoughtful while Sigmund Freud chatted to her.

‘Stop winding your brother up and don’t for a minute think that you can buy me off with hot beverages,’ said Pa, sounding stern, which we all knew was just a pose. In this house, Ma is the one you don’t cross. ‘Soon after your precipitous return from the States you announced you were going to get a job and move to London – “as soon as I get myself sorted,” were your exact words. Do you have a date or a plan in mind, given that there are no unmarried men left in the village?’

Will snorted with laughter and I opened my mouth to say something in my defence, though I couldn’t think of anything, when the kitchen door was flung open, bringing with it an icy gust of English spring air and my sister-in-law, Sophia. It was probably the first time in my life I was glad to see her.

Actually that’s not true. I was pleased to see her the first time we met. I was so excited at the thought of welcoming her into the family and was already imagining cosy late night gossip sessions and sharing clothes and giving each other manicures. But then she asked Anna what diet she was on, just as Anna was reaching out her hand for her third

scone. Sophia had a silly smirk on her face as she said it and you could almost see her mentally patting her own twenty-three-inch waist.

Now, even I couldn't describe Anna as skinny or slender or thin. But why would I want to? Anna is voluptuous and gorgeous, and easily the sexiest woman I know. In fact, everyone knows that, apart from Anna, which is why she says things like this.

Anna: 'Oh, Lila, I asked a shop assistant if my bum looked big in these jeans, and she said yes, it did!'

Me: 'She was just jealous of you, probably because the shop manager, who was actually quite fit, was staring at you with his mouth open.'

Anna: 'Yes, but only because he'd never set eyes on someone as fat as me. But thank you for trying to make me feel better. Oh, why don't I have a figure like yours?'

Me: 'Like me? Like Ms Bag of Bones Barton? You might as well just say I've got a great personality and be done with it.'

I don't want to be skinny, I want to be curvy and beautiful, like Anna. Anna is a peach, a really luscious ripe one. But me, I'm a stick of rhubarb, and Sophia, well, she's just a lemon.

Anyway, Sophia doesn't understand either of us. In fact, I think she secretly hoped Will was snatched from his real family at birth, and one day soon they would come for him and take him back to their nice dull house in Suburbanville - a place where the *Telegraph* got delivered each day because the paper bill was always paid on time, and if you got cold you just put the heating on, and everyone had a normal job, but no one was quite as important or as thin and pulled-together as she was.

Sophia has a well-paid job and this evening she was wearing co-ordinating navy and white, which had an underlying theme of extreme dullness. I think it would be fair to say that the mannequin in our local charity shop was

dressed more boldly than Sophia. There was also a smudge of lipstick on one of her teeth, something that, I regret to say, caused me great satisfaction.

Her eyes did a quick scan of the room, checking that we hadn't been up to anything she could disapprove of, and she sank into a chair like she was God and it was Saturday evening.

'Long day, darling?' asked Will.

'Shattering.'

I went to the sink to refill the kettle. 'Would you like a cup of tea?' I asked hospitably, hoping to focus attention in the room on anyone but me.

'Oh, I suppose so, but please make sure it is caffeine-free, herbal, and would you take care to rinse the cup properly this time? I could taste soap suds the last time you made me a drink.' She shuddered.

'Go on, be a devil, have some caffeine. You look like you could do with it,' said Will. But she just looked at him like he was offering her a bag of heroin.

Emma held out her arms for her mother and Will stood up to pass her over. Sophia owned thirty-five books on child-rearing - at least that was the figure the last time I counted. She knows the right way to hold a baby, dress a baby, feed a baby, talk to a baby and play with a baby - and we do as well because she has lectured us at length on the subject. So Pa and I couldn't help grinning at each other as she bent over and whispered nonsense into Emma's ear and let Emma see how hard she could pull on her ear - both of which were expressly forbidden, according to her favourite manual. 'Who's my gorgeous snookynookums?' she burbled. 'No, darling, you can't eat Mummy-wummy's ear, can you, but you are very clever for trying.' She looked up proudly. Though I was loath to admit it, she really was a great mother.

'She is easily the cleverest baby ever,' I agreed, smiling at Sophia. I made her a cup of something caffeine-free, herbal,