



the  
Story  
of US  
felicity  
everett

Friendship lasts a lifetime...

## About the Book

**It is 1982 and Thatcher is in Downing Street, Human League is in the charts and *Dallas* is on the telly.**

But the girls of Albacore Street are too busy to notice. For Stella, Bridget, Vinnie, Maxine and Nell, life revolves around demos, parties and no-strings sex. Against a background of Greenham Common and the Miner's Strike, however, they are about to learn that life is not quite as simple as they thought.

Twenty years on and they are juggling like mad, but dropping all the balls. Their partners are straying, their daughters want plastic surgery, and their careers have stalled. Living increasingly separate lives, the tie that binds them grows thinner, until tragedy brings them back together, giving them a chance to refocus themselves on their friendship, their misdirected lives, and their survival.

Felicity Everett is the author of more than twenty fiction and non-fiction books for children. Having completed an MA in Creative Writing at Goldsmiths, she has now branched out into adult fiction and *The Story of Us* is her debut novel.

the  
Story  
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*For Adam*

**1982**

**Stella**

Stella took a deep breath and rang the bell. There was, after all, nothing to be frightened of. Soon she would be coming and going from this address without a second thought. These girls, these *women*, would be her housemates, probably her friends. There was to be no interview; the room was hers. Bridget had fixed it up already, so there was really no need for her stomach to churn or her finger to slip moistly off the doorbell. The door opened and she found herself looking at the back of someone's head.

'... his fucking tutorial in any case and that's what I told him ...' the girl was saying over her shoulder. She turned cheerfully towards her visitor. 'Hello, you must be ... Oh God, Bridget just told me and I've forgotten in the five seconds it took me to walk from the kitchen to the front door.'

'Stella.'

'Stella, Stella, Stella.' The girl beat her fists repeatedly on her temples as if that were the only possible way to commit to memory such a bland and forgettable name. 'OK. Got it. Come in. We're in the kitchen,' she added, clacking her way back down the hall in her stilettos. Stella struggled behind her, dragging a suitcase in one hand and a rucksack in the other. It didn't seem to occur to the girl to help, nor to introduce herself. Not that there was any need for the

latter. Vinnie was a legend. Stella had first seen her in the Common Room of the School of Cultural and Community Studies, about three weeks into the first year. She had been perched on the edge of a low-slung chair, her slender legs entwined like black bootlaces, her minuscule rah-rah skirt and peroxide bird's-nest hair apparently only enhancing her reputation as an intellectual giant. Stella had loitered by the vending machine, trying to catch the gist of what Vinnie was saying about Sylvia Plath's Electra complex. Further research had put a name to the face, and wherever Stella went on campus after that, her eyes were drawn to Vinnie and her entourage. There always seemed to be an entourage: men with rockabilly haircuts and drainpipe jeans; women dressed like Vinnie in downbeat trendy clothes and Egyptian-style eyeliner. People like that would be dropping round to Albacore Street on a regular basis, Stella realised. She would have to smarten up her act.

'... I mean, apart from anything else,' Vinnie was saying as she led Stella through to the kitchen, 'they knew when they offered me a place that my degree was always going to come second to directing.'

Stella, stranded in the doorway, took a covert look at the other two housemates, as yet unknown to her, who were sitting at the kitchen table drinking tea. One had the old-fashioned bloom and waist-length hair of a pre-Raphaelite beauty and was wearing a pair of oversized denim dungarees, which only emphasised her waif-like frame. (This, Stella concluded, must be Nell, the home-schooled hippy Bridget had told her about.) The other one was big-boned and imposing with a wedge haircut and strong handsome features, which to Stella's mind were not greatly enhanced by make-up that appeared to have been applied with the aid of a set square. This must be Maxine from Bolton. And then there was Bridget, who was even now meeting Stella's gaze with an apologetic eye-roll. How at ease her friend seemed around these awe-inspiring women.

Was it possible that she too would, at some point, cut across them carelessly in conversation, lay a casual hand on one of theirs to make a point, send them up fondly for their little vanities? It scarcely seemed possible.

'Anyway, enough of the fascist tendencies of the English Department,' finished Vinnie. 'Allow me to introduce our new housemate.' She turned with a flourish to Stella. 'Everyone, this is ...' She paused, bit her bottom lip and made her eyes round with mock contrition. 'Fuck. Sorry. I've forgotten again.'

'God, Vinnie, you're hopeless,' Bridget groaned. 'Don't mind Vinnie, Stell, her head's full of sawdust. No room left for odd items of extraneous information, like *the name of her new housemate.*'

'Not sawdust, Bridget,' Vinnie protested, '*theatre.*' She turned confidentially to Stella, who had sunk unobtrusively on to the nearest chair: 'I'm directing *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* in a matter of weeks and none of the cast knows a single fucking word of the script yet. Not that that's any excuse for forgetting your name, but when the reviewers shoot my production down in flames and I'm drummed off my English course for non-attendance, I hope you'll forgive my momentary lapse.'

'Of course,' Stella said gravely.

'You see, Brid, I'm forgiven,' Vinnie crowed. 'I love her already. I *love* you.'

'Thanks,' said Stella uncertainly. Vinnie laughed, a throaty smoker's laugh, her vermilion mouth cracking her white china-doll face in two. Stella's stomach squirmed with pleasure and embarrassment. She couldn't believe she lived on the same planet as this woman, let alone in the same house.

For the first time, she allowed herself to feel a glimmer of optimism about the year ahead. Was it possible she might heal herself here? She leaned towards her rucksack and took out the bottle of Hironnelle that she had bought

from the off-licence on the corner. It had seemed a reckless purchase at the time for someone whose bank balance still had to absorb the payment of a hefty non-returnable deposit on a flat that she would never now inhabit; but seeing the gratitude of her housemates, she couldn't feel any regret.

'Ooh, wine, lovely!' said Vinnie.

'It's going in the fridge till dinner,' said Bridget firmly. 'I'm not having you guzzling it all now.' And then to Stella: 'I've made a veggie pasta bake. Do you want to do the tour while it's heating up?'

'OK,' said Stella.

'Well, kitchen, obviously,' said Bridget, waving her hand complacently around the huge airy room. 'It's very well equipped. There's a garlic press and a Magimix. He left all his herbs and spices. Oh, and there's a really good Italian coffee percolator and a chicken brick.'

'He?' Stella said.

Trevor Cunliffe,' Maxine supplied, 'Dean of English and American Studies. He's gone on sabbatical for a year. Told the letting agency to find him some nice quiet female tenants. I suppose he thought we'd be less likely to wreck the joint. I wouldn't mind, but he's the course convenor for Women's Studies - bloody hypocrite!'

'Doesn't surprise me,' said Bridget flatly. 'All men are sexist, but the right-on ones are the worst of the lot. I knew this mature student last year, used to go round wearing a badge saying "the future is female". Reckoned it helped him pull.'

'*Mike's* not sexist,' said Nell defensively.

Bridget picked up Stella's rucksack and walked into the hall, motioning for Stella to follow. Stella did so, reluctantly, wishing she could stay and hear more about Mike, but as the kitchen door closed behind her, she could only pick up Maxine's tone of flat-vowelled scepticism and Vinnie's throaty laugh.

'Is Mike Nell's boyfriend?' she asked Bridget as they bumped the bags up the stripped-pine staircase.

'In her dreams,' Bridget replied. 'He's her philosophy tutor. Mike O'Meara? CCS? Married. Kids. Ancient. Don't know what she sees in him, but she's definitely got it bad. I don't give much for his chances.'

'Flippin' heck,' murmured Stella, regretting it as soon as she said it. Why wouldn't the F word trip off her tongue, the way it did with Vinnie and the others? She would try harder in future.

'Bathroom.' Bridget flung open a door on the landing to reveal a light square room with a modern avocado suite, lacquered cork flooring and a spider plant cascading shoots down into the bath. Over the loo, drawing-pinned to the pine-clad walls, was a spoof *Gone with the Wind* poster, in which Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher posed in front of a mushroom cloud, recast as Rhett and Scarlett. 'She promised to follow him to the end of the earth. He promised to organise it!' said the strap line.

'Good poster,' Stella said approvingly, though she would secretly have preferred not to be reminded of the precariousness of her existence every time she got caught short. She had been morbidly preoccupied with such thoughts since her love life had unravelled. It only took a fighter plane to zoom over the seafront or an unfamiliar siren to sound for her to flinch in anticipation of a blinding flash which would make her eyeballs melt - though common sense told her that Brighton would not be the epicentre. At this distance from London, she reasoned, she would be more likely to suffer an agonising death from radiation sickness. In the early days of her separation from Matt, there had been a grim comfort in the thought, so she took her increasing unease at the prospect of a lingering death to be a good sign.

'The trick is to get in before Vinnie,' said Bridget, 'otherwise all the hot water's gone.' After only ten minutes'

acquaintance, there was no need to ask why Vinnie should get away with such selfishness. It had been obvious from the moment she'd clapped eyes on her that Vinnie was a special case and universally regarded as such, without malice or envy.

'Wait till you see her room,' said Bridget, reading her thoughts. They went further along the landing and Bridget opened the door to the master bedroom. It was a tip; clothes, books and make-up everywhere. But it had a commanding view over the garden, a roomy double bed, and, beneath the chaos, a shag-pile carpet and a beanbag chair. Vinnie had disregarded Trevor Cunliffe's Blu-Tack ban and stuck film and theatre posters all over the expensive Sanderson wallpaper.

'That's her mum, in that one,' said Bridget, pointing to a poster promoting a National Theatre production of Shaw's *Saint Joan*.

'Barbara Napier? You're kidding!'

'Nope.' Bridget looked grimly proud. Stella wished she could unknow this piece of information. How could she ever treat Vinnie like a normal human being now?

'The other rooms are nice too,' said Bridget, and they were. Nell's was half the size of Vinnie's, but she had hung a tie-dye bedspread over one wall and strewn the floor with cushions. Above her bed was a poster showing a seagull soaring in a cloudless sky, accompanied by the legend 'They can because they think they can'. There was a lingering herbal smell, which might have been cannabis, or joss sticks, Stella wasn't sure. Maxine's room was smaller still, and, like Vinnie's, it had clothing covering every surface - mad stuff, to Stella's fastidious eye: giant houndstooth checks; T-shirts in Day-Glo colours; a turquoise jacket with vast padded shoulders; flamboyant, mannish hats. In one corner was a makeshift bookshelf, constructed from planks and house bricks, an idea Stella determined to copy. This was crammed with books on

political science and sociology and seemed as sober and organised as the rest of the room was anarchic. On the wall were a Snoopy calendar and a large studio portrait of two rather ugly-looking babies.

They backed out of the poky space and hoiked the bags up a flight of attic stairs to an airy room with picturesque dormer windows to front and rear and quaintly sloping ceilings. An over-sized paper lampshade took up a ridiculous amount of ceiling space and a narrow pine wardrobe had been squeezed against the only wall which would accommodate it. A rattan screen in one corner turned out to conceal a small hand basin. Two single beds stood either side of a small pine chest, which served as a bedside table for both. Despite the constraints of layout and storage space, the room was spotless. It was the kind of bedroom Stella would love to have shared with a sister, if only she had had one, and seeing it, she felt almost tearful with gratitude.

'It's really good of you,' she said, dumping her case beside the narrower of the two beds. 'You could have had all this to yourself.'

Bridget shrugged. 'I don't mind,' she said, 'as long as you don't snore.'

'Well, if you want to ... you know, entertain up here, I can always sleep downstairs on the couch. There is a couch?'

'Yes - and the same goes for you. We can work out a code, like ... if I leave my slipper outside the door, it means *I've copped off*, and if you do ... oh God, sorry, Stell.'

Stella pinched the bridge of her nose to stave off tears. 'It's all right,' she said, 'I just ... can't even think about seeing anyone else at the ...'

'Of course you can't, come here.' Bridget held out her arms and Stella submitted to an awkward hug. 'You're better off without him.'

Stella pulled away and nodded brusquely. 'Right. I'd better get myself unpacked.' She leaned down and busied herself with the clasps on her suitcase.

'If there aren't enough hangers, you can double up some of my things,' Bridget said, opening the door. 'I'd better go and check on dinner. Should be ready in about ten minutes.' She paused for a moment and looked at Stella pityingly. 'Sure you're ...?'

Stella nodded fiercely. She waited until Bridget's footsteps had died away and then took another long look around their little dormitory; its Milly-Molly-Mandy quaintness seemed to be evaporating with the remaining daylight.

She wandered over to the window and looked out. The whole of Brighton lay below her, its pastel-coloured houses turning mauve in the gathering dusk. In the far distance she could just pick out the silhouette of the derelict West Pier jutting, spindly and uncertain, into the oily blankness of the sea. She stood by the window, chin resting on her hands, until she couldn't feel her fingers any more.

'Ste-lla.' A voice she didn't recognise was bellowing her name from downstairs. She started, then hurried over and opened the door.

'Hello?' she called tentatively. 'Hell-o-o-o?' she repeated, and then cringed when she realised she was yodelling like her mother did over the back fence.

'You'd better get down here if you want some dinner. This lot don't hold back!' Now she recognised Maxine's voice, friendly, bossy, inclusive. Evidently her presence was required.

'Coming!' Stella clattered down the attic stairs towards the sound of laughter and conversation, and the aroma of slightly burnt pasta.

## **Bridget**

Bridget put her Styrofoam coffee cup next to her new ringbound folder on the table and sat down. She looked around at the other students. There was a girl in a black polo neck, hair sleekly bobbed, bright red lipstick; a grave looking Nigerian man in a University of Sussex sweatshirt; a chisel-faced guy with Joe 90 glasses; and, next to him, an artfully dishevelled young man, wearing a checked brushed-cotton shirt, a battered leather jacket and a light sprinkling of stubble. He caught Bridget looking at him and curled the corner of his lip in what may have been a smile. Bridget looked away and blushed. Before she could size up the remaining four students, the tutor came in.

‘Hi, everyone, I’m Gerald Lefevre. We won’t go into who you are just yet, but it would help me if you would introduce yourselves before making a contribution to the session, as I am sure you will all be most eager to do.’

He collapsed his gangling frame into the plastic chair that the students had left respectfully vacant at the head of the table and beamed at them. He was ginger, noted Bridget with disappointment, even down to his nostril hair. And what was that accent? Canadian? Scottish? Distinctly odd, anyway, and not what she had been expecting for a film studies tutor called Gerald Lefevre. But what *had* she been expecting? Yves Montand? Jean-Paul Belmondo? She mentally crossed him off her list of fantasy suitors. Probably just as well, anyway; she didn’t want to turn into a

marriage-wrecker like Nell. Though it was hard to imagine Gerald Lefevre having a marriage to wreck.

'So I trust we have all taken advantage of the library's lavishly appointed new viewing suite and are by now familiar with the seminal works of the British New Wave?' There was an awkward silence. 'Excellent. Who's going to be brave and lead off for the first seminar? Let's see ...?' He glanced around the table. 'How about you ...?'

Bridget shrugged miserably. 'OK.'

'What's your name?'

'Bridget Rowland.'

'So, *Bridget*. Which two films have you chosen to compare and contrast?'

'*A Taste of Honey* and *A Kind of Loving*.'

'Good. And what is your thesis?'

'Well, er ... my thesis ... I say thesis, it's sort of in note form, but I can, you know, extemporise if you like ...'

'Extemporise away.'

Bridget stared at the first page of her notes. Her spidery italic script danced impenetrably on the page: 'historical perspective', 'angry young men', 'post-war upheaval'. Drivel, all of it. If only she hadn't stayed up till two debating the existence of the G-spot with her housemates last night. She was aware of her audience becoming restive. Pouncing in desperation on a likely-looking phrase halfway down the page, she launched in.

'You might say that *A Kind of Loving* is a typical example of the celebration of masculine sexuality that characterised the British New Wave.'

Lefevre took a greedy bite of the Eccles cake he had brought in for his elevenses and motioned with a revolving finger for Bridget to keep talking.

'Whereas *A Taste of Honey*,' she went on haltingly, 'subscribes to the same aesthetic of working-class realism, but manages to ... er ... subvert the masculine paradigm.' She looked up doubtfully. Gerald Lefevre's finger continued

to revolve. Bridget's notes had taken her as far as they could, so she started to ad lib, hesitantly at first, but with increasing confidence, attacking *A Kind of Loving* in particular and the British New Wave in general for its misogyny and inverted snobbery. 'In fact,' she heard herself assert in what by now had become a querulous warble, 'I would go so far as to say that the theme of the scheming woman luring an unsuspecting young working-class bloke into bourgeois respectability is so common in these films as to be a cinematic cliché.'

'That's unfair! The real theme of these films is capital and labour.' Bridget looked up in surprise. It was the dishevelled young man in the leather jacket. His voice was soft and urgent, with a slight northern flatness to it.

'Name, please?' put in Lefevre.

'Steve. Steve Pinder. Yeah, I just think you're missing the point, Bridget, with all due respect. These filmmakers were of their time and place. Their views of women weren't unusual for the times they were living in and they're not what the films are really about. They're about individuals - men *and* women - being ground underfoot by the capitalist machine.'

'I don't agree,' said Bridget, jutting her chin defensively. 'The women are actually seen as agents of that reactionary bourgeois society, doing the bosses' work for them, bringing the men to heel.'

'Or dupes of it, surely? Aren't the women victims too?'

'Oh, sure, because they're the ones that end up holding the baby. But are we invited to care about that? When our hearts could bleed for Arthur Seaton in *Saturday Night, Sunday Morning*, because he can't go out and get drunk every night, or Vic because he's got to stay on the estate, married to Ingrid, instead of finding self-fulfilment?'

'What about *A Taste of Honey*?' Steve interjected with a triumphant look in his eye. 'There's nothing misogynist

about that. It's a sympathetic depiction of a young girl getting pregnant—'

'*Made* by a woman,' interrupted Bridget.

But Steve Pinder was shaking his head, a smug smile on his face. Bridget could see now that his bohemian stubble had been cultivated to cover faint acne scarring. 'Tony Richardson made *A Taste of Honey*,' he said, tipping his chair on to its two back legs and lacing his hands behind his head as if to say QED.

'Shelagh Delaney.' Bridget turned to Lefevre in disbelief, like a footballer appealing a bad decision.

'Well, technically, Steve's right,' Lefevre said, 'Richardson produced, directed and co-wrote ...'

Steve smirked.

'... but Delaney co-wrote the screenplay with Richardson and it was acknowledged to be faithful in intention to Delaney's stage play, so I think your broader point stands, Bridget.'

'Ha!' Bridget couldn't help herself. She met Steve Pinder's flinty gaze across the melamine tabletop. There was a slightly stunned silence.

'But I'd like us to take a less adversarial approach to our discussion, if possible. There's no right or wrong here. Opinion is what matters; opinion supported by evidence ...' Lefevre encompassed Steve and Bridget in a slightly reproachful glance. And from then on he skilfully broadened out the debate.

Bridget didn't say another word. Steve Pinder did though. He kept dropping pretentious little nuggets here and there: 'André Bazin', 'the auteur theory', '*Cahiers du cinéma*'. What a show-off. He was the most opinionated, pretentious, irritating little superannuated sixth-former she had ever had the misfortune to meet, she decided. She knew the type: grammar school existentialist, probably listened to Barclay James Harvest and smoked Camel. She shuddered inwardly. Poser.

She was first out of the door when the session wound up and pleased that she had arranged to meet Stella and Maxine in Engam Common Room, because it gave her a reason to hurry away from the gaggle of students following her down the corridor. She was sure they were laughing at her. They were gaining ground as she approached the double doors out of Arts B. She quickened her pace so as to avoid the dilemma of whether to let the doors swing back rudely in their faces, or hold them open and risk having to engage. In the end she let the door go, changed her mind, grazed her knuckles trying to retrieve it and found herself muttering a grudging apology to none other than Steve Pinder.

‘Hey, glad I caught you,’ he said. ‘That was really interesting what you were saying about women and stuff. I don’t suppose you’ve thought about joining Film Soc? We could do with some more birds ...’

Bridget’s mouth fell open.

‘I’m kidding. But seriously, you seem like you know your celluloid, so how about it? We’re on our way to Falmer Bar now to draw up a list of films for the term.’

Bridget shrugged. They had reached the stairwell. Up one flight, Stella and Maxine would most likely have a cheese roll and a coffee waiting for her in the Common Room. Then again, she had promised herself that this term she would be more adventurous – branch out ...

‘Might as well,’ she said, and, with a guilty glance upwards, fell in step beside him as he descended the stairs.

‘What can I get you?’ Steve asked when they got to the bar.

‘I’ll have a Pernod please,’ she said, colouring slightly. ‘Here, let me give you the money ...’

‘You’re all right,’ he said nonchalantly. ‘You go and sit down.’ He jerked his head towards a corner of the bar where three people from her seminar were chatting with a couple of equally trendy and intimidating newcomers. His

tone irritated her – he seemed amused, condescending almost, his lip curled in a permanent smirk. He wasn't what you'd call good-looking: about five eight; head a bit too big for his body; square jaw with its fungal layer of stubble, vaguely reminiscent of Desperate Dan. His eyes were nice though: chilly arctic blue. Dangerous.

She squeezed on to the tatty banquette and struck up a stilted conversation with the red-lipstick girl, whose name was Tamsin and who kept darting possessive glances in Steve's direction. Bridget felt an unsisterly smugness rise up in her as Steve walked over with their drinks. She wasn't yet prepared to admit that she fancied him herself, but she liked the idea that someone else did.

'Shove up,' he said, putting the drinks down on the table. Both girls shuffled the few centimetres that were available to them, but there was no leeway. Steve swung himself down on to the seat, next to Bridget, and the length of his denim-clad thigh pushed hotly against hers. As much as she tried to distract herself by fixing her gaze on the legend 'Descartes = wank' scratched on to the tabletop in red Biro, she couldn't deny a shudder of visceral pleasure.

'Smoke?' Steve asked, and there were the Camels, casually fished out of the torn pocket of his leather jacket. Bridget shook her head – this was all she needed. If there was one thing guaranteed to put paid to Steve's nascent romantic interest in her, it would be the sight of her having an asthma attack. As if she instinctively knew, Tamsin put a cigarette between her immaculate lips and inclined her elfin face coolly towards Steve's Zippo lighter. Soon a fug of smoke hung over the table. Bridget took a slug of Pernod and braced herself for the tell-tale tightness in her chest. Steve and Tamsin had by now become embroiled in a debate over whether to kick off the term with Godard or Buñuel and were talking animatedly across her. Sinking back into the seat, Bridget braced herself against the first rasping cough, but the effort of suppressing it made her

body convulse against Steve's thigh as if she were in the throes of orgasm. It was at this point that someone turned up the jukebox and put on 'If I Said You Had a Beautiful Body Would You Hold It Against Me?'. Bridget groaned inwardly, but she needn't have worried. Tamsin had Steve so firmly in her intellectual clutches by now that he was oblivious. By the time the song ended, Bridget's eyes were streaming and her face was bright red. The words 'What do you reckon Bridget?' died on Steve's lips as he at last turned towards her. She stood up abruptly, accidentally sloshing his pint into the ashtray, croaked something about having to meet someone, and stumbled towards the door.

She was striding, two at a time, up the shallow steps that led back to Arts B, taking in great lungfuls of clean air, when she heard her name being called.

'Bridget? Hey, Bridget! Wait a minute. I need to talk to you.'

She kept walking.

A hand tugged at the strap of her canvas shoulder bag. 'Whoa. Where're you running off to?'

'Told you,' she panted, 'I was s'posed to meet my friends after the seminar. I forgot.'

'Only you looked a bit ... upset.'

'Upset? No, not at all.'

'Good, well, look, are you still interested in Film Soc or not?'

'Dunno,' she muttered. 'It seems like you've pretty much got it under control.'

'What do you think of Fassbinder?' He squinted up at her, shielding his eyes against the low sun.

Was this a test? she wondered suspiciously. 'He's all right.'

'Only they're showing *The Marriage of Maria Braun* in Brighton. D'you fancy it?'

'Doesn't Tamsin like Fassbinder?'

'I'm not asking Tamsin. I'm asking you.'

She examined her fingernails. 'All right then.'

'Great. I'll meet you at the New Continental, top of West Street, eight fifteen,' he said, turning to walk back down the steps. 'Don't be late,' he called over his shoulder.

She shrugged nonchalantly without turning round, pleased that he couldn't see the grin on her face.

\*

Bridget looked at her watch for what seemed like the hundredth time. It was eight twenty-four. Another bus disgorged its passengers without Steve among their number, and Bridget wondered at what point pride required her to give up hope. She couldn't have felt more conspicuous if she had been wearing a placard saying 'Stood up'. Perhaps this was part of Steve's plan. Perhaps he and Tamsin were watching her from a safe distance, sniggering. The cinema was a fleapit. Only half a dozen people had gone in the whole time she'd been standing there and the last bespectacled cineaste had disappeared through its doors five minutes ago.

Unsure whether she was going on a date or a strictly platonic meeting of minds, she had dressed down for the occasion in ski pants, fringed boots and an oversized jumper. A slash of red lipstick, Vinnie-style, a single earring dangling from her left lobe and a black beret set at an angle over her hennaed crop, and she felt every inch the film student. Now she stood, shuffling from foot to foot in the frosty darkness, telling herself that it would probably be better if he didn't come. She might fancy him, but she didn't like him. He was the sort of bloke who'd always have her running to catch up.

'Hi.' He sloped up to her, looking vaguely sardonic. No apology, no appearance of haste or urgency. Her stomach lurched at the sight of him. 'Shall we go in?'

They both bought their own tickets and made their way into the dimly lit auditorium. It smelled musty and Bridget was glad it was too dark to see the upholstery on the old-fashioned tip-up seats. They sat in the second row from the back. Only six or seven other seats were occupied. Suddenly, and without ceremony or the interpolation of Pearl and Dean, the screen flickered to life and the film began.

She tried hard to concentrate, knowing that a detailed critique would be required of her later, but she was acutely aware of Steve's presence beside her; the creak of his leather jacket; the scuffling as he kicked off his shoes and slung one leg languorously over the seat in front; his elbow nudging hers on the single arm that separated their seats. Twenty minutes in and all she could think of was whether or not this was a date. She wanted it to be, she now realised, stealing a sidelong glance at him. But Steve just stared intently at the screen, apparently oblivious. She let her finger accidentally graze his; no response. She crossed and uncrossed her legs and shifted her body suggestively towards him. The plot lumbered impenetrably on. Someone went to prison; Maria became a nightclub hostess; she took a lover; red roses and machinery seemed to figure symbolically in some way.

At last, Steve looked across at her and smiled his wonky smile. Bridget melted. He leaned in and kissed her once on the lips. Her stomach turned inside out. They both stared at the screen again. His hand reached across in the darkness and took hers. She caught her breath, but before she could relax into the tentative romance of the situation, he had thrust it inside the waistband of his jeans and clasped it around the clammy helmet of his erect penis. Her eyes widened in shock, but she didn't dare move. Besides, as she became accustomed to the situation, she found she didn't want to. The only trouble was, she had no idea of the protocol. She gave his dick a tentative squeeze, to which he

responded with a muted groan, but after that, she didn't know what to do for the best. Clearly she wasn't expected to deliver a full hand job, here in the cinema; then again, she felt that it would reflect badly on her if he went off the boil. She compromised by delivering a sort of affectionate tweak every time she detected him starting to wilt, a state of affairs which could have continued satisfactorily if Maria Braun hadn't accidentally left the gas unlit in her shiny new post-war kitchen and her lover hadn't rung the doorbell, creating a small electrical spark and blowing the pair of them to kingdom come.

'Jesus Christ!' Steve gasped, doubling up.

'Sorry! Oh God. I'm sorry. It made me jump! Steve ... are you all right?'

'I'll live,' he muttered angrily.

The credits were rolling now. He stood up, oblivious to the angry tutting of other members of the audience, who were intent on sitting spellbound until the third assistant boom operator had been name-checked, and hobbled towards the double doors. Bridget hurried after him.

'Serves us right, I suppose,' she laughed nervously, but he just stalked out on to the street and strode off down the hill, his head down, his face contorted, whether with pain or anger she couldn't have said.

'Steve, I'm really sorry,' she called, jogging to catch up with him. He stopped, but didn't look at her. 'It was an accident. Please ... you're not being very ...'

He looked up. 'I'm not, am I?' he said sarcastically. 'It's just that, generally speaking, a man likes a bit of warning before someone tries to rip his cock off.'

Bridget bit her lip in contrition. They had reached her bus stop by now and a 108 was already lumbering up out of the darkness. She could let it go, but at this time of night there might not be another.

'Well, this is me ...' she said, reluctantly joining the queue of people waiting to board. He shrugged