

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Rising to the Occasion

Linda Taylor

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About the Book

Cathy Gordon has made a discovery. Adopted at birth, she finds out at the age of twenty-eight that she has a grandfather. But when she arrives at a cricket match to meet Frank, there is no trace of him - only an alarmingly sexy man called Nick.

At Frank's home in leafy Oxford, she encounters a grumpy old man who only takes pleasure in two things. Cricket, and arguing - especially with his lifelong friend, Barbara.

Determined to bond with her only living relative, Cathy takes up the challenge - a challenge which means her path crossing with Nick's once again. But as the summer heatwave continues, Cathy realises that there is more at stake than family ties. Will any of them - including Frank's beloved England team - rise to the occasion?

About the Author

Linda Taylor worked for the Foreign Office in London, Angola and Sri Lanka before teaching in Japan. On her return, she read English at Oxford. When her first novel, *Reading Between the Lines*, was published in 1998 it immediately became a *Sunday Times* top ten bestseller. Her subsequent novels, *Going Against the Grain*, *Beating About the Bush* and *Rising to the Occasion* were published in 1999, 2000 and 2001 respectively, to great acclaim. Her latest novel is *Shooting at the Stars*. Linda Taylor lives in Kent.

Also by Linda Taylor

Reading Between the Lines

Going Against the Grain

Beating About the Bush

Shooting at the Stars

LINDA TAYLOR



Rising to the Occasion



arrow books

For Tris

Acknowledgements

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To the England cricket team, for cheering us up.

But especially my gratitude to my wonderful mum, who came through illness so bravely and continues to be my rock. I couldn’t have done any of this without you. Thank you, Mum.

Author's Note

In this novel an Ashes match takes place at Old Trafford. In fact, Trent Bridge has now been favoured over Old Trafford for the 2001 Ashes. All other details relating to the Ashes, the players and their actions are entirely fictional, and any mistakes my own.

I like dreams of the future better than the history of the past.

Thomas Jefferson

Chapter One



The sun was throbbing over east London, warming the late June air. Cathy left the throng of Hoe Street behind and sidestepped the kids wrestling with their bikes on the pavement. She couldn't wait to get home and change out of her suit.

She'd spent most of the afternoon locked in a stuffy meeting in Euston and the last half-hour in an even stuffier tube compartment. The weekend was supposed to start on Friday night. She tried to superimpose images of the coming weekend over her list of things to do on Monday morning.

That was the flip side of her recent promotion. It was difficult to leave it behind at the end of the day, or even the end of the week. A glimmer of a frown crossed Cathy's forehead as she unlatched her low gate and made the four strides that took her across the tiny concreted front garden to the doorstep. Then, while she sought her keys in the depths of her bag, she stepped back and gazed up at the façade of her house. She smiled. It was *hers*. It was much more enriching to think of the house as hers than to remember that it really belonged to the Woolwich and she was buying it back off them. She'd moved in about six months before and she still got a buzz every time she put her key in the lock of the front door.

It was an unexceptional red-brick terraced house, in a long row where all the houses looked the same, with small bay windows and neat little porches. It was a quiet street, helped by being one-way and endowed with sleeping

policemen. The residents' cars lined the road on either side, the sound of groaning cars and buses from Hoe Street only drifting over the roofs in the still evening air and moving on.

Trying to push thoughts of work right from her mind, Cathy concentrated on the happy fact that it was the weekend, the summer had arrived with a passion and Jason was probably going to be back from his Paris trip some time on Saturday. Hopefully he'd come straight to her house, rather than stopping off at his flat first. That would give them a little more time together before he disappeared again. Perhaps they'd grab a meal out, or have a brainstorm about what colour to paint the living room, or possibly they'd just spread out on the sofa with a bottle of wine. Whatever they did, she'd missed him while he'd been away and was looking forward to seeing him. She worked her key into the lock and began to sing under her breath.

'Oh give me a home where the buffalo roam, and I'll give you a house full of—'

She pushed open the door. There was a loud clunk as the door hit something, followed by a sharp cry.

'Shit!' came a muffled voice.

'Jason!' Shock mingled with delight as Cathy spotted him on his knees on the hall carpet. He swayed backwards and forwards, clutching his nose.

'My God,' Jason whistled nasally. 'I know how the Serengeti feels in stampede season.'

'You're here!' Cathy exclaimed and threw herself at her boyfriend to give him a hug. 'What happened? I thought you weren't flying in until tomorrow?'

'We tied up the loose ends early, so I got back at lunchtime. I thought I'd put the chain on the door for you.' Jason held up the screwdriver as evidence. 'Then you can stop badgering me about it.'

'Then perhaps Melissa and Brian will stop badgering *me* about it,' said Cathy, referring to her adoptive parents and

pulling a face. 'They think east London's full of gangsters and salivating dogs with spikes sticking out of their collars. They won't rest until I'm bound into this house like Houdini.' Cathy sank to the carpet with Jason to give him a kiss. 'Thanks for doing that. I never seem to have time to do fiddly things. I'm so glad you're here early. I've been thinking about all the things we can do this weekend. How was Paris?'

'The hotel room was fascinating,' Jason said ironically, dropping a kiss on to Cathy's lips. 'Hmn, that's nice.'

'Are you thinking what I'm thinking?' Cathy smiled suggestively.

'Well I *was* thinking of a cold glass of white wine, some French bread and some of that delicious cheese you love so much.' Jason grinned. 'What are *you* thinking?'

'You brought me back some Pont-l'Evêque?'

'Of course. As if I'd dare come back from France empty-handed.'

Cathy put her arms round Jason and hugged him. His dark-brown eyes were still a bit watery from where the door had hit him in the face. He hugged her back.

'Thank you, Jace.' Cathy eyed the wonky chain hanging from the inside of her front door. 'You might as well finish the chain now you've started. I'll get us some plonk.'

Cathy danced through the living room, dumping her bag and jacket, and into the kitchen. It was a long, bright kitchen with a big, square window facing the kitchen annexe of the next house. Cathy had visions of reinventing the whole thing in years to come, but for now the white floor tiles and white units were functional. She found a bottle of Pouilly Fuissé chilling in the fridge. There were a couple of bottles of red wine on the unit and a bag of goodies fresh from Paris. She spotted a *saucisson* sticking out of it and smiled. This was the bonus of Jason's trips away. He always brought back some mouth-watering souvenirs. For the moment Cathy didn't even mind that

Jason had likened her entrance to a herd of buffalo. She was a nicely proportioned size sixteen and very happy about who she was, unless people sniped. Jason's teasing was only affectionate and made her laugh, so that was fine.

Cathy returned to Jason with cold wine for them both and perched on the stairs to watch him as he finished putting on her chain.

She loved the back of Jason's dark head. He had a little arrow of hair that tapered down the back of his neck. His skin was olive, his hair black, his eyes Spanish-brown. He was slim and fit without trying, which she envied but didn't try to emulate. He wasn't the slightest bit fashion conscious, but he had a classic way of looking smart, casual, or scruffy, without ever thinking about it. Today he was in jeans and a loose shirt, and Cathy took a moment to admire his rear view. He was five foot ten or eleven, but as Cathy was a modest five foot four, he always seemed satisfyingly tall too.

Cathy had first met Jason at work - at the business development company in Euston she still worked for. He'd moved on, headhunted for the role he'd been dying to have - European Marketing Manager - in a firm based in the City. Cathy could still remember her first impressions of Jason, five years ago, when they were thrown together on a project. She'd been struck by how swarthy and handsome he was. So unlike herself, with her fair skin, deep-red hair, blue eyes. Cathy only had to look at a holiday brochure and she exploded with freckles. Jason could spend hours in the sun without even noticing that he was slightly warm. She'd speculated that he might have Mediterranean blood. In fact, Jason was European in taste, style and looks, but not in blood. It was just the way he was.

They'd worked together for almost a year before they'd started a relationship, and in that time Cathy had fancied Jason like fury. She still did. Watching him concentrating on screwing her chain into place, Cathy wondered if Jason

missed her when he was away – at his flat, working hard, or off on his never-ending business trips – quite as intensely as she missed him. She wouldn't have minded an impulsive passionate reunion, but on the other hand it was lovely to drink wine, watch him and feel comfortable. Things would be passionate later.

'There. All done.' Jason took a glass of wine and drank from it. 'What shall we do this evening? I've got to be off again tomorrow, so let's make the most of it.'

'Aw, no!' Cathy felt her face fall. 'You haven't really got to go again tomorrow, have you? You've only just got back.'

'Fraid so. We've got to fly out to Amsterdam on Sunday morning and I really need to spend tomorrow night at my flat unpacking from Paris and getting organised again. Sorry, Cathy. So what do you want to do tonight? There's a great Fellini film showing in town. We could do that and a meal out?' Then he added, seeing Cathy's uncertain expression, 'A Stanley Kubrick video and I'll cook?'

Cathy swallowed back her disappointment. Just one night this time. She offered a tight smile. 'Sometimes I wish they'd never promoted you.'

Jason considered Cathy carefully. 'I know. And it's knackered, believe me. They expect me to be everywhere now.' He paused. 'But we've got tonight, so let's make the most of it. What would you like to do?'

'I don't mind,' Cathy said in a small voice.

'In which case,' Jason murmured, pulling her close, 'perhaps we should get a takeaway and have dinner in bed? What do you say?'

Cathy had been renting, until the lease on her flat in Stratford had come to an end and she'd found herself back in the flat-hunting loop, picking up *Loot* every day. She'd spent her time at work ducking under the desk to make calls to agencies, and her evenings steaming around on

tubes and buses. It was a frenetic race to find a few square yards of concrete she could call home.

Then Melissa – her adoptive mother whom she'd always thought of as Melissa – had brought up the subject over lunch one Sunday and persuaded her to think about buying. Brian had gently added his agreement. It made much more sense than renting. Why throw money down the drain? Why not buy?

There were lots of reasons. Being broke was the main one. But Melissa had offered Cathy a small loan to put down as a deposit. She'd pointed out that if Cathy paid as much on a mortgage as she did on rent, she could afford a little place of her own, somewhere not very flashy. After a struggle with her conscience that lasted all of five minutes, Cathy agreed to be lent enough money for a deposit.

She had known, without asking, that Jason wouldn't want to buy in with her. He had a flat in west London – he was already paying a mortgage on that – and although they'd been seeing each other for four years, they were both fond of their own space. Now that she had a small house, however, Cathy was starting to feel that there would be enough room for them to live together and still have space. It seemed like the natural thing to do – if she could bring Jason round to the idea.

Her home was in a sprawling part of east London, lively, unaffected by trendy London life, and the Walthamstow street market was enough to draw her friends down for bargain-hunting binges. She was intrigued by the little shops, selling anything from saris and sofas to curry spices and bargain flights. It was an exciting place to be. Cathy loved the stringy lights over the Millennium Dome, the sharp, clean angles of Canary Wharf, the Docklands developments, the buzz around the regeneration of the area. It gave her a thrill. She was a part of something that was growing.

This was true of her work too. She worked with East End companies, trying to help them to get ahead. There was so much potential in the area, and every time she was part of a project that boosted employment and made a difference she felt that she'd really achieved something.

She was putting in a lot of work and she was doing very well for it.

Cathy lay beside Jason that night, full of wine, takeaway Chinese and squishy French cheese, and warm from their physical reunion. It was a hot night and they'd flung the duvet across the room. She squinted through the dusky orange light cast by the street lamps at Jason's back and curled herself into the back of his legs.

'Jace?'

'Hmn?'

'I don't suppose you'd like to spend a bit more time here?'

'Hmn.'

'I know we're happy the way we are. Just to say that you can. If you want.'

'Hmn.'

Cathy wriggled around on the cool cotton. She couldn't help feeling a bit peeved that Jason wouldn't answer. But after four years of their relationship she knew him very well.

Jason took time to get used to new ideas. When they'd first started seeing each other it had taken Cathy ages to persuade him not to sprint off after each night they'd spent together. He was busy, she knew that. Perhaps he was even a workaholic. Cathy was prepared to accept that too. But when Jason came to stay with Cathy he'd turn up with a handful of his own things and take them all away with him when he left.

A few times, when Jason was away, Cathy had wandered around her house, looking for signs of him. If it weren't for

her kitchen, which he constantly rearranged so that he could cook, there'd be no evidence that he'd ever been there. No toothbrush, shaving foam, towel, loose change, or even a screwed-up hanky. Forensics would have to dust for fingerprints to prove that he'd ever visited. She gave it one more push.

'It's just that - you could leave stuff here, you know. If you wanted to.'

'What stuff?' Jason mumbled.

'Like - boxer shorts.' Cathy waited, holding her breath.

She felt Jason stir. 'Boxer shorts?'

'Yes. Just a pair or two. Somewhere.'

Jason turned over to lie on his back. 'You know, boxer shorts are fairly important to a man. I have to recycle them. I can't leave them as mementos everywhere I go.'

'Well, it was just an idea.'

Jason fell silent. A distant underground train rumbled and faded away. Before long, the wood pigeons camping out in the tousled sidings would stir and start whooping at each other - a reminder that summer was truly in full swing. Cathy flopped back into her pillows and stared up at the ceiling. That was enough mention of boxer shorts. Jason's voice had been quite tense in reply. It was best to forget it, for now.

'Thank you for putting the chain on my door. It was really sweet of you,' she cajoled.

'Hmn.'

'I love you.'

'You too,' he murmured.

She kissed the back of his neck and nestled against him.

Cathy was catapulted from drowsiness into sharp consciousness again by the shrill of the telephone coming at her in stereo. She sat up and peered at the radio alarm: seven thirty in the morning. The sun was already blazing through the yellow curtains. Her room glared yellow

wallpaper and lampshades back at her. This was the only part of the house Cathy had got round to decorating and yellow was her choice. Everybody had something that gave their spirits a lift. For some it was music, or scented candles, or paintings. For Cathy it was yellow. It made her feel happy.

Jason draped an arm over his eyes. 'I bet that's your mate Fiona in a boyfriend crisis.'

'No, I don't think so. I had lunch with her at work yesterday. She seems fine. Who'd ring me this early?'

'Probably a wrong number. Just leave it.'

'No, I can't. What if it's an emergency?'

'Better answer it, then.' Jason rolled over.

Cathy padded out to the bedroom she'd turned into a study. She shuffled past the boxes and heaps of files she was intending to sort out one day and grabbed the phone. 'Hello?'

'Cathy? It's Melissa.'

Cathy sat down and stared at the dead computer screen on her desk. Melissa? At this time in the morning? Melissa and Brian were usually in bed by eleven at the latest. They were very early risers – but they knew that Cathy wasn't. Something had to be wrong.

'Melissa? Are you all right?'

'Oh – it's just ...' Melissa stopped. Cathy crouched over the phone. Melissa was a creature of calm routine. Something was dreadfully wrong. She licked at her dry lips.

'What is it? Is it Brian? Has something happened?'

'Cathy, I've been playing this over and over in my mind. I don't know what to do. I want to do the right thing for you and I've decided this is the right thing.'

Cathy froze. 'What's the right thing?' she whispered.

'I'm so sorry to get you out of bed. It's just that I've been thinking about this all night. I've got to talk to you about it.'

It all sounded horribly ominous.

'I think you'd better just tell me what it is,' Cathy said quietly.

'It's - you see - it's ...' Then Melissa blurted out the words that would change Cathy's life for ever. 'It's your grandfather. He wants to see you.'

'Grandfather?' Cathy perched on the edge of her chair, staring blindly at her wall. 'What grandfather? I haven't got a grandfather. They're both dead.'

Cathy was confused. Melissa's father and Brian's father had both slid philosophically away when she was in her teens. She hadn't had a grandfather for years.

'No, Cathy,' Melissa said in a quiet voice. 'I mean your real grandfather.'

*

Cathy shot down the stairs, through the living room and headed for the bottle of gin in the kitchen.

'Cathy?' Jason appeared behind her in his boxer shorts, his hair ruffled, rubbing his eyes sleepily.

'Want a gin?' She held out the bottle.

Jason screwed up his face in distaste. 'A gin? For breakfast?'

'I'm having one. Up to you.'

'Christ, Cathy, what's happened?'

'Nothing. Go back to bed. Sorry I woke you up.'

'Woke me up? You thundered down the stairs swearing at the top of your voice.' But he added gently, 'I was worried about you anyway, I didn't go back to sleep. You were on the phone for ages.'

Jason watched in amazement as Cathy splashed a small measure of gin into her glass. She added some tonic from the fridge, tossed in some ice, watched it fizz, then took a gulp. She stared at Jason with round eyes as the gin fired its way down her throat.

'Cathy?' Jason took a step towards her. 'Who was that on the phone?'

'That was Melissa.'

‘Your mum? What was she doing ringing so early?’

‘She had something’ – Cathy stopped to take another sip of gin – ‘that she just had to tell me.’

Jason took another look at Cathy’s face, then reached for the gin bottle. He poured himself a more modest measure. ‘Go on.’

Cathy stood silently for a moment, only the hum of the boiler and the soft tick of the battery clock on the kitchen shelf disturbing the air.

‘I’ve got a grandfather,’ she said. ‘A real, live one. A proper one. Genetically speaking. Apparently.’

‘What?’

‘Exactly.’

‘But hang on, Cathy.’ Jason’s eyes widened. ‘People can’t do that. I mean, they can’t just get in touch with adopted relatives. There are laws against it.’

‘I never thought of that,’ Cathy said. She was still breathless. ‘I wouldn’t, would I? Both my parents are dead. Mum and Dad were, still are, Melissa and Brian, and my grandparents were their parents. All four of them. Now dead. Nobody has five grandparents, Jason. It’s just silly.’

‘But Cathy, how could he have found you, if it really is him?’

‘Melissa said they’d had some brief encounter, when I was a baby, at the hospital. It wasn’t supposed to happen, but he’d been there, looking at me or something. And he gave them a contact address. But this is the first I’ve heard of it. I’ll find out more from Melissa later. Or maybe I won’t bother,’ Cathy said tersely.

‘Wow.’ Jason’s eyes grew even wider. He sipped his gin thoughtfully. ‘Wow. What a blast from the past.’

‘And now ...’ Cathy swallowed down another mouthful of gin. It was making her feel ludicrously light-headed and a little sick, but it was better than shock. ‘Apparently, he wants to see me.’

‘Flipping heck.’

‘My response was a little more forthright.’

Jason shook his head, dazed. ‘I don’t know, Cathy, it seems like a bit of an imposition. After all this time. I don’t know how I’d feel.’ He considered her carefully. ‘How *do* you feel?’

Cathy gripped her glass tightly. How did she feel? Overwhelmed. Shocked. As if her world had been picked up like a paperweight, shaken about by a celestial hand and put back down again. But the words that came out were very ordinary:

‘I’m extremely pissed off.’

‘You know, you don’t have to agree to see him.’

‘Too right. I know that.’ Cathy choked on her last mouthful of gin and thumped her glass back on to the unit. Her blood was boiling now. At the moment anger had become the triumphant emotion, though she hated to think what she might feel once she’d had a chance to dwell on Melissa’s revelation. ‘I’ve got my life, right here. I know what I’m doing and who I am.’

‘So,’ Jason began hesitantly, ‘your grandfather?’

‘Can sod off. Let’s go back to bed.’

Cathy had been about seven years old when she’d found out that she was adopted. She’d asked Melissa why she had red hair, when Melissa was dark, Brian was fair and the rest of their families were either dark, fair, grey, or bald. Someone in the playground had made a joke about the milkman and it had puzzled her. It had been an uneventful revelation, devoid of angst. Her blood parents had apparently both died and her adoptive parents wanted her as much as her real parents would have done. She wasn’t abandoned, she was loved twice over, which was even better. That knowledge had grafted itself seamlessly on to her childhood experience. It was who she was.

Melissa and Brian had been attentive to her needs and she’d lacked for nothing. There were advantages to not

having a brother or sister. She didn't have to fight for air space with a handful of siblings over the dinner table. Nobody could break her air-fix models of Henry the Eighth's six wives, or borrow her Plasticraft without asking. She became expert at beating herself at Kerplunk and read her way through the school library. Melissa would quiz her on her day at school, then Brian would repeat the exercise when he came home from work. They were always concerned with her progress, and her physical and material well-being. They were, in every sense, her parents and she loved them both as dearly as she knew they loved her.

It was a peaceful, organised household on the whole. Melissa was a Christian and believed that good behaviour was the key to happiness. She wasn't a fanatic and she wasn't a hypocrite. She didn't ram her views down Cathy's throat, but let her make her own way. She was a nice, solid woman; tall and upright with a firm figure, which had become a little fuller in middle age, and steady grey eyes. She held down a job at the local council, involved herself in community activities and charities, and was on the PTA of Cathy's school. In her own subdued way she loved life and loved people. The warmth inside Melissa wasn't the greedy, self-nourishing heat of a flame, rather an internal spiritual glow which people were drawn to. As a child, Cathy had felt comforted and safe whenever Melissa was close by. She was a strong woman and she had taught Cathy to be strong.

Brian played the guitar relentlessly, unhindered by considerations of accuracy or tunefulness. He'd been playing since Cathy was a child and he was still trying to perfect the chord of B minor. He helped out at the youth club and engaged in perennial debates with teenagers he found drinking, smoking pot, or stealing the pool cues. He had all the grace of a daddy-longlegs, which the kids mocked him for mercilessly. He passed it off with an affable wiggle of his head. It was Brian who'd sat patiently with

Cathy for hours on end, playing childlike games with her, listening to her talk about her friends, her thoughts, her ideas. He was everything she could have wanted in a father.

Cathy had done the rounds of immature relationships, had been disappointed, had disappointed people back and had gone off to university. She'd made a bunch of good friends, most of whom she still saw, and had started work in Euston, where she'd met Jason. He'd invited her to a late-night showing of *The Thing* and that had been it.

So there it was: family and friends, a job she cared about and, now, her own house too. Cathy's life was full. She didn't see a crisis around every corner and tried to live a steady life. Jason did always say that underneath the even-tempered surface, Cathy was a volcano doing its very best not to erupt, but Cathy laughed it off. There were occasional ripples on the surface of her pond, of course, but she shunned any input to her routine that would cause anything more than a ripple.

But now the wind was getting up and there was surf on the waves.

Chapter Two



‘Are you all right today?’ Fiona’s pale-blue eyes were rounded with concern.

‘Of course.’

Fiona appeared round the low artificial wall that separated her office space from Cathy’s in the vast open-plan room, as Cathy was replacing the receiver of her office phone. Had she just snapped at somebody? Surely not. She was very careful, always, not to let her feelings affect her work.

‘You seem a bit – jumpy.’ Fiona chewed the end of her pen, eyeing Cathy cautiously. The overhead striplights made Fiona’s fine blonde hair look almost transparent.

Cathy took a steadying breath. ‘I’m not jumpy. I’ve just been here since – quite early. I need a really big, strong coffee with a lot of froth on top.’ Cathy stood up and gathered her handbag. ‘I’ll go and get one from Dom’s. D’you want one?’

‘*Quite* early?’ Fiona smiled ironically. ‘I was here at eight and the guys in reception told me you’d been in an hour then.’

‘Well, maybe it was a bit earlier than I’d planned.’ Cathy waited for Fiona to move out of the way so that she could slide out of her cubicle.

Fiona looked as if she wanted more of an explanation, one hand gently resting on the hip of her short, ochre skirt.

‘Nobody speeds in to work on a Monday morning,’ she said sagely. ‘Not unless they’re expecting a bonus and have

to receive it in person. Or unless they've had a really crappy weekend.'

'Well, it was an odd weekend.' Cathy sighed. 'Do you fancy a chat over lunch?'

'Sure.' Fiona nodded. 'It'll be good to get out of the office. My eyes are turning into computer screens already.'

'How are the web pages going anyway?' Cathy asked.

Fiona was trained in IT, and her job mostly involved creation and design of websites for the companies they helped.

'Fine, fine. Paying the rent.'

Cathy's phone rang again. It was just as well she had got in early. Everyone seemed to expect her to be there and on top of things by the time they settled themselves into their chairs and took the first bite of their bacon rolls. She picked it up.

It was Mark, her immediate boss and one of the senior partners of the firm, asking her into his office to discuss the account of Havers Construction. Of all the clients she was involved with, Cathy liked Bill Havers most of all. Once a brickie, he'd built up his East End construction company with grit and the collective sweat of his family. She and Bill seemed to have clicked and she had some ideas she was very keen to put to Mark. Cathy looked apologetically at Fiona as she put her phone down again.

'Sorry. Mark beckons. I'll have to get the coffees later.'

'I'll get you one. And an eggy sandwich. I bet you haven't had breakfast.'

Cathy paused as she struggled into her suit jacket to give Fiona a grateful smile. 'Thanks, Fi.'

Mark Lyme was in his early forties, angular, bespectacled and with a bad case of hair loss. He had an energetic manner and sharp eyes. He seemed to like Cathy and she thought he'd probably been instrumental in her promotion. She closed the door to his small office behind her.

‘Bill Havers,’ Mark began, indicating Cathy should sit on the swivel chair next to his desk.

‘Ah yes, our Bill.’ Cathy perched and smiled. ‘I’ve been thinking a lot about this one. I’ve put together some ideas over the weekend.’ She handed Mark the folder she’d amassed on Sunday. With Jason gone and her thoughts fluttering unsteadily over the idea of her new grandfather, she’d plunged herself into work with all the energy she could muster.

Mark picked up the folder and slowly leafed through it. He raised his eyebrows. ‘You have been working hard, haven’t you?’ His eyebrows shot even higher as he scanned her report. ‘Hellier’s? What have they got to do with Bill?’

Cathy tingled with excitement. In all the work she’d done since her Economics degree at the LSE she’d got the greatest thrill from an idea that would actually do some good and she was especially proud of this one. She sat forward eagerly.

‘I think we can put Bill in the way of Hellier’s. The word is that Hellier’s are going to relocate their European headquarters to London.’

‘Really?’ Mark’s eyebrows were sliding over the top of his head. ‘Hellier’s are one of the top software development companies in Europe. Are you sure about this, Cathy?’

‘Yes. At the last Docklands Business Club meeting I had a very interesting chat with Troy Vickers.’ Cathy was careful not to sound too triumphant as she named the well-known architect. She did her best to attend all the networking functions and she was aware that Mark didn’t. She didn’t want to put his back up.

Mark clicked his tongue thoughtfully. ‘You mean someone from Troy Vickers?’ he asked.

‘No, I mean Troy Vickers himself. He’s been talking to Hellier’s. They’re definitely looking for an architect for their new development and they’re definitely interested in him.’ Cathy swallowed. ‘Troy thinks they’re very keen on

the idea of government funding for converting a brown site.' The brown sites, as both Cathy and Mark knew, were the most crucial areas of redevelopment in east London. Once industrial, they were now a priority for rejuvenation and offered the most incentives in the way of government help. As Mark was still looking astonished that he hadn't heard about Hellier's plans, Cathy added, 'I gather it's under informal discussion already.'

'I see,' Mark said under his breath. 'And you're sure Troy wasn't just speculating?'

'There's nothing secret about Hellier's intentions.' Cathy tried to sound light-hearted. 'I'd heard it on the grapevine and there was another small reference to it in the *The Wharf* a week or so ago.' Cathy always scanned her local paper for ideas and opportunities that would affect her work. 'I've saved the article and marked it, there.' She pointed at her folder.

Mark ranged his eyes over the article. 'But what has Bill Havers got to do with this?'

'Troy's keen to put in a holistic bid. He wants to offer himself to Hellier's with a construction company already in tow. Bill's an ideal candidate for that. It's just the break his firm needs and it'll create a load of employment opportunities locally. It's perfect.'

'I can't see a bigwig architect like Troy Vickers using a small building company like Bill's, Cathy.' Mark looked doubtful. 'It'll be up to Bill to lobby him, of course, if he wants to.'

'Well, that's the thing.' Cathy maintained an enthusiastic smile. 'Troy's keen to do as much for local employment as anyone. I think Troy would give Bill a fair chance to bid for the work and I really think Bill could do it.'

Mark was thoughtful for a moment, then he cleared his throat. 'Let me speak to Ruth. I was really hoping you'd be concentrating on the balance sheet and the market research. That's the top priority for you at the moment.'

‘I’ve got that covered, there.’ Cathy pointed delicately at the sheaf of papers. ‘Here’s the spread sheet and the report. I’ve flagged them up.’

‘Hellier’s are big brass, Cathy. I know Bill’s company’s growing, but I’m not sure he’s ready for such a large contract. Any building company would give their eye-teeth to work with Troy Vickers on a Hellier’s development. Bill would be up against the biggest and the best.’

Cathy took a patient breath. ‘I know. But Bill’s brought off the Docklands office complex without a hitch. Ahead of schedule and up to spec.’

‘It’s not a big site and it remains to be seen whether there are going to be problems with it.’

‘The work is all up to standard,’ Cathy defended. ‘Bill’s far too sensible to take short cuts. His livelihood depends on it. I know he’s trustworthy.’

‘We can’t put our heads on the block on a gut feeling, Cathy.’

‘If you’d just let me put out some feelers—’

‘Cathy,’ Mark said patiently. ‘Hellier’s are massive and Troy Vickers is extremely influential. If there’s any brokering to be done here, Ruth or I would want to handle it personally. You know that.’

Cathy opened her mouth and shut it again. If either Mark, a senior partner, or Ruth, the managing director of the firm, had bothered to get involved with business and social events in east London they might have had an inkling of the Hellier’s move already. She counted to ten.

‘Okay, perhaps you’ll show Ruth my ideas.’

‘Of course I will.’ Mark sipped from a mug of coffee. Cathy stared at it enviously. She should have picked one up on the way in, but she’d been keen to polish up her report. Mark continued, ‘And I’m sorry about the lack of office space. I’m afraid that unless someone bolts there still aren’t any offices spare. Are you managing out in the goldfish bowl?’