

What are you doing on  
New Year's Eve...?

# One Minute to Midnight

Author of *All I Want  
for Christmas*

AMY SILVER



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## About the Book

### **Nicole Blake's New Year Resolutions, 1990:**

1. Start keeping a journal
2. Lose half a stone
3. Kiss Julian Symonds

If there are two things Nicole can guarantee about New Year's Eve it's that there are always fireworks and Julian Symonds is always there.

Since she was thirteen, no New Year has been complete without Jules. Through school, university and beyond, as friends come and go, Nic and Jules are at the centre of every party. Until one year everything changes...

Now, as another New Year approaches, Nicole has ghosts to lay and bridges to build - with her husband Dom, with her best friend Alex, and with Aidan, the man who broke her heart.

Life is about to change again, and once the fireworks are over and the dust has settled, this time Nicole is determined it will be for the better.

## About the Author

Amy Silver is a writer and freelance journalist, and has written on everything from the diamond trade to DIY dog grooming. She lives in London and has a penchant for vintage clothes and champagne cocktails. This is her third novel.

*Also by Amy Silver*

Confessions of a Reluctant Recessionista  
All I Want For Christmas

One  
Minute  
to  
Midnight

AMY SILVER



arrow books

For Ben, my favourite New Yorker



# *Acknowledgements*

Thanks to Lizzy Kremer and Gillian Holmes

# *Chapter One*

## **Boxing Day 2011**

I GET UP in darkness, while the house sleeps, slipping from the warmth of our bed unnoticed. I dress in the bathroom so as not to wake Dom, then pad down the stairs, taking care to walk on the left side of the staircase (less creaky for some reason). The dogs are curled up in their enormous basket in the corner of the utility room; Mick, the hulking great mongrel, an unholy mix of Alsatian, Rottweiler, some Pyrenean mountain dog and a host of unknowns, completely enveloping Marianne, our tiny, delicate golden lurcher. They look up at me sleepily as I open the door.

‘Come on, then,’ I whisper, jamming my feet into my wellies, the sight of which already has them scrambling out of the basket, Mick barking enthusiastically.

‘Shhhhhh,’ I hiss at him uselessly, lunging for the back door so that I can let him out before he rouses the entire household. Wake everyone up and they’ll all want to come.

The dogs bound out onto a lawn turned crunchy and white by a thin layer of snow just freezing to ice. I zip up my parka to the very top, tucking my nose under the material, hunkering down against a bitter whip of wind. Fingers of pale winter sunlight are just beginning to creep across the lawn, warming nothing whatsoever.

Tails wagging furiously, the dogs are waiting for me at the back gate, Mick’s nose pushing against the latch. One day he’ll figure out that all he needs to do is flick his head

upwards and he'll be able to open it. Fortunately, he's not too bright, so that day is probably a long time away. If Marianne could reach the latch she'd have figured it out ages ago.

I glance up at the window of the spare room. Blinds still drawn, in-laws still slumbering. Probably not for long. The three of us slip away, out of the gate and into the lane behind the house, making for Wimbledon Common.

We head north-west-ish, the dogs running ahead, Mick at a gentle canter, Marianne racing out of sight then returning a moment or so later, anxiously bobbing her head up and down like a meerkat, wondering what's taking us so long. There's not another soul in sight. Usually by seven-thirty on a weekday there are plenty of runners and dog-walkers around, even in the dead of winter. Not today. Everyone's still sleeping off the turkey and mince pies. It's eerily quiet, there's no traffic noise, no birdsong, not even the faint drone of aeroplanes overhead. I quicken my pace, partly to warm up, but also because, despite myself, this silence is creeping me out a bit.

Dom hates me going out alone at this hour, with the sun barely up.

'No one's going to attack me when I'm with Mick,' I tell him, although we both know that while our beloved dog might look fierce he'd run a mile if there were any real danger. I've seen him back down in an argument with next door's kitten. Marianne would probably provide better protection; she's got a fierce temper when roused.

('Just like you,' Dom tells me with a wink, although he isn't really joking.)

We get as far as the windmill and I know I ought to turn back. They'll all be up by now, early risers my extended family. They'll be wanting their breakfast. Failure to have it on the table will be regarded by my mother-in-law as a dereliction of my wifely duties. Yet another dereliction: does one more really matter? The dogs have barely been

out of the house in two days, they need a proper walk. And I have things to think about, mental lists to write.

On 29 December, in just three days' time, we're flying to New York. New York for New Year! Just the thought of it is thrilling: carriage rides through the park, ice skating at the Rockefeller Center, cocktails at the Met. But it's nerve-racking too. Of the many, many skeletons in my closet, a surprising number of them have, for one reason or another, decamped to Manhattan. They're waiting for me there. That aside, I've just got too much to do before we go: I need to take down all the Christmas decorations (too early, I know, but it'll depress me to come back to them after our holiday's finished and Christmas is well and truly over), I need to clean the house (our lovely Albanian cleaner is away until the end of January for some reason); I have to drive to Oxford to do an interview for the *Betrayal* TV programme I'm producing, email my assistant with our New York contact numbers, read through (and decline?) the *Girls Gone Mild* proposal from i! TV, shop for a dress to wear to Karl's party, get my hair cut, my eyebrows threaded and my nails done *and* take the dogs to Matt and Liz's place in Sussex. Oh, and at some point I probably ought to reply to that email from my father.

The first communication of any sort I'd had from him in more than two years, it had arrived on Christmas Eve.

Dear Nicole,

I hope this message finds you well. I imagine you'll be spending Christmas with your mother. Do give her my regards.

I'm afraid I write bearing bad news. I have been feeling rather unwell lately and after many doctors' visits have finally been diagnosed with prostate cancer. The doctors assure me that my prognosis is good, the

cancer is not too advanced. However, I am due to go into hospital for surgery on 2 January.

I was wondering whether you might be able to come and see me before I go under the knife? It is relatively minor surgery of course, but one never knows, does one? It's been so long since we talked, there are things I feel I ought to say to you.

I know that for one reason or another our relationship is almost non-existent these days. You might not believe me, but this is a matter of great regret for me.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Happy Christmas,

Dad.

I still haven't told anyone about it, not even Dominic. It's not just that it would have put a dampener on our Christmas celebrations, it's more that Dom can be a bit ... *prescriptive* when it comes to my dealings with my father. It's only because he wants to protect me, I know, but I need to figure out what I want to do about it by myself.

The dogs and I get to the northern end of the Common, the point at which it meets the A3. Usually, we would cross over the road and carry on through the Robin Hood Gate across Richmond Park, right up to the brow of the hill. Not today. It's almost quarter past eight already. By the time we get back home it'll be after nine o'clock. I might just make it in time to start breakfast before Maureen, Dom's mum, is bathed and coiffed and downstairs ready to make me feel bad.

No such luck.

'There you are,' Dom's dad says, looking up from his fry-up as I come into the kitchen. 'We were wondering where

you'd got to.'

Maureen is standing at the cooker, her back to me. 'You are going to eat this morning, aren't you?' she asks, without turning round. 'I've done you a couple of fried eggs and some sausages.' I turn to close the door between the kitchen and utility room, but I'm too slow. Mick pushes past me, padding mud across the white kitchen tile.

'Oh, do keep the dogs out of here, Nicole,' Maureen says, wrinkling her nose in distaste at Mick, who's now standing next to Dom, having a sniff at his breakfast. 'You should never have animals in the kitchen. It's so unsanitary. Just look at the mess he's making.'

I grab Mick's collar and drag him out, slamming the door before he has time to barge back in again. 'Sorry, Maureen,' I say guiltily, slinking back to the kitchen table like a scolded child. Dom squeezes my knee and gives me a wink.

We eat in silence, the minutes ticking by. Dom and his father wolf down the remains of their meal while I push the lukewarm bits of greasy egg white around my plate. I can't bear fried eggs but I'm not about to tell Maureen that.

Eventually, Peter, Dom's dad, interrupts the quiet.

'So, when are you two off to the States?'

'Thursday,' Dom says. 'Midday flight. Gets us there late afternoon.'

Maureen sniffs. New York is not a place she's ever had any desire to visit, and therefore doesn't see any reason why anyone else should want to.

'We're going to the golf club for New Year's Eve,' Peter says.

'That sounds lovely,' I lie.

'Oh yes, it's always quite a good night,' Peter says, 'isn't it love?'

'It is,' Maureen agrees enthusiastically, 'it's wonderful. The O'Neills will be there, Dom, and the Harris clan, of

course. You remember Simon, don't you? He married such a lovely girl. They're expecting their third in April.'

'Always a good night,' Peter says again, 'perhaps you two could come along next year?'

'Definitely,' Dom agrees, without looking at me. 'We should definitely do that.'

More silence.

'Are you not enjoying your eggs, Nicole?' Maureen asks.

\* \* \*

They're gone by eleven, heading back up the M1, back to civilisation. Yorkshire. The second the car pulls away from the pavement outside our house, Dom grabs me around the waist, kissing me passionately on the mouth.

'Three days and not a single stand-up row!' he says with a grin. 'That must be a record.'

I smile ruefully, instantly feeling guilty for spending the two weeks before they came openly dreading their arrival.

'It was good. It was nice to see them. It's always good to see them.' He laughs. 'I mean it, Dom.' And I do mean it, sort of. Peter's a lovely man. And I don't think Maureen means to criticise my every move. She just can't help herself.

'I know. I thought you did very well.' We're walking back to the front door, arm in arm.

'I should try harder with her. Next time we should go to a show or something.'

Dom laughs again. 'A show? Good god, woman, that's above and beyond the call of duty.'

As I open the front door Dom puts his arm around my waist, pulling my body back against his.

'Let's go upstairs,' he whispers into my ear.

'I had a bet with myself that it wouldn't take you long to suggest sex,' I say, laughing. 'But less than thirty seconds after they leave! Impressive.' Dom has a weird thing about

not having sex when his mother's in the house (just his mother, for some reason, sex with his dad around is fine).

'Oh shut up and get your knickers off,' he replies, slipping his hand into the waistband of my jeans.

We only make it halfway up the stairs. Afterwards, while we lie there comparing carpet burns, Dom asks about New Year's Eve.

'Where is this party exactly? At a bar, I take it?'

'No, no no, darling. It's at Karl's new gallery. Much more glamorous.'

'Ri-i-i-ght.' Dom sounds dubious.

'It'll be fun,' I say, kissing the point on his temple from which his sandy hair is fast receding.

'It'll be full of terrifyingly cool arty types,' he grumbles. 'We won't fit in.'

'What do you mean we?' I ask, struggling to my feet. 'I'll fit in just fine.'

Dom grabs me again, pulls me back down beside him. 'Oh is that right?'

'It is. In any case, I'm sure Karl will have invited some other geeky and uncool people to keep you company.'

'Right, bitch, you asked for it,' he says, running his fingers lightly down my side, sending me into paroxysms of tickle-induced laughter. He doesn't stop until I beg for mercy.

'Let that be a lesson to you,' he says, eventually, wriggling back into his boxer shorts.

'Lesson learned,' I assure him breathlessly. 'But there's just one thing I ought to say ...'

'What's that?'

'I just wanted to tell you that no matter how much I love you, no matter how good you are to me or how well you treat me I will never, *ever* go to the fucking golf club for New Year's Eve.'



## *Chapter Two*

### **New Year's Eve, 1990 High Wycombe**

Resolutions:

1. Start keeping a journal: write every day!
2. Read more! *A Clockwork Orange*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *On the Road*, also some classics
3. Lose half a stone
4. Volunteer for a charity, do forty-eight-hour famine
5. Kiss Julian Symonds

I WAS GOING to my first-ever proper New Year's Eve party. Okay, it was at my house – for the first time ever I was being allowed to join in my parents' annual New Year bash – and okay, most thirteen-year-olds would sooner die than attend a party with their parents and their parents' friends, I'm well aware, but I had an incentive, and his name was Julian Symonds.

Julian was a couple of years ahead of me at school; he was the son of one of Mum's nursing friends, he was fifteen years old and he was bloody gorgeous. Tall and skinny with dark hair which was always falling into his huge, brown eyes, he had high cheekbones and long lashes, he wore lots of black and listened to the Velvet Underground, he was into art, he read Rimbaud and the Marquis de Sade, he was languorous, sulky, androgynous, rebellious, dangerous, a smoker. He was *divine*.

Under normal circumstances, I'm sure Julian would have had far better things to do with his New Year's Eve than come to a party at my parents' house, but he was being punished. The story, told to me by my mum, who had got it from his mum, was that Julian had snuck out to a rave, stayed out all night and came home in the morning 'high on drugs'. He was grounded for three months, but since his parents couldn't trust him to stay home all by himself, and since they wanted to come to the party, he was being forced, very much against his will, to come along.

'Little bastard better not bring any drugs into this house,' my father said when he was informed. 'I'll break his bloody neck. And you,' he turned to me with a snarl, 'don't get any ideas. I don't want you anywhere near him. You hear?'

Oh, I had ideas. I had fantasies, daydreams, scenarios, imaginings, entire scripts written in my head. I'd greet him (and his parents) wearing acid wash jeans and my new pink halter neck top from Jigsaw (which was the first overtly sexy piece of clothing I'd ever owned) and he'd be struck dumb, speechless with admiration. I, of course, would play everything really cool, but eventually he'd get up the courage to ask me to dance, and we would, a slow shuffle in the corner of my parents' living room, the two of us, alone in a crowd. 'Nothing Compares 2U' by Sinéad O'Connor. I put it on the end of the mixtape I'd made for the occasion (after 'There She Goes' by The La's, The Stone Roses' 'I Wanna Be Adored', 'Suicide Blonde' by INXS). Just in case.

This was of course all total bullshit. For one thing, Julian Symonds – gorgeous, smouldering, achingly cool fifteen-year-old Julian Symonds – wouldn't look twice at me. He wouldn't even notice me. Why would he? I was average. Undeniably, boringly average. Average height, average weight (in other words, *not* thin), boring brown eyes – the only thing different about me was my hair. Mum (and Mum's friends) were always banging on about how lucky I

was to have such lovely hair. 'Titian blond,' Mum called it, but to be honest in some lights it looked worryingly close to ginger.

Julian Symonds would never notice me. He never had before, in any case, we'd passed each other in the corridors at school a hundred times and he had never once glanced in my direction. I was a total nobody. And second, the chances of me slow dancing with anyone while my father was in the same room were remote. Dad wouldn't like it. And wherever possible, I tried to avoid annoying my father.

Dad worked in middle management at Swan (tobacco papers, filter, matches) and he was always pissed off about something. Interest rates, football results, the travesty that was *Rocky V*, you name it, Dad was angry about it. But mostly he was angry with Mum.

Mum could never do anything right. That's what she always used to say, anyway. 'No matter what I do, it's never right, is it? I never do anything right.' When I was younger this struck me as odd, because Mum *did* do everything right. She was a brilliant storyteller. When she was reading to me at night she'd have me in stitches, giving Peter Rabbit a broad Glaswegian accent or reading the whole of *The Cat in The Hat* in a Jamaican patois. She was incredibly patient: she was the one who taught me to ride a bike, to swim, to bake brownies, to play pool – Dad didn't teach me anything, except perhaps how to fish. And how to swear. So why, I wondered, did she think she never did anything right?

There may have been a time when my parents were happily married, but if there was, I don't remember it. I do remember, when I was much younger, that things were better. Dad and I used to be friends. That was a long time ago, though. For years now, there had been tension in the air whenever Dad was around. Mum and I were quieter when he was in the house; we made ourselves small. We walked on eggshells; we tried not to get in the way. Things

had been bad for a while now, and they were getting steadily worse. The screaming matches that had made me cry when I was little were now much more regular. And they weren't just screaming matches any more either; these days they always seemed to end with something – a chair, a plate, a window, my first, greatly treasured, Sony Discman – getting broken.

The Discman incident had taken place a couple of weeks before Christmas. The Discman itself had no bearing on the row; it had nothing to do with the row. It was an innocent bystander. The row concerned a shirt. An unironed shirt. The thing was, Mum, who was a nurse in A&E, had worked a double shift because one of the other nurses had phoned in reporting 'a family emergency' (read: hangover) and they hadn't been able to find any other cover at the last minute. So my mother, who was the senior nurse on the ward and a highly conscientious person, agreed to work an extra eight hours. Instead of coming home at six-thirty in the evening, she'd arrived back just after two in the morning and had gone straight to bed, without ironing the shirt my father had intended to wear to work the following day. This, it turned out, was a disaster.

In the morning, getting ready for school, I heard him shouting. 'I have a meeting today, Elizabeth! Jesus Christ! Can you never do anything I ask? Blue shirt, grey suit, I told you this. Why is it so bloody difficult to listen? You just never listen, do you?' Standing in the hallway, their bedroom door slightly ajar, I watched him shake her awake.

'Okay, okay,' I heard her say as she was groping on the bedside table for her glasses, 'I'll do it now.'

'It's too late, it's too bloody late now, isn't it? Or do you want to make me late? Is that it? Do you want me to look a fool at work?' He pushed past me and crashed down the stairs, taking two at a time, Mum followed at a run, shooting me an apologetic glance as she hurried by. Like she was the one who had to apologise.

I hovered on the landing at the top of the stairs, not wanting to listen to the row continuing downstairs, but unable to walk away.

‘It’s important for me, Elizabeth!’ he was shouting again. ‘This meeting is important. Jesus Christ, if you paid half as much mind to me, to this household, as you did to your patients, everything would be fine.’ I could hear the sound of the ironing board being dragged from its resting place next to the washing machine, the clank of metal as it was brought to stand.

‘I told you! I have to leave now, you’re too late!’ Miscellaneous banging and crashing. ‘But could you please do me one favour? Just one thing?’

‘What is it, Jack?’ her voice was clear and even, the voice she used when she didn’t want to provoke him, but she was prepared to show that she wasn’t afraid, either. She used that voice a lot.

‘Will you tidy this bloody place up?’ Crash. Something smashed. As I discovered later, it was my Discman hitting the kitchen wall. ‘It looks like it hasn’t been cleaned in weeks.’

That had been the last big confrontation. Since then, over Christmas and in the run-up to New Year’s Eve, peace had descended on the Blake household. Dad had been off work, which always put him in a good mood, and – better yet – we’d had my uncle Chris staying with us. Chris, Dad’s older brother, seemed to have a calming effect on Dad, who was an altogether more reasonable person when Chris was around. In the face of considerable provocation – Mum working long hours, the interminable pissing rain, even England’s ‘total bloody capitulation’ in the second Ashes test – Dad didn’t throw a single tantrum.

I spent most of that week preparing for the party. In addition to my outfit, my hair and make-up and the music, I

was in charge of preparing snacks – this was the price I had to pay for my admission. I was also required to help clean the house on the day of the party, and to lug tins of beer and bottles of soda water from the back of Dad's car to the ice-filled bathtub.

Mum and Dad were always entertaining. Maybe it was because we weren't the happiest of households, they liked having other people around, it eased the tension. They were always having barbecues, fancy dress parties and loud birthday bashes with karaoke machines. The planning of these events followed a regular course: Dad would suggest the party, but as the date drew near he'd decide it was a terrible idea and that they didn't have time to organise it, he'd work himself into a furious rage about it and eventually wash his hands of the whole thing, Mum would do all the actual preparation, she would organise the drinks and make the food and invite the guests. At the party itself, Dad would inevitably get blind drunk and the following morning he'd say to her the next day, 'That was good, wasn't it? Good idea of mine, to have a party, wasn't it?' He'd say it with a half smile; I never knew whether it was his way of apologising.

They did throw good parties, though. They had lots of friends, mostly Mum's, most of whom were quite rowdy and enjoyed a drink. There would be lots of nurses and hospital admin staff, the occasional hospital porter and, even rarer, the odd doctor. A few of Dad's mates from work (who weren't so much fun) would also come, plus Uncle Chris, the next-to-next-door neighbours (Dad didn't get on with the people immediately next door) and a few other old family friends. This New Year's Eve we were expecting no fewer than thirty-five guests to cram themselves into our two-up, two-down semi in suburban High Wycombe. It was going to be a packed house.

The party was due to start around seven, although Dad and Uncle Chris had opened their first beers a couple of

hours earlier. Mum was on duty until six, so she barely had time to get home and shower and change before the first guests started arriving. She looked great, in fitted black trousers, a gauzy, floral print top and pink kitten heels. She'd had her hair done specially, her blond hair cropped short, it gave her this cool, elfin, impish look, a bit like Annie Lennox.

I was in a state of feverish anticipation, my stomach was churning with nerves and too much Diet Coke. I wanted to play it cool, but somehow I just couldn't seem to manage it. I hung around the front door, greeting my parents' guests, taking coats, constantly watching the road outside for a glimpse of the Symonds' red Volvo.

When eight o'clock came and went and there was still no sign of Julian, I lost heart. None of my parents' other friends had brought their kids, so I was stuck making polite conversation with people in their thirties. It was really boring. After a while, I gave up and, heart heavy, installed myself next to the stereo where I could at least make sure none of the old people started putting on any of their music. The mixtape I'd lovingly put together wasn't due for a hearing until later in the evening – around ten-thirty, I thought – so I busied myself shuffling through our meagre CD and more extensive tape collections, putting things into order, a potential playlist.

I was lost in thought, deep in the sleeve notes for *Disintegration* when, as if from nowhere, he appeared at my side. Julian Symonds. He was dressed in jeans and a black biker jacket, a yellow smiley face peeping out from his T-shirt underneath. Its sunny demeanour contrasted perfectly with his.

'It's not nearly as good as *The Head on the Door*,' he said, pushing his hand through his perfect, floppy dark hair. 'Don't you think?'

I didn't know what he was talking about, so I just said, 'Oh yeah. Completely,' and I felt the colour rising to my

face and looked down, scrutinising the CD cover as though it were the most interesting thing in the entire world.

It was a huge moment. It was the first time Julian had ever spoken to me. We'd never talked at school, obviously, because he was two years above me and we didn't exactly hang out with the same people. We'd encountered each other before, in town, both of us standing next to our respective mums, which was of course the most embarrassing bloody thing ever, so neither of us were likely to speak then. Everything I knew about Julian, his coolness, his edginess, his brilliance, was mostly stuff I'd heard from people at school, plus some things that his mum (Sheila) had told mine.

And now, he was here. In my house. I stole a glance at him, sitting on the sofa across the room, staring at the blank television screen, a study in boredom. He'd only been here a couple of minutes. The fantasy in which I opened the door and wowed him with my stunning looks, the one in which I'd play it so cool, in which he'd be unable to resist me, was well and truly forgotten. I got to my feet and crossed the room to stand awkwardly in front of him.

'Can I get you something to drink?' I asked him.

'Brandy and Coke,' he replied, not looking at me.

I laughed nervously. 'I'm not sure ...' I started to say, but he silenced me with a withering gaze.

'Okay,' I said, and weaved my way through the guests towards the kitchen.

Mum was leaning on the counter next to the fridge, a glass of wine in her hand, laughing at something the man in front of her was saying. I'd seen him before, he worked at the hospital, but I couldn't remember his name. They were standing really close together, but the music was turned up quite loud so you had to be quite close to hear what the other person was saying.

'Excuse me, I just need to get some more Coke,' I said, squeezing past Mum's companion to get to the fridge.



'You remember Charles, don't you, love?' Mum said.

'Hello, Nicky!' Charles said.

I grabbed the two-litre bottle of Coke from the fridge, resisting the urge to correct him. I hate it when people call me Nicky. Dad came barrelling into the kitchen, bouncing off the door as he did.

'Everything all right in here?' he asked, a little too loud, beaming at us.

'Yes, fine, we're fine,' Mum said. I noticed that Charles took a step back, opening up the space between his body and my mother's.

Some more people came into the kitchen, Dad was offering them drinks, Mum returned to her conversation with Charles, no one was looking at me. This was my chance. I scuttled round the room to the opposite counter where several bottles of spirits were laid out for guests to help themselves. Gordon's, The Famous Grouse, Bacardi, Rémy Martin. That was brandy, wasn't it? I placed the Coke bottle on the counter in front of the Rémy Martin. Glancing over my shoulder to confirm no one was watching, I slipped my hand behind the Coke bottle and twisted the cap off the brandy bottle. I grabbed a plastic mug, sloshed a bit of brandy in, and then a bit more (he'd want a strong drink, wouldn't he?), topped the cup up with Coke and sauntered out of the kitchen, giving Dad a big smile as I went.

Julian, still wearing his leather jacket, was gazing sorrowfully out of the window; he had slumped even lower, he was disappearing among the sofa cushions. I presented him with the drink. He took it, wordlessly, took a sip and pulled a face as though he'd bitten into a lemon.

'Jesus,' he said, laughing (the sight of his smile almost stopping my heart), 'how much brandy did you put in that?'

'Home measures,' I said, smiling at him. I'd heard Mum use the expression.

'Thanks,' he said, raising his mug to me. He took another sip, a smaller one this time. 'You not having one

yourself?’

‘Not just yet,’ I said. I planned on having a glass of wine later, but I didn’t really like the taste and I didn’t want to get sleepy too early. I sat down next to him on the sofa, a little too close. He shifted in his seat.

‘Enjoying the holidays?’ I asked him.

He shrugged. ‘All right, I suppose.’

‘I went to see *Presumed Innocent* yesterday,’ I said. He looked at me blankly. ‘You know, Greta Scacchi, Harrison Ford. Have you seen it?’

‘Nah, not really into all that Hollywood shit,’ he replied.

‘No, right. It was all right,’ I said. ‘It was okay. It wasn’t that good.’

He looked at me as though I were a complete idiot, and then he smiled. ‘I’m more into French cinema at the moment. Have you seen *Betty Blue*?’ I shook my head. ‘It’s amazing. It’s about madness and love and obsession. And fucking. Lots of fucking.’

I flinched at the word, I wasn’t used to it being used in the literal sense, not conversationally.

‘It sounds cool,’ I said. We lapsed back into silence.

The party was starting to heat up a bit, the music was turned up very loud, the laughter of some of the women turning shrill. I could hear my father, who was standing a few yards away from us, telling a dirty joke to one of his friends in a very loud voice. I’d heard it before. It wasn’t funny. I could see that Julian was listening and felt embarrassed. I pointed to his mug.

‘You want another one?’

‘Yeah, go on then.’

The kitchen was heaving by this point, which was good news for me because it made it much easier for me to get to the brandy unnoticed. I stood on tiptoe and could see Mum on the other side of the kitchen, still leaning on the counter, still holding a glass of wine (though probably not the same one), still talking to Charles.

Back in the living room, I handed Julian his drink.

'Hey,' he said, beckoning for me to lean in closer to him, 'do you want to go somewhere for a smoke?'

'Umm. We could go to my room,' I said. I couldn't believe I was actually saying the words. I was inviting Julian Symonds to *my room*. 'But not together. I'll go up first, you follow in a minute. Otherwise my dad might ... You know.'

'Bit overprotective?' Julian suggested. I nodded, not sure that overprotective was how I'd put it, but anyway.

I slipped out of the living room and up the stairs, unnoticed again. Or at the very least not remarked upon. I tore around my bedroom, getting rid of anything that could be construed as embarrassing: my flesh-coloured 32AA bra, for example, and my well-thumbed copy of Jilly Cooper's *Riders*. Then I sat back on my bed, resting against the pillows, trying to look casual, as though I invited older boys to my bedroom all the time.

After a few minutes, there was a gentle tap on the door. Julian popped his head round and smiled at me.

'All right if I come in?'

It's a good thing I was sitting down, because by this point I was close to passing out from nerves. Julian wandered idly around the room, picking up things and putting them down again, his face betraying neither approval nor disapproval, until he spotted the poster on the back of the wardrobe door. *The Kiss*, by Gustav Klimt. Julian smirked.

'You don't like Klimt?' I asked, defensive and disappointed. He wasn't supposed to laugh at my Klimt poster; it was the last item in the room I expected to provoke derision.

He shrugged. 'Bit of a cliché, isn't it? Don't all fourteen-year-old girls have *The Kiss* on their walls?'

Fourteen? He thought I was fourteen! That almost made up for his not liking Klimt.

‘I think it’s beautiful,’ I said. ‘I could look at it for hours.’

‘Fair enough,’ he said, sitting down at the end of the bed and pulling a packet of ten Silk Cut from his jacket pocket. ‘You want one?’

I didn’t really. I had smoked before but hadn’t much enjoyed it. I took one anyway and got up to close the bedroom door.

‘Just in case anyone comes up here.’ He opened the window above my bed to let out the smoke, lit his cigarette and handed me the lighter. I lit up too, stifling a cough as the first drag hit my lungs.

‘Klimt’s okay, I suppose,’ Julian said, ‘just not really my thing. I like Rothko. Rothko, Hofmann, Newman – the Colour Field painters. Do you like Rothko?’

I didn’t know who Rothko was, I’d never heard of him, or of Hofmann, or Newman or the Colour Field painters.

‘I don’t think I know his work,’ I said, feeling like an idiot.

But Julian didn’t treat me like one. ‘Oh, you should have a look at his stuff,’ he said, suddenly brighter, enthusiastic, the mask of impenetrable coolness slipping for a moment. ‘Mark Rothko was a genius, a real radical. He used colour in the most amazing way. The Seagram Murals are incredible. He killed himself by cutting his arms with a razor blade, here, at the elbow,’ he mimed the motion to underline the point. ‘He cut all the way down to the bone.’

I wasn’t really sure how I was supposed to respond to that, so I just nodded thoughtfully.

‘Fucking cool paintings though. He studied at the Art Students League of New York. That’s where I want to go. I’d give anything to live in New York, wouldn’t you?’

I’d never given it much thought, although anywhere that wasn’t High Wycombe sounded great to me. ‘Anyway,’ Julian went on, ‘I’ve got a couple of books on Rothko at home. You can borrow them if you like.’

‘Oh thanks, Julian, I’d love to,’ I said, and I really meant it. I don’t think I’d ever meant anything so wholeheartedly in my entire life.

Julian flicked his cigarette butt out of the window.

‘Jules,’ he said, ‘my friends call me Jules.’

It was the greatest party ever. Jules and I spent the entire evening together. We couldn’t stay upstairs in my room, but we managed to split our time between the living room and my bedroom fairly evenly, wandering up and down the stairs, always individually, never together, making sure we were spotted by enough people in the living room or the kitchen. I kept him in a steady supply of brandy and Cokes, and the more he drank, the more garrulous and friendly he became.

We talked about art, which I didn’t really know anything about, and music, which I knew a bit more about, and books and films and the fact that Kathy Slattery had given James Tompkins a blow job in the boys’ loos at school. Midnight drew nearer. I started to wonder, when twelve o’clock came, would it happen? Would I get a kiss? (I would never have admitted this, not even to my closest friends at school, but at the grand old age of thirteen, I had still never been kissed. Not with tongue, anyway.) I tried not to think about it. Thinking about it was making me sweat.

‘Do you make New Year resolutions?’ I asked Julian, a little timidly. I was worried he might think New Year resolutions were stupid, or pointless, or bourgeois, or something like that.

‘Oh yeah, a list of five. Always five. Ten’s a bit ambitious. You?’

‘I have five, too.’

‘Well, okay then, Miss Nicole,’ he said, giving me that heart-stopping smile again, ‘let’s hear them.’ He was

leaning towards me, his face only a few inches from mine. I could feel the colour coming to my cheeks.

'You first,' I said, looking away. Oh god oh god oh god. Why did I start this conversation? Why did I tell him I had five resolutions? Why the hell didn't I tell him I only had four?

'All right,' Jules said, lighting yet another fag and settling back against the window sill, 'number one: get As for my art, English and French GCSEs. That's very important. I'm not all that bothered about the other subjects, but I want to do well in those ones. Two, cut down on the cigarettes. They're very bad for your health.' He grinned and took a drag. 'Three, get to London to see as many art exhibitions as possible. At least ten. Four ...' He hesitated. 'No, hang about. This isn't fair. I've done three, now you do three. Then we'll do the other two.'

I was starting to panic.

'I should probably make an appearance downstairs,' I said to him. 'They might have noticed we're missing.'

'Bollocks!' Jules replied, laughing. 'They're all pissed by now.' As I got to my feet he grabbed my hand. 'You're not going to get away with it that easily.' He pulled me back onto the bed. For a second neither of us said anything. He was looking right into my eyes, he was still holding my hand. 'Come on then,' he said, softly, 'what are you going to do next year?'

And in that moment, I thought, I can tell him. I can tell him that I want to kiss him. This is the right time to tell him, it's the perfect time, and I opened my mouth to speak, but I never said anything because in that moment the bedroom door burst open and there stood my father, red-faced and angry-drunk. I snatched my hand from Julian's and got to my feet.

'What the fucking hell is going on?' He crossed the room and grabbed the mug of brandy and Coke from Julian's hand, took a sniff and threw it straight out of the window.