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Love is on the Air

Jane Moore

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Jane Moore is a columnist for the *Sun* and *GQ* magazine. She regularly presents investigative documentaries for Channel 4's *Dispatches*, on subjects ranging from supermarket secrets and broiler chicken production, through to food labelling and Britain's obesity crisis. She is also the author of the bestsellers *Fourplay*, *The Ex-Files*, *Dot.Homme*, *The Second Wives Club* and *Perfect Match*. She lives in London.

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Also by Jane Moore

Fourplay
The Ex-Files
Dot.Homme
The Second Wives Club
Perfect Match

JANE
MOORE

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In memory of Robert Brown ... Deborah's true love

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Chapter One

'I want to look like her.'

The photograph, torn from the cover of one of the hundred and forty-five gossip magazines littering the salon, is of Cheryl Cole, with more head hair than Jedward.

Unfortunately, the woman thrusting the picture towards my face looks more like 'merry' Old King Cole, apart from the merry bit. A triumph of hope over reality would be a masterly understatement.

'I've just got over a messy divorce and my daughter says I need a new hairdo. You know, to mark a new start.'

Time may be a great healer, but it's a lousy beautician, I think, inwardly grimacing at the task in hand.

'She said I could get extensions.'

'Yes, we do provide those here, but they're *very* expensive,' I reply diplomatically. 'And I'm not sure they'd suit your face shape.'

'I want 'em.' Her mouth sets in a firm line, her voluminous arms resolutely folded in front of her large, clearly unfettered bosoms.

I toy with the idea of issuing the legendary retort of hairdressers everywhere - 'This is a comb, love, not a bloody wand' - but think better of it and scurry to the back room to try to find what colours we have in stock.

I find Luca leaning against the sink, nursing a cup of coffee. His name's Luke, actually, but he added the 'a' in the hope it made him sound more mysterious. Trouble is, his accent is more Romford than Rome and he thinks the Leaning Tower of Pisa is a five-for-one offer at Domino's. I love him for it, though.

'The customer's always shite,' I grumble, as I start opening cupboard doors and closing them with a spleen-venting bang.

‘Oh dear, got a bad one, have we?’ He rolls his eyes, then yawns. ‘When I eventually get my own salon, I’m going to ban anyone who gives me a hard time or is too ugly.’

‘This one’s both.’ I find a clump of light brown extensions and hold them up to the light. ‘Do these say “Cheryl Cole” to you?’

He pulls a face. ‘They say “cheap nylon scrag ends”, love, whichever way you look at it.’

‘Thought so. A match made in heaven, then.’ Clutching the extensions, I walk back to the client with a heavy sigh.

I have been a hairdresser for sixteen years now, starting as floor sweeper-cum-tea-maker and working my way up to the lofty heights of ‘senior stylist’, as I have rather grandly been referred to on the tariff sheet for the past five years, and salon manager.

As a trainee, I imagined I was going to cut a trail-blazing swathe through the world of hairdressing, culminating in an eponymous salon to which all the latest celebrities would flock for inspiration.

But then, just like so many others in my trade, I decided that creativity is great, but plagiarism is faster, so here I am giving the customers what they want by copying someone else’s style. I’m not sure whether I consider it a career any more or merely a job that has gone on too long.

Most days, though, I still enjoy the combination of staff camaraderie and the unpredictable flow of clients, many of whom are delightfully chatty and thrilled with their transformation.

And then there are those I might even describe as friends, even though our relationships don’t extend beyond the salon doors. I was there the day they got married, making last-minute tweaks to their hair. I have seen them arrive at the salon with their newborn babies, and watched their offspring grow from demanding toddler right through to surly teenager. I know what they love about their husbands; I know what they hate. I know some of their deepest

thoughts and desires, all unleashed to little old me, someone who touches them intimately yet is still ostensibly a stranger, someone comfortably distanced from their home life.

Only yesterday, I led one of them into the back room where she could weep in privacy as she told me her husband was leaving her for someone else. There was little I could do except comfort her and lavish some TLC via my scissors and dryer, but by the time she left she seemed faintly stronger for it. So I'm a bit of a therapist too, I suppose, and I relish the privilege.

But on days like today, when first I had a one-year-old boy screaming the place down for the duration of his first ever haircut, and now a Gollum lookalike wanting me to work miracles with hair extensions, it's rather more challenging.

My name is Cam Simpson. I'd like to be able to tell you that it's short for Camilla, but it's not. Nope, it's Camomile, as in the poncy tea, or that shampoo that's supposed to lighten your hair but rarely seems to. Apparently, it's my mother's 'favourite' tea, despite the fact that I have never seen her drink it and she originally hails from Colchester, where most seem quite happy drinking PG Tips or similar.

'But, dah-ling, it's soooo exotic and mysterious!' she always witters, after one of my many challenges on the matter. 'Who wants a dull old name like Sarah or Jane?' For the record, *she's* called Liz.

So, thanks to a mother who, rather than cure cancer or even just dress quirkily to make herself appear interesting, saddled her only daughter with an 'unusual' name, I spent my school years thwarting piss-taking behaviour from my fellow pupils and being saddled with the oh-so-witty moniker 'Baggy'. And the majority of my adult years so far explaining it to people who think they're all being highly original when they ask why I have such a 'refreshing' name. Gee, thanks, Mum.

To compound the injustice of it, she named my younger twin brothers Josh and James, her argument being that their being identical made them unusual so they didn't need daft names as well.

'Right!' I force a smile for the client, who is now flicking through the latest edition of *Hair* magazine and lingering worryingly on a picture of some stick-thin model whose hair extensions are so big she's clearly struggling to keep her lollipop head upright.

'I've found your colour,' I say brightly. 'So let's get going - it's a long old job.'

By the time I've finished, waved goodbye to what resembles a transvestite trucker (albeit a happy, smiling one) and cleaned up my work station, I notice it's six fifteen.

'Shit!' Grabbing my coat and bag, I make a cursory wave in Luca's direction and rush out of the door, turning left towards the busier end of the High Street, where all the theme pubs and wine bars stand cheek by jowl, a binge drinker's paradise. It's an assault course of excessiveness, from signs saying 'Two drinks for the price of one' and 'Girls drink free' to bins overflowing with empty fag packets and junk-food cartons.

My favourite haunt used to be Corks, a sophisticated and consequently quiet little place that boasted an excellent wine list and unobtrusive music. But because hardly anyone except me went in there, it sold out to a corporate chain that renamed it the Brewer's Droop, piped in bangin' tunes all day long and, now, inexplicably, it's crammed most nights. Clearly, I'm getting old.

I'm walking past it now, glancing through the window where I spent many a peaceful moment nursing a glass of house white before heading home to the thrills of my boyfriend, Dean, more of whom later. Inside, one man has another in a headlock and a woman of indeterminate age, who has clearly never heard of moisturiser, is shrieking at them both to 'Leave it aaaaaaahht'. A traditional scene one

mysteriously never sees re-enacted in Disney's 'typical English pub' at the Epcot theme park.

Hurrying on, I head towards the less raw environs of Strada, the pizzeria where I'm meeting two of my oldest friends, Saira and Ella, for a long-overdue girls' night. We've known each other since school, but of late, the 'Three No Degrees', as my dad scathingly referred to us because we all exhibited no interest whatsoever in attending university, have become the Three Degrees of Separation, forced apart by maturity and its accompanying baggage.

Since her 'sort of arranged' marriage three years ago (meaning *she* could have said no if she wished but, fortuitously, Abbas turned out to be gorgeous and successful) Saira has produced Rashid, thereafter always referred to among us as 'the Golden Child'. I swear he didn't learn to walk until he was two, because there was no need. He was carried everywhere - held aloft, even - by Abbas's horde of proud relatives, his mother bursting into tears of pride and joy every time she so much as laid eyes on him. Consequently, the demands of an ever-present family posse and a new baby meant poor Saira's spare time shrank to nothing.

Around the same time, Ella met her latest boyfriend, Philip, a man who takes playing hard to get to new levels, in that he is still firmly married to his 'first and last wife', as he pointedly describes her.

'Love is grand; divorce is a hundred grand,' he once quipped to Ella when she brought up the latest celebrity break-up in the newspapers.

To any sane woman, this would be a small clue that he has no intention of ever leaving, but no, Ella doesn't see it that way. As far as she's concerned, the phrase was coined before he met her, a goddess in human form, and she is going to be the one to make him see the error of his intransigency. And the band played 'Believe It If You Like', as my grandma used to say.

But, regardless, these days most of her time is taken up with sitting in love's waiting room, just in case he might ring and want to see her. I can't tell you the times I have called Ella to suggest meeting for a spontaneous coffee and she's replied, 'I'd love to, but Philip said he might be able to leave the office for a couple of hours to come and see me.'

Invariably, he won't show and yet another day is wasted. But, as she constantly reminds me when I question her sanity, he pays her rent, bills and 'a little pocket money', so the very least she can do in return is be there when he wants her to be.

'Personally, I'd rather be homeless and my own person,' I sniff, and we won't speak for a couple of days, but then I'll feel dreadful for being so judgemental and arrogantly trying to impose my own ideals on a friend, and I'll call her to apologise. It isn't that I'm miffed she isn't jumping to *my* tune, more that she is at the beck and call of a man who, at best, simply doesn't deserve her, at worst, treats her like a high-paid hooker. Ella is kind, funny and ridiculously beautiful, and, in my humble opinion, could do so much better. But hey, who am I to talk?

I live with the aforementioned Dean in a one-bed-roomed flat that's so small we sometimes have sex without realising it. Which is just as well, because our conscious sex life is practically at the point of flat-lining. The last time we even attempted it was about four weeks ago after a night out to celebrate Luca's birthday. As you may have guessed, we were both pissed and, emboldened by lager and red wine, Dean leapt on me before we swiftly realised that same alcohol had rendered him physically incapable. So that was that.

We've been together for six years, living under one roof for four. I have chosen those words carefully because, sometimes, it seems that's *all* we have in common: the same bricks and mortar.

When I get home later tonight, it's a given that Dean will be occupying his usual position in the centre of the sofa, watching either Sky Sports or reruns of *Top Gear* on Dave. On the rare occasions he vacates it (toilet break, always during the ads, or bedtime) there's a permanent dent there to remind me of his enthusiastic indolence. Such is my desperation to break the cycle that last Christmas, I even forked out money I could ill afford on a Wii, in the hope it might stir him to *some* level of action. But it's still gathering dust in the corner, waiting for the day when Dean can find the time in his busy TV-watching schedule to actually connect it.

It hasn't always been this way. When we met, he was a keen amateur rugby player, relieving the largely sedentary tedium of his working week as a mobile-phone salesman by throwing himself around a muddy pitch most weekends before heading off to the pub with his team-mates and, invariably, me. My previous boyfriend had been a 'street artist', something I deemed fascinatingly anarchic at the time before rapidly realising it was merely a cover for being an idle twat. He was also so tight that I swear he'd learn to limbo simply to enter a pay toilet for free.

So Dean seemed generous, dependable, manly and *active* by comparison, a *real* man who, coincidentally, never ate quiche. Well, not unless it was packed solid with Peperami.

Then, after a couple of years, he moved into my tiny flat and morphed into his father, Roy, a couch potato who thinks that holding down a job during the week entitles him to sit on his idle backside the entire weekend while Dean's mum, Paula, waits on him hand and foot. More fool her. The only difference is that, as someone whose idea of housework is to sweep the room with a glance, I refuse to run around after Dean.

'That's it. I'm officially stuffed.' Saira pushes her plate away, one small chunk of crust the only evidence that an airbag-sized pizza has graced it.

‘I’m not surprised.’ Ella raises a deftly plucked eyebrow. ‘A family of four could have lived off that for a week.’

Saira pokes out her tongue. ‘I won’t eat again until ... oooh ... later tonight,’ she grins. She’s always had a good appetite but rarely goes above an enviably curvaceous size fourteen. The thing about Saira is that she has a teensy waist that gives her figure an hourglass shape she knows how to maximise to great effect with stretchy tops and tightly tailored pencil skirts that kick out into fishtail hems.

I, however, may be young at heart, but feel distinctly middle-aged in other places. I only have to glance in the direction of one slither of pizza and instantly put on three stone. If I even smell one, my jeans suddenly become a size too small. I’m currently hovering at around eleven stone, and it has taken me six long, painful months of iron willpower to get here.

Ella, you’ve probably guessed, is über-slim and toned. She likes to pretend it’s effortless, but we know different and have the incriminating photos to prove it. At school, she had brown, frizzy hair to her shoulders, a mono-brow and a real-life bottom and stomach area that suggested she might actually have internal organs. That was Ella as nature intended, not this expensively highlighted, carb-free gym bunny who is seized with an overpowering compulsion to do four circuits after so much as a salad, and has a concave abdomen.

I let out a long sigh at the thought of our school days back in the mid-eighties, making us all now thirty-four, or thereabouts. In real time, we all universally hated it, but the passing years have distorted my and Saira’s memories and morphed life at St Nicholas’s Secondary School into a fiesta of fun that makes *High School Musical* seem drab and staid. Ella rarely indulges our nostalgic reflections, perhaps not wishing to revisit her unadulterated self.

‘I was thinking about that school camping trip to Wales the other day,’ I murmur. ‘How it was our first time away

from our parents and felt so exciting.'

'God, yes, it took about two years of pleading for my dad to even let me go.' Saira smiles dreamily at the thought. 'It felt sooo liberating.'

Ella makes a small snorting noise. 'You ...' she jabs a finger in the direction of Saira, '... spent all week snivelling because you missed your mum, and you ...' the finger moves round to me, '... moaned non-stop that there wasn't enough to eat and how you couldn't wait to get home and raid the fridge.'

I let a few, dignified seconds pass, then lean towards her slightly and inspect her forehead. 'Darling, you really should be careful. All that frowning leaves terrible lines.'

Saira laughs. 'She's right, though. I think we have probably rewritten history over the years. But it *was* a rite of passage for me in many ways. When I managed to come back alive and unsullied by male hands, my father started to give me a little more freedom.'

'Those were the days,' I sigh. 'No responsibility, no commitments ...'

'No money, no independence, no LIFE,' finishes Ella. I resist the urge to question whether her current set-up is any better.

Since the school trip, we have shared several, more exotic holidays, sometimes all three of us, sometimes variations of two. The Canary Islands are a favourite, so too the Costa del Sol ... nothing long distance, mainly because of time and budget.

But the last joint holiday was four years ago, before Saira met Abbas and before Ella was put on permanent standby for Philip. I've suggested a week in Spain a couple of times, but it has never materialised. We haven't even managed a much-discussed spa mini-break in Britain.

'OK, so the camping memories may have improved with age,' I concede, 'but you've got to admit the week in Mallorca was pretty damn fine.'

‘Ahhh, those really *were* the days,’ sighs Saira. ‘Before shitty nappies and early starts ...’

‘Before skulking around in obscure restaurants and spending Friday nights wondering whether he’ll call ...’ says Ella.

‘Before ...’ I falter, unsure of what to say now I’ve started, ‘... mundanity.’ I recoil inwardly as soon as the damning word leaves my mouth. Is that how I see my life now? I don’t have time to dwell on it as Saira’s voice punctures my thoughts.

‘Why don’t we go on holiday again?’

‘We’ve been down this road before.’ I point out wearily. ‘Then you can never find the right time to leave little Rashid, and Ella always has something she *might* have to do with Philip.’

‘Well, Rashid’s a bit older now and I’m sure the omnipresent in-laws can help look after him; in fact they’ll positively relish it,’ counters Saira. She glances across at Ella. ‘What about you?’

Ella shrugs. ‘Yeah, why not?’

They both look at me.

‘Are you asking whether I’m up for it? Or have I just become our official travel agent?’

‘If a job is worth doing, make sure you delegate it to the right person, that’s what I say,’ grins Saira.

‘And I say that delegation is a sign of weakness. Let someone else do it,’ quips Ella, adding hastily, ‘and I don’t want to go camping in bloody Wales. It has to be somewhere hot, with comfy beds and an all-day bar. That’s my criteria.’

I raise my eyes heavenward. ‘Leave it with me, Your Majesty.’

Chapter Two

'Only me!' I shout in the general direction of the living room. I close the front door noisily behind me and throw my coat over the banister.

There's a reason for my deliberately bombastic entrance and it lies in the fact that I once let myself in quietly and stumbled across my beloved sailing solo, if you get my drift.

Now, to many women, particularly our younger, more idealistic selves, perhaps this would be a devastating blow, a sign that we weren't satisfying him. But to older, more settled women, such as myself, particularly one knackered after a long day at work, it was a blessed relief to know that any sexual desire he may have been harbouring was sated and I could enjoy an early night untroubled by any cursory nipple twiddling.

At the time, Dean simply grinned and said, 'Oops,' but I felt mortified to have witnessed it, hence tonight's theatrically loud homecoming. Mind you, if it was a gun-wielding gang of six in balaclavas, I still doubt it would be enough to garner a response if there's a televised football match in progress.

'All right?' I walk in just as he changes channels from Dave to Sky Sports. Variety is the spice of life, I think wryly.

He manages a quick smile and small grunt, and I hover expectantly, wondering whether tonight will be one of those rare occasions when he actually expresses even the faintest interest in how my evening went. But no, he returns to staring at the screen.

'Anything to report?' I persevere, knowing that unless a news event was so catastrophic that it was actually flashed across all channels, Dean wouldn't even know if Lord Lucan was sitting in our kitchen right now, making himself a cup of tea.

‘Nope. You?’

At last, a flicker, a faint pulse detected in this relationship. I seize upon it and sit next to him on the sofa, struggling to get comfortable on the raised edge of the cushion that’s propelling me towards its Dean-shaped dent.

‘Saira’s fine, and Ella seems OK, but she’s still flogging that dead horse Philip. I just don’t get the attraction.’ I’m speaking to the side of his head because he hasn’t bothered to turn and look my way.

‘We were reminiscing about holidays ...’

He makes a scoffing noise, but I’m unsure whether it’s directed at me or the TV screen, where Arsenal have just scored against his beloved Tottenham Hotspur in a repeat of a match which, by the way, he saw in real time yesterday.

‘Are you listening to me?’ I demand.

‘Yes.’ He turns slightly. ‘You said Saira is fine but Ella is still with Philip.’

‘And what were we reminiscing about?’

‘Er, old times?’

‘I *knew* you weren’t listening!’ I leap to my feet and stand in front of him, blocking the screen. ‘For fuck’s sake, you’re more interested in a match you’ve seen already than you are in me. What does *that* say about us?’ I flounce off into the kitchen and flick the kettle on, my heart pounding with the injustice of being ignored. Opening and slamming cupboard doors, I grab a mug and throw a teabag in it, imagining it’s Dean’s head as I pour boiling water over it.

As the anger begins to subside, tears well. Is this how it’s going to be ... for ever? A form of coexistence with little or none of the benefits usually associated with long-term relationships, such as constant support, shared interests, conversation and sex on demand?

If I were sharing a house with a girlfriend, I would have come in and she would probably have asked about my night. Then we’d open a bottle of wine and sit at the kitchen table, putting the world to rights until one or both of us

decided to get some sleep. There'd be no sex, of course, but then again, I don't get much of it now. Mind you, that's probably just as much my fault as it is his. I let out a wistful sigh.

'You sound fed up.'

I swivel round to find Dean leaning against the kitchen doorframe, a sheepish look on his face. I notice he's wearing the T-shirt I hate, with 'Heinz Meanz Fartz' emblazoned across the front.

'Are you pissed off with me?' He moves across to the small bistro-style kitchen table and plonks himself down.

'A bit,' I mutter, squeezing out my teabag and lobbing it in the bin. 'Do you want tea?'

I ask this knowing that, despite having been home for a few hours, he won't have made one. I reckon the only thing he can achieve on his own is dandruff.

'Yes, please. I was about to make one anyway.'

As if you move off the sofa in my absence, I think, resisting the urge to say it out loud.

'So what have I done?' He looks at me expectantly.

I *hate* it when he says it like that, clearly making the point that the misdemeanour is so small that he doesn't have a clue what it even is. It's designed to make me feel hysterical and petty, and it works.

'You didn't ask me if I'd had a nice evening.' It sounds so ridiculous when spoken aloud.

He frowns slightly. 'I did. You asked me if I had anything to report, and I replied "no", then asked if you had.'

He's right, of course. But I've been here so many times before, when he recalls some lacklustre or one-word answer as a defence against my condemnation of his lack of interest in me.

'Yes, but you had to be prompted,' I say.

He purses his lips. It's written all over his face that he thinks the slight is either imagined or completely fabricated. 'Well ... sorry if I offended you.'

Another phrase I hate. One that makes the recipient feel as though they're being oversensitive and need placating with an apology of an apology, one that bestows no blame on its messenger.

Wearily, I approach the table and sit opposite him, nursing my untouched mug of tea. To be honest, I'm dog-tired now and want nothing more than to crawl into bed, waking up to a brand-new day when life might not seem quite so humdrum. But I have done that countless times before, sweeping my concerns – however minor – under the carpet, usually through apathy and an unwillingness to enter an energy-sapping, in-depth talk ... if there *is* such a thing with Dean. But tonight, I feel a compulsion to articulate what's festering inside me.

'It just strikes me as odd that you wouldn't ask me how my evening went. It makes me think that if you're not interested in *that*, then maybe the disinterest extends to me personally.'

Mild irritation flashes across his face. 'That's not the case at all.'

'I only have your word for that.'

'Isn't that enough?' His eyes fix on mine questioningly.

An awkward silence descends, one indicating loud and clear that, no, I don't consider it to be enough.

'I need to *feel* as though you're interested,' I say eventually.

'So what should I do?'

Again, he places the ball firmly back in my court, seeking my instructions on how to behave, as if he's my recalcitrant child rather than my lover.

'If you have to ask me that, then that's part of the problem,' I sigh.

'Problem?' He looks perplexed. 'Have we got one? Is that what you're trying to tell me?'

Dean is no idiot. He did well at school, securing eight pretty good GCSEs and B-grade A levels in English and

history, and if his sales bonuses are anything to go by, he could sell air conditioning to the Eskimos. He's also in possession of a fine wit, when the mood suits him. But when it comes to emotional intelligence, he's so dim he could be hit by a parked car.

Trouble is, he grew up in a family with two emotional pygmies at its helm. His mum, Paula, is your archetypal Stepford wife, all big hair, fixed smile and, once Botox became available on the open market, fixed forehead too. She looks like she's stepped straight off the set of *Dallas*, though they live in a typical red-brick semi in an unremarkable side street in Croydon, in the shadow of a vast Ikea.

In her mind, Paula is a company director's wife, consistently keeping up appearances in case she has to throw a power dinner party at a moment's notice. But her husband, Roy, is a taxi driver who exchanges the seat of his cab for the seat of their sofa, with little movement in between. The only exercise he gets is jumping to conclusions.

He works days, by which I mean from about 10 a.m. to just short of 5 p.m., Monday to Friday. He used to work the occasional weekend when Dean and his older sister, Stacey, were young, but once they'd flown the nest, and less disposable income was needed, he'd cut back considerably on his hours.

I'd like to tell you that he fills his downtime with fascinating hobbies or worthy pursuits, but I'd be lying. He watches TV mostly, perhaps the occasional war film DVD given away with a Sunday newspaper. And that's it. Consequently, he looks like the 'before' picture in one of those medical ads about high cholesterol, all pucefaced and sweaty at even the slightest exertion, with the waistline of a Spacehopper.

Paula fulfils her wifely duties in that she makes sure Roy's clothes are washed and ironed and his vast stomach filled,

but aside from that she does her own thing. Bingo with the girls on a Monday night, salsa lessons on a Wednesday and the occasional shopping and lunch trips to town with her best friend, Dorothy. If Dean came home one day and told me she'd run off with a salsa instructor called Miguel, I'd reply, 'It was only to be expected.'

She's a whirling dervish, fuelled by a ferocious coffee habit. She doesn't sweat, she percolates. Consequently, their life is like one of those movie sequences, where one person is speeded up and shown whizzing around the room from chore to chore, whilst the other - in this case, Roy - is motionless. It's my greatest nightmare that Dean and I become the same in a parallel universe: two people who just happen to share the same patch of real estate and rarely communicate beyond 'What's on TV tonight?' or 'What's for tea?' Perhaps we have already.

Dean is staring down at the table now, his attention diverted by a football supplement lying across the fruit bowl. I take the chance to study him closely, something I haven't done for a while. His stomach, once highly toned from playing rugby, has now slackened considerably, with a slight paunch. But his arms and legs have maintained their muscle definition, and the firm bottom I fell in lust with all those years ago is still just as eye-catching.

Typical, isn't it? Every time I lose weight, it finds me again. Yet I'm sharing my life with a man who constantly eats junk with no discernible consequences.

Facially too, he's barely changed, with just a few more laughter lines (few of them inspired by me, I fear) and perhaps the faintest beginnings of a bald patch on the crown of his head. But the kind features, shock of dark hair and piercing blue eyes that once attracted me so much are still there; it's just the chemistry that seems to have faded.

Given my inner irritation towards him, you're probably wondering why I stay, and it's a question I often ask myself. But the answer is always the same: many of our obvious

differences are simply the gender-related ones experienced by men and women the world over, and fundamentally, he's a *good* man and I know he loves me. It's just that he doesn't express it very often.

I always think that perhaps I'm being my own worst enemy in needing more obvious manifestations of what I mean to him, that I'm being too insecure. There are plenty of women who are happy just *knowing* they're loved; they don't seek constant and obvious reassurance of it.

And maybe my apathy is a self-fulfilling prophecy: if I make more effort to recapture what we once had, then perhaps he will rise to the challenge. They always say a successful marriage takes hard work on both sides, and it's the same with long-term relationships. We've just slipped into a lacklustre routine, that's all. With a little thought and dedication, it's possible we can get ourselves back on track. It's at least worth a try.

My spirits lift at the thought and I stretch my hand across the table, resting it on his. It feels awkward, because any intimacy other than perfunctory sex is alien to us these days, but I persevere and take heart from the fact he hasn't moved away from me.

'I'm sorry for being a bit oversensitive in there.' I jerk my head towards the living room. 'It's been a pretty shit day in the salon and I'm feeling a bit frazzled.'

'Forget it,' he smiles. 'We all feel like that sometimes.'

This, of course, is the point where any normal person would ask what had happened to make my day so stressful, but not Dean. Sometimes, I think I could burst in the door and announce I'd just been the victim of a hit-and-run and he'd simply ask me where the cereal bowls were.

Focus, Cam, I tell myself, we're about to enter a brave new world. It's just that you're going to have to be the one who takes his hand and drags him to the threshold of it.

I squeeze his hand and smile reassuringly. 'I was thinking, how about we do something at the weekend?'

I can almost see the football fixtures scrolling down each of his eyes. After a couple of seconds, he shrugs. 'Like what?'

'Oh, I don't know ... the cinema perhaps?'

As soon as the words leave my mouth, I know this is a bad idea, highlighting as it will the yawning chasm between our taste in films. I like rom-coms and the occasional arty, subtitled number, if I'm not too knackered to concentrate, and Dean likes movies with minimal dialogue and lots of car chases. The notion there might be a film on that we *both* want to see is laughable.

'Or just drinks somewhere, followed by a nice dinner?' I start nodding furiously to indicate that this is my preferred option. 'We could try out that little Italian at the bottom of the hill.'

'OK.' He nods and yawns simultaneously. 'Book it for eight and we'll have a couple in the pub next door first.'

'It's a date,' I smile, feeling a swell of optimism, despite being the one to suggest and, now, book it.

Dean removes his hand from under mine and stands up, noticeably relieved that I'm no longer cross with him. He turns towards the sanctuary of the living room.

'One of the *Mission: Impossible*s has just started. Fancy watching it?'

I shake my head. 'Nah, I think I'll have a bath and read my book.'

Just as he disappears from view, I remember what else I wanted to say and follow him. By the time I reach the living room, he is already ensconced in his dent, flicking through the TV channels.

'By the way, I forgot to say ... Saira, Ella and I are thinking of going on a girls' week abroad.'

'Great.' He carries on scrolling down the channels and switches to *Mission: Impossible* just as Tom Cruise is dangling by one arm from a clifftop. Some days, I know just how he feels.

I sigh inwardly, hoping that our night out on Saturday will inject a bit of life back into our relationship.

Chapter Three

The queue of bleary-eyed people is snaking round the corner, moving at a snail's pace.

'Bloody hell,' I mutter, 'by the time we get to check-in, it will be time to come home again.'

'Let's look at the positives ... we're on holiday!' says Saira, far too cheerily for my liking.

As the mother of a toddler, she's used to interrupted sleep and early starts. As she once pointed out, 'Why do people say they've slept like a baby when mine actually wakes up every two hours?'

But I'm childless and struggling to function and, so far, Ella hasn't uttered a single word.

It's 6 a.m. and we're in the soul-destroying hellhole that is Gatwick airport, along with the forty-nine thousand other people either too poor or too tight to pay for flights that leave at a reasonable hour. Worse, as easyJet has a first come, first boarding policy and we're at the back of the queue, we're in danger of being seated *outside* the bloody plane.

'Where's Rashid when I need him?' says Saira wistfully.

'Eh?' Christ, I think, it's only been two hours and she's missing him already. This is going to be a fun week.

'You get to board first when you have a small child,' she adds. 'But I suppose boarding last is a small price to pay for a stress-free holiday.'

Phew, normal service resumed.

After forty minutes, we finally reach check-in, where a sullen man wordlessly extends his arm for our tickets and passport.

'Didyerpackyerluggageyerself?' he recites.

'Yes,' Saira and I both chorus enthusiastically.