

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Dreaming Spires

Juliet Hastings

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purchaser.

If André hadn't been so quintessentially masculine he might even have seemed vulnerable, standing there with his eyes shut waiting for her to touch him. As she drew closer her breathing stirred the dark hairs on his thighs and he shivered, the way a horse shivers when a fly lands on its skin. He smelt of aroused male - of mud and sweat and soap. Just smelling him was an erotic experience. He wouldn't be a man to touch lightly, or to tickle. He needed to be treated like a strong animal, simply, straightforwardly, with a strength to match his own.

She ran her tongue around her lips, moistening them so that when she took the head of his cock into her mouth it would slide in smoothly. She wanted him to remember this. She recalled his words: 'I haven't had it for months.'

Other books by the author:

CRASH COURSE

WHITE ROSE ENSNARED

FORBIDDEN CRUSADE

THE HAND OF AMUN

ARIA APPASSIONATA

DREAMING SPIRES

Juliet Hastings



Prologue

Dearest James,
You'll never guess where I have been today.

Catherine pushed herself back from the computer and stared into mid-air. James thought it charming, but odd, that she wrote emails as if they were letters. His replies were always sprinkled with peculiar abbreviations and symbols, so that they read more like a code than English. All very well for him, the always-urgent journalist, but she loved words and couldn't bear shortening them and mauling them. Besides, telling him her thoughts in literate language was great practice for writing them again some other time.

Or maybe you will guess. No surprise, really: I'm still working on Catullus, so that means that my mind is in Ancient Rome.

When people think of Rome they think of palaces and jewels and orgies and slaves, don't they? But that's not the Rome I was in today. I was working on one of the bitter poems, one of the ones he wrote when she was sleeping with other men. Just take two lines for example:

*Nunc in quadriuis et angiportis
Glubit magnanimi Remi nepotes.*

The best I've got to so far is:
Now at the crossroads and in alleyways
She sucks off Remus' sons and strips their threads.

It's got a nice raunchy sound to it, but it doesn't really convey the Latin. Translations never do, I don't know why I bother sometimes. *Glubit* means 'she strips the bark from a tree'. You can just imagine it, can't you? Lesbia, the heartless aristocratic beauty, stripping the bark from lover after strapping lover, leaving them gasping in the shadows with their cocks skinny and limp as dishrags.

Had she ever left James's cock a limp skinny dishrag? Well, maybe once or twice. She would have liked to have him there now, with her in the room, eyes glinting, distracting her from her work with a slow sweep of his hand from her nape to the hollow of her spine.

But he was thousands of miles away, somewhere in Asia hunting for war, and it was a long-standing part of their agreement that they didn't say that they missed each other. Yearning and regret were banned from their e-correspondence. Better get back to the bit they would both enjoy.

I worked hard at that translation, and it filled up my mind with images. Do you remember that incredible church in Rome, where underneath the pillars of the nave and that squat dark crypt you could squeeze down and round a corner and find yourself in a Roman alley? A real Roman alleyway, preserved for thousands of years, dark and damp and narrow? Imagine an alleyway like that on a hot June night, under the heavy black Rome sky, the stars glowing like candle flames guttering in the strong hot wind. Here's our Roman lady, rustling in layers of diaphanous silk, lolling in her litter as the matched team of blond slaves carry her down the street. She's fucked all four of them, by the way, but that's not what she wants tonight.

There's a young man on the street, alone, armed, up to no good, no doubt. Painted eyes flicker up and down, gauging his potential. He passes beneath a torch, guttering on some great man's doorstep, and the gleam of the torchlight on the muscles of his arm makes up her mind.

The litter stops, the curtains part, just a little. Intrigued, like a cat, the young man approaches. He is wearing a gold torc, a prize of war in some barbaric land. Has he been a soldier? He hardly looks old enough. His clothes mark him as an aristocrat, but that does not mean that he will be safe.

Good. She does not relish safety.

Half a dozen soft words, and he meets her shadowed eyes with a look of hunger. His brown hand lies on her white wrist, below the sleeve of her gown, and he pushes the silk back, revealing the tender crook of her elbow, blue vessels pulsing beneath the translucent skin. He leans forward with his lips open and touches his tongue to the spot, a flicker of movement, like a snake. She draws in a deep breath and her fist clenches, shell-pink nails biting into her soft palm, rings of pearl and lapis gleaming in the light of the torches.

He looks up. The rims of his nostrils are pale. 'Now.'

She does not answer him, but her breathing quickens. Her eyes are dark with lust, the familiar shape of lust curls in her throat and her belly. She leans forward, stretching out her arms to him, and he catches her by her

shoulders and pulls her from the litter to stand her on the stones. They stare at each other and slowly, deliberately, he reaches out and scratches his nail against her nipple where it protrudes through her embroidered stole. She sets her teeth and clenches the muscles between her legs hard. The slaves stare straight ahead, but one of them cannot conceal the erection that lifts his uniform tunic.

Without another word they back into the shadows of the alley. At the front of the street is a perfume shop, and the alley is giddy with the reek of shit and sandalwood, roses and refuse, jasmine and urine. He

A knock at the door. Catherine cursed and enabled her screensaver, then swung round on her chair. David's head appeared, tousled and amiable. 'Sorry, am I interrupting?' he said, pointlessly.

'No, no,' she lied, because she always felt that being truthful with him would be like hitting him.

'I brought the post,' he said.

'Just stick it on the shelf, would you?'

Despite herself, her tone betrayed her irritation. 'Oops,' said David, pulling a face. 'Sorry, sorry.' He put down the post and withdrew.

Now should she explain to James what had happened to interrupt her flow, or just carry on regardless? Carrying on seemed like the best option. Why would he be interested in the peccadilloes of her landlord? She closed her eyes for a moment, then reread the last few paragraphs and took a deep breath.

He holds her shoulders and presses her against the wall. She tilts back her jewelled head to watch him, exposing her white throat. His fingers push back the heavy stole, then move deftly among the brooches that hold her robe closed. Suddenly the fabric is loose. It falls open, revealing her to the waist. Her breasts gleam in the faint torchlight with a sheen of sweat and scented oil, and her taut nipples are like another pair of eyes.

Catherine shifted uneasily, conscious of the fact that she was already wet. She closed her eyes for a moment against the frustration.

Frustration! Jesus, James, you know what happens next. You know that they don't even kiss, that he grabs her robe and lifts it and she opens her

legs and wraps them around his waist and he thrusts his cock right inside her and then he fucks her, her back against the rough wall, her heels drumming on his buttocks, her nails digging into the back of his neck, he fucks her until she cries like an animal and sinks her teeth into his shoulder, he fucks her with fierce jerks of his hips until he snarls and comes and I wish you were here with me now, James, fucking me.

If you were with me I'd suck your cock. You know how I love to have you in my mouth. Perhaps I wouldn't let you fuck me at all, perhaps I'd just suck you until you came in my mouth. You know how it makes you shout. Or perhaps

It was no good. Sometimes there was real relief in writing to James, but today was not one of those days. Today virtual sex was no substitute for the real thing. She didn't even want to masturbate today, and she'd be resorting to David before the night was out, she could see it coming. Poor old David, it wasn't as if he was bad in bed or even bad looking, but he knew he was just some sort of default option and you could see that it didn't do his ego any good.

David had brought the post. Post! Perhaps there would be some distraction there, a letter from her publisher or a new catalogue to browse. Not another bill, God forbid.

She picked up the letters and stared at the first one. It had a Cambridge postmark. She looked at the college crest on the back of the envelope and swallowed hard, then opened it and scanned the letter in one rush.

James, do you know who is writing to you today? The new writer in residence at St Henry's College, Cambridge, that's who. I start there in October for one term! At last, a chance to get this damn translation finished and get started on the novel. A whole three months without bills to pay or anything to worry about. Except getting laid, of course, James dear. You know they say that Oxford is the city of dreaming spires, and Cambridge the city of perspiring dreams? Let's hope some perspiring dreams come my way!

Oh, James, I can't wait. Beautiful environment, everything sorted out for me, new people to meet, intelligent people . . . I'll be telling you about them. The men particularly, James. Rely on it.

You'll enjoy that, won't you?

Chapter One

Henry's Parade was Maggie's favourite part of Cambridge. The colleges were beautiful, but they were removed from the real world. She liked Henry's Parade because it linked the colleges, and St Henry's in particular, with the world of work and shops and cars that other people lived in. And also, of course, because it was beautiful too. On one side was St Mary's church and the higgledy-piggledy row of old houses, half-timbered and Georgian, with shops in the bottom and college accommodation above, which she was lucky enough to live in this year. On the other was the Senate House and its smooth square lawn, then the rearing, etiolated towers and windows of the Chapel, and then the glorious screen of pierced and fretted stone which separated St Henry's from the town, and in the centre of the screen the pretty pale Gothic gatehouse. Unlike most colleges, which hid themselves from the world, you could always see into Henry's through the screen, and the fine green lawn looked welcoming and cheerful.

The street was busy, as it always was, with bikes and people hurrying to and fro. She stopped at number sixteen, unashamedly thrilled to be living at such a splendid address. Number sixteen was a dress shop on the ground floor and a crooked, black-and-white, half-timbered house above. She unlocked the door and sidled through with her shopping bags.

Beyond was a warren of stairways, kitchenettes, loos and doors to rooms where people lived. Maggie smiled again, because she really still couldn't believe her luck, and started up the narrow, leaning staircase towards the top floor.

Someone was coming down, and she stood to one side on the first-floor landing to let whoever it was squeeze past. It was her neighbour, this term's writer in residence. Maggie said, 'Hello,' and gave her a bright smile.

'Hello,' said the writer in residence, returning the smile rather wanly. She was an attractive woman, with thick, silvery brown hair pushed back from her long oval face, pale skin and huge dark eyes. She didn't look happy. In fact she looked anxious and lonely.

'How are you?' Maggie said, prolonging their encounter.

'Oh,' said the woman, as if she was startled to be asked, 'fine. Thanks.' She hesitated slightly, then added, 'I'm Catherine, by the way.'

'I'm Maggie. Your neighbour.' What amazing eyes those were, big enough to drown in. And a heavy, sensual mouth, too. She looked like someone it might be rewarding to get to know. How old was she? Middle thirties, probably. Hard to say anything more. And what looked like an interesting body, currently hidden beneath jersey trousers and a Peruvian knitted tunic. Definitely interesting altogether.

For a moment Maggie thought of asking her in for a cup of tea and seeing what developed. But that would mean missing Ash, and she had rather got herself ready for seeing Ash. The flesh between her legs tightened at the thought. So she just said, 'We ought to have a cup of tea some time.'

The sad eyes brightened. God, she must be lonely, if the offer of a cup of tea cheered her up that much! 'That would be very nice,' said the writer in residence.

'Right.' Ask her in now? Try to cheer her up more thoroughly? Tempting, tempting. No, Ash would be on his way. 'See you, then.'

Maggie climbed the rest of the stairs and put down the bags in front of her door. As she opened it she drew in a deep breath, preparing to be amazed again.

Her room was awe-inspiring, astonishing, a great and mighty wonder. She was so brilliant that she had to wrap

her arms around herself and squeeze hard in sheer delight.

'Damn, I'm good,' she said, taking in the full majesty of the view.

The room was *huge*. It was enormous. Not high ceilinged and posh, more cottagey and quaint, with odd diagonal corners where the roof-beams crossed: but all the same, it was huge. The little poxy shoebox she had occupied in her first year would have fitted into one corner; thank God she was almost a postgrad. And it was a room with a view, too: the wide window, filled with panes of warping, old glass, opened on to a magnificent vista of the college, all the way over the court and through the arch of the McLean building down to the river.

How clever had she been to get this room and this view? Bloody clever. All it needed now was someone to show it to, someone to impress. And because she was so brilliant, Ash would be there any minute. She put the kettle on to boil and got a packet of chocolate Hob-Nobs out of the shopping bag, because they were his favourite and this was cause for celebration.

It was just as well she hadn't asked the warden in residence up this time. Part of the point was to show off the room, and a person in their mid-thirties wouldn't be impressed by it in the way Ash would. Also, she wanted to fuck Ash. Sex with women was great, but sometimes she wanted to feel a cock, and today that's what she wanted. Ash would fit the bill just fine. Of all her many sexual partners he was the one she preferred for everyday consumption, and she had not seen him for three whole months. Not that she'd been entirely celibate, of course, but she was still pleased to be back at Cambridge and its multiplicity of delights. Her breasts were already tight with anticipation.

She also intended to tease Ash for as long as she could keep it up. Let him think that she wasn't interested. It would be fun to keep him in suspense.

A knock at the door! She dashed across to it and said, 'Helloooo?' in her best silly voice.

'It's me, you plonker,' said Ash.

'Prepare - to be - amazed!' Maggie opened the door slowly, with a flourish, and watched his face change.

'Fuck a duck and die a cripple,' Ash said, walking slowly into the room and looking around him. 'God Almighty, Maggie, there is no fucking justice. How the hell did you swing this?' He moved to and for, lean brown hands touching things as he named them. 'Room three acres big. Sofa, a bloody three-seater sofa, big fat armchair, desk and chair and a fucking *telephone*, for Christ's sake, table and six chairs so you can hold a dinner party any time you want to, and Gordon Bennett,' he stopped in front of the *pièce de résistance* and shook his head, 'a double bed. I don't believe it, Maggie. A *double bed*.' He grinned. 'It was nice of you to invite me to see it now, before the whole thing becomes submerged beneath a foot-thick stratum of dirty underwear.'

'How dare you impugn my housekeeping skills,' Maggie huffed, unable to disagree.

'Never mind. It's so big, it'll probably absorb more underwear than your other haunts. It might even absorb your inexhaustible supply.' Ash smiled slowly and walked towards her, tapping his fingernail thoughtfully against his straight, white teeth. 'Maggie, it's magnificent. And you know what? I would like to fuck you on or over every single piece of furniture in this magnifi-cent room.'

She grinned. It was good to know that his intentions matched hers. But she wasn't going to say what she wanted to say, which was: Right! Let's get stuck in! Instead she folded her arms, turning slightly away from him, and said lightly, 'That's what I like about you, Ash. Your Hindu sensibilities make every word you utter as delicately erotic as the Kama Sutra.'

'Don't tell me you asked me here just for a cup of tea and a chocolate Hob-Nob.' He sounded more irritated than

anxious. More work was needed.

'Tell me,' she asked rhetorically, moving towards the window with its glorious view of Henry's Parade and the rearing spires of the Chapel, 'which cliché of student life do you prefer? That they engage in existential debate, dressed in battered corduroys, fuelled by incessant cups of tea and chocolate Hob-Nobs, or that they are sexually insatiable layabouts who squander the taxpayers' money on cheap booze, Lycra clothing, clubbing and easy lays?'

'I'd go with version two,' Ash said, 'except that I don't believe the bit about the taxpayers' money. Have you seen my overdraft?'

'Mine too, sweetie, mine too.' She jerked her head towards the window. 'Look, Ash, you can see right into the Court. Old King Henry on his pedestal could look right into this window and see us.'

'He wouldn't like that,' Ash said, as he moved to stand behind her and look out at the view. 'Once upon a time some women danced at a party where he was and their breasts were bare, and -'

'And he said, "Fie fie, for shame, forsooth ye are much to blame." Old story, Ash.' Maggie tossed her head and turned. Ash was standing behind her, so that she found herself in his arms, but she didn't react. She kept her face as calm and imperturbable as she could. 'You know why I asked you here?' A tiny pause, and his pupils dilated as his lips quirked with expectation. 'I wanted to show off my new room to you.'

For a moment his face was shadowed. Had she convinced him? Did he really believe that that was all she wanted? Could he? She only had to look at him and she wanted him: smooth, *café-au-lait* skin, sloe eyes, thin lips, long limbs . . .

He laid the palms of his hands against her temples, pushing her hair back so that he could look directly into her eyes. For a moment he held her gaze, and she tried not to quiver. But then his sombre face relaxed into a slow grin.

'Wind-up merchant,' he said, accusingly. He jerked his chin down at her T-shirt. 'Look how hard your nipples are.'

She made a rueful face. 'The erectile tissue never lies, eh?'

'Never,' he said, nudging closer to her. Through her thin skirt and his jeans she felt his cock swelling, hot for her. Her smile faded and she pressed her lips together against the sudden dryness.

'I've missed fucking you,' he said in a whisper, and she closed her eyes and let herself relax into his hands, leaning back, letting him support her weight on one circling arm, arching her neck away from him. All of her consciousness slipped into the tension of her skin - pale throat down to the hard bone between her breasts, taut ribcage dilated with her deep breathing, stomach flat and eager - one smooth tight curve all the way from her chin to her pubis. The curve of her spine rested against his supporting hand. She kept her eyes closed, waiting for him, because there was no hurry now.

His lips brushed her neck. She sighed with anticipation and he stirred her skin with his tongue, then bit softly, sucking. With his free hand he pushed up her T-shirt. The air kissed her naked breasts and edged her tight nipples.

'Suck my breasts,' she whimpered, not because she thought that he wouldn't but because she loved to hear herself begging. 'Suck my nipples hard, Ash, please. Bite them. Please, Ash, please.'

She kept her eyes closed. Daylight, and they were standing in front of her window. Could someone in the street look up and see them? Perhaps, and that made it all the better, that little extra frisson of danger. Ash's teeth nibbled on her left nipple and she groaned aloud with the sheer pleasure of it. She was giddy with leaning backwards, her head was spinning, and he sucked and tugged at her breasts as if he wanted to bruise them, and her whole body was drunk with lust.

Ash took his mouth from her breasts and pulled her upright. 'On the sofa,' he hissed. 'I've never had you on a sofa. No, not on it. *Over* it.' He pushed her away from him, held her at arm's length, comparing. 'God, why are you so short? Get a pair of high heels. Really high.'

She nodded and walked to the wardrobe, resisting the urge to pull down her T-shirt. The mirror on the door showed her herself: little, slight, T-shirt under her arms, her exposed breasts shallow as saucers, the nipples long and dark and hard against the pale skin. She yanked the door open and kicked off her loafers, pulled out a pair of Charles Jourdain shoes, a ridiculous extravagance, crystal acrylic mules with thick transparent soles and ten-centimetre heels and rainbow plastic straps, crazy, kinky shoes that made her legs look long. She slipped her feet into them and turned back swiftly, so that her little skirt flipped and swirled.

Ash stopped unbuttoning his shirt and stared at her. 'That's better,' he said. 'God, you look like -' Words appeared to fail him and for a moment he chewed his lip. Then he said, 'Take off your T-shirt.'

She crossed her arms, trying to move gracefully, and obeyed.

'Now the skirt.'

She hesitated, because she had imagined that he might have fucked her while she was still wearing it. But he looked as if he knew what he wanted, so she obeyed this time, too. Underneath was an M&S thong, plain white, not too tatty, considering.

'Turn around,' said Ash.

Now that didn't surprise her. One thing that Ash loved was a rear view. She turned, and when he saw the string of her thong he let out a breath of delight.

'Now,' he said, 'go and bend over the back of the sofa.'

The sofa was old and battered, but its back was strong and straight. It was just the right height, so that when she bent over her belly rested on it and the upper half of her

body dangled towards the seat. She closed her eyes again, imagining the white moon of her arse split by the white string of her thong, imagining Ash's eyes on it.

His footsteps came up behind her and she heard a rustle. Probably his shirt. For a moment she was sorry that she couldn't see him, because his body was so beautiful, but then she decided she didn't care, because this was new and different.

'What a beautiful arse,' Ash whispered. 'God, Maggie, I love that little tight arse of yours. It's like a ripe, juicy apricot. I'd like to sink my teeth into it.'

A moment of silence, and she waited, expecting his teeth. But then she jumped and drew in a quick breath, because what she felt was his tongue, wet and cool on the back of her ankle. He drew a line of saliva up the back of her leg, up to the hollow of her knee, tracing on to the inside of her thigh. She couldn't keep in a little moan of pleasure and expectation.

'So gorgeous,' he whispered, and she heard the clunk of his jeans buckle and then the whine of the zip. 'There's the string of your thong, and then this little white pouch with soft hair escaping either side of it, and it looks so plump and sweet.' His tongue touched her again, this time on the inner curve of her buttock, slipping up towards her crack. She shuddered with the perennial delicious agony of wondering if she was clean there, if it mattered, if he wouldn't like it anyway. And then his tongue was working under and around the string of her thong, delving right into her crack, exploring the soft entrance to her arse, and she would have fallen over if the sofa hadn't been holding her up. He squeezed his tongue inside her and she moaned and put her hands to her breasts, pulling at her nipples, and whimpered, 'Oh God, Ash, please fuck me, please, please.'

'Now,' he whispered, and he eased her thong off her hips and down her legs. 'Ah, that's it. Look at that lovely little hole just waiting for me. Is it wet, do you think?'

'It's fucking soaking, Ash, what do you think?' She could feel the moisture at this moment, oozing out of her and making the whole of her labia slippery with wanting him. 'Ash, please -'

'Patience is a virtue,' Ash said sententiously. 'Keep your feet together, Maggie. Nice and modest. And -' He dipped a finger in her juice and slipped it down to touch her clit. She groaned and stuck her arse out further, trying to rub herself harder against his finger, but now he was dipping and slicking the juice backwards, around her arsehole.

He leant forward, and she felt his body against hers, jeans rough against her calves and thighs, his smooth chest against her lower back, and against her backside the hot harsh crispness of his pubic hair and the hot smooth rigidity of his cock. She heard the rustle of a condom wrapper and the little slick sound as he smoothed the rubber on. Into her ear he whispered hoarsely, 'I'm going to fuck you up the arse.'

She swallowed hard, readying herself. Half of her wanted to scream that arse-fucking was more fun for him than for her, and what about her? But this was Ash, and she knew that he would take care of her pleasure as well as his. Then Ash hissed again, 'I'm going to fuck you up the arse over your fucking sofa.'

So do it, do it now! she screamed silently. And then she felt it, the head of his cock pressing up against her anus, squeezing its way inside. For a moment he was stuck, and she gasped and tensed, and then his fingers were there, loaded with her juice, easing the passage. He wriggled one finger around inside her and, as he withdrew it, pushed and pushed until the head of his cock was inside, and then sliding the rest into her was as easy as breathing and she was full, full of his gorgeous cock.

'God,' he gasped, 'it's so tight, I'll come if I move.'

'No,' she whimpered, desperate not to be cheated now.

'Ssh.' He reached around her narrow hips and slipped his finger between her tightly closed legs, touched her clit, began to rub it, so gently that she wanted to scream. His other hand reached over and found one breast, scraped against her hard nipple. She writhed, impaled on his immobile cock, and he slid his finger to and fro, still very, very gently.

'Oh,' she cried, 'oh, oh, please do it harder.' But he wouldn't, and it was like climbing to orgasm up a long, long flight of very shallow steps, unable to take more than one step at a time, when what she wanted to do was bound up them in huge greedy leaps. Her moans were desperate and her upper body writhed as if she was trying to escape, when all she really wanted was for the cock that penetrated her to move and move and move until she split in two.

'Are you coming?' he demanded, circling her aching nipple with his nail. 'You have to tell me when you're coming.'

'I - ah -' she gasped, clutching desperately at his cock with the muscles of her sphincter. 'Oh God, Jesus, I'm nearly there, Ash, please, please fuck me now, now, now, I'm coming now.'

He heard her, and suddenly his cock was moving, plunging into her arse with such strength that she almost screamed, and his finger rubbed hard at her aching clit and the orgasm burst in her, like fireworks in her head, so strong that she didn't know whether he had come or not until the waves receded and she lifted her head and heard his rasping breathing.

'Ah,' he whispered, 'I'm going to pull out, before you squeeze my cock off.'

He withdrew and after a couple of deep breaths she straightened and turned to see him wrapping his wet cock in one tissue, the used condom in another. That was one thing she didn't particularly like about Ash: his care not to get any fluids anywhere. Wasn't the whole point of fluids that they were messy? But he was always very tidy.

'Tea,' she said with a sigh. 'Hob-Nobs.'

'Just as nice as a fag, and better for you,' he agreed.

She curled up on the sofa in her dressing gown and he zipped up his jeans and sat on the chair, because they were friends and sex partners, not lovers. Maggie didn't have lovers, only mates that she shagged. Romantic slush made her laugh.

'So how the fuck did you get this room?' he demanded.

'It's really for graduates and visiting Fellows,' she said smugly, 'but I have a friend working in the college office, and he tipped me off that the Fellow who was supposed to get this room might not turn up this year. Apparently she's got incipient depression. Anyway, she didn't come, and her loss was my gain. I, so to speak, failed to find any digs outside college, and come the week before term I threw myself on the mercy of the college office, and it all paid off beautifully.'

'Jammy cow,' he snarled. 'I'm stuck in some godforsaken hole up Mill Road over a curry house. Don't say a word: if I hear one more "the smell must remind you of home" I'll kill someone. My mother's cooking never once smelt like the bloody crap they serve up underneath my flat.'

'Well, at least you have an interesting job in the summer. Mine was Dullsville yet again.'

'Were you back at the refinery?' he asked. 'I would have thought it suited you, all those big blokes wandering about and hardly any women. Isn't that why you did chemical engineering in the first place?'

'Yeah.' She dunked her biscuit in her tea, making a wry face. 'But I tell you, Ash, once I'm out of Cambridge I come over all modest.'

'Modest is hardly a word I would associate with you.'

'I know. But I worry about what people at the plant think of me. All the other engineers are wimps, and the blokes I fancy are the mechanics and the other workmen, but they don't even seem to realise that I'm female. I think they've

all been stuffed up tight with PC nonsense and they're scared of appreciating me in case I sue, and I just don't have the bottle to grab one of them by the nuts and drag him behind a distillation column.'

'Alas,' said Ash ruefully.

'I tell you what, though,' Maggie said, leaning eagerly forward, 'this year is going to be a riot. All I have to do is manage enough work to scrape through my Postgraduate Cert and my 2:1 is assured. I should be able to cover that in a couple of hours a day, and the rest - you won't see me for dust!'

'I hope some plans involve me?' Ash arched a perfect, dark brow. 'Subject to my studies, of course.'

'Absolutely. You, and the woman next door.'

'Who she?'

'She the new writer in residence. Early thirties, kind of Roman-looking, big brown eyes, silvery brown hair. She looks sad and lonely and shockable. You know how much I love to shock people.' She knew this was bravado, because what had really attracted her to the writer in residence was the yearning in those big dark eyes. But she wanted to keep up a bold face in front of Ash.

'Might I be of assistance?' Ash enquired, archly.

'Well, you might,' she admitted. Yes, he might. But she wanted to seduce those lovely eyes herself, not enlist a man to help her. 'But not straight away,' she said, after a moment. 'I'd like to break her in gently.'

Ash put his mug down and licked his lips. 'By all means. After we've broken in another piece of furniture.'

Chapter Two

Well, I thought I would try to wait you out, but I've run out of patience first. Where are you, James? What's going on? Not a squeak from you for two weeks. God, I hope you're OK. I don't see the TV much these days, but what I see in the newspaper makes me worry about you. It looks as if SE Asia might start coming to bits yet again.

No more of this, though. I know you like to be in hot spots. What have I been up to for two weeks?

To be honest, James, I've been lonely and miserable. I didn't realise when I accepted that I was a sort of experiment. It's the first time that the college has appointed a professional jobbing writer – a hack, if you like – as writer in residence. The idea was that I would be able to work, of course, but also advise students on how they might make their livings at writing if they wanted to. Sounds sensible, doesn't it? But I don't think the rest of the college has understood. When I went to the beginning-of-the-year cocktail party in the Senior Common Room, most of the Fellows treated me as if I was some sort of alien. Had I not written scholarly books, or at the very least impenetrable poetry, or the sort of novel that academics review? I had not? Well, no interest in me, then.

And the students are just as bad. They all seem to think that they are Proust reincarnated. They scorn the idea of actually making a living from writing. At least, the ones I have met so far do.

And worst of all, James, no bloody men! Not one, not one in two weeks. If I don't find someone to have sex with soon I will explode! I did meet one rather hunky bloke at the SCR do. In fact he was very hunky, tall and built like the proverbial, and about my age, too. Some sort of mature student, I think, not sure what in. But I only really caught his name, which is Mike, before some ancient Fellow buttonholed him and that was my chance gone. At the time I thought that he was giving me the eye, but if he did notice me he hasn't gone to the trouble of seeking me out. I've seen him around college once or twice, too. He would have had the chance to talk to me, if he fancied me. Bollocks.

Oh, my rooms are really gorgeous, in the top of a seventeenth century building overlooking the college. But I don't enjoy them as much as I expected because I have a female student for a neighbour who seems to do nothing all day and all night but have sex. I've met her, and she seems a nice enough girl, but she's very single-minded. It does remind me a bit of what I'm missing. So today I'm going to go over to the University Library and try to get a bit of peace and quiet there.

James, drop me an email and let me know what's going on with you?
Please?

It was one of those October weeks when it seems as if summer is coming back. The sun was warm in a blue, freckled sky, and the leaves on the big horse chestnuts were just beginning to turn. The rims of gold and paler green on the edges of their leaves made it look as if they were new, fresh spring leaves, when in fact they were ready to drop.

Catherine stood on the bridge that carried the path from St Henry's over the Cam to the Backs. Tourists and students splashed beneath her in punts, enjoying the extraordinary weather, and the little herd of cows which lived on the field opposite the college were galloping about, tails in the air, like mad things.

She was worried about James, but that was normal. It would be good not to worry about him for a while, only she'd never succeeded. Abnormally, though, she was worried about herself too. Had she been trying to fool herself when she came here? Was she trying to behave like a new spring leaf, when in fact she was ready to drop? She was 36. Whatever had she been doing surrounding herself with students, guaranteed to make anyone feel old?

Like that girl in the next room. Maggie was her name. A little bundle of energy, small and slight, with a mop of blonde curls that looked as if it belonged on a three-year-old, and a manic laugh which could be clearly heard through the wall. Along with the rest of the noises she made: moans and gasps and sighs. Not just noises, either: Maggie was very sure about what she wanted. Last night something had made the sounds come through the wall as clear as a bell, and before she gave up and went to the bar Catherine had heard Maggie say, 'Oh, that's so good. Oh please, don't stop. Put your fingers up my cunt. Further, further . . . oh, yes . . .'

Perhaps all Maggie did was laugh and shag. Lucky her.

Catherine shook herself, slung her bag over her shoulder, and walked on across the Backs and past the Fellows' garden to the huge, ugly bulk of the University Library. In her frustrated condition its stumpy brick tower looked more phallic than ever. In the forbidding entrance hall she swiped her entry pass and headed past the busy reading room. She eschewed the temptations of the café - the rock buns would have to wait until later - and went into the north wing, where the books on classical subjects were located and where she could be guaranteed a quiet spot to work.

This early in the term there were few people about in the library. She left the main reading areas and went on into the stacks, the remoter spots where you could spend all day without seeing a soul. There were desks there which looked out of the windows, and on the fifth floor the view encompassed most of Cambridge.

She found a desk she liked, with a good outlook, securely surrounded by the high metal bookshelves that filled this section of the library. The books filled the shelves from one wall to the next, so that the space between each set of shelves was like a little room in itself. There was almost total silence, broken only by birdsong from outside and the occasional sound of the lift, whirring slowly between the floors several shelves away. She spread out her work and opened her notebook, where she had marked the locations of several books that she thought would be helpful. Where would she find the first one?

The page blurred before her eyes. Her mind slipped back to the previous night and Maggie's cries of pleasure. Who had been with her? Catherine had seen a young Asian man at Maggie's door a few times, a very good-looking guy, slender and well made, with flashing dark eyes and a very student-intellectual beard trimmed to the edges of his fine chin. Had he been with Maggie last night, parting her slender legs with his long hands? Had it been his dark,